The Maturation of Pan African Nationalism

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the rise of Pan Africanism as a dominant ideology of the late 1960s. It examines the emergence of cadres of organizers as a framework for the practice of “Pan African nationalism,” the fusion of black nationalist and Pan Africanist politics. Many activists saw Pan African nationalism and the construction of independent black institutions as critical components of a new phase of struggle. The Congress of African People (CAP) was the main organizational expression of Pan African nationalism. This chapter profiles several Pan African nationalist schools associated with CAP. It explores the political contradictions of the quest for “Africanization,” critiquing the patriarchy and idealism of such campaigns. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Left Pan Africanism as an alternative to the essentialism of Racial Pan Africanism. The theories of West African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral and other international influences behind the shift to Left Pan Africanism are explored.

Keywords: Amiri Baraka, African Free School, Haki Madhubuti, Congress of African People, Africanization, African Socialism, Racial Pan Africanism, Left Pan Africanism, Festival of Pan-African Culture, Amilcar Cabral

To think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous.

—C. L. R. James

The years 1969–1972 offered a number of signs that the black nationalist resurgence was losing momentum. Ironically, this was a moment of unparalleled assertiveness and cultural expression. The sheer volume of intellectual production reinforced the sense that a long-term political realignment was underway. Yet neither the energy nor the inventiveness of militant nationalists could stem the crises that seized black America. Amid the nation’s abandonment of its cities, the violence of
counterinsurgency campaigns, and the dialectic of economic decline and drug crimes, a generation of organizers sought new directions.

Pan Africanism appeared to provide solutions. The Pan Africanist reawakening was hailed as a natural extension of the Black Power theme. But the advent of “Pan African nationalism” (or “Neo-Pan Africanism,” as the movement was dubbed) produced no panaceas. Confronted with complex realities of power, many activists were forced to rethink their ideals. Some rejected the assumptions of “Racial Pan Africanism.” They abandoned reductionist visions of the African world, seeking more rigorous frameworks and, in some cases, engaging feminist and proletarian struggles. Encounters with figures like West African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral inspired the transition to “Left Pan Africanism,” an approach that attempted to root itself in the material circumstances of race and class.

“A Life Superior”: Pan African Nationalism and the Rise of the Cadre Model

The crises of black liberation increased the appeal of Neo-Pan Africanism. Cultural nationalism’s reputation had been damaged by the Panther–US conflict; its status was further diminished by the emergence of “revolutionary nationalism” as the preferred self-designation of young militants. The Black Panthers had been virtually decimated by the state. Other radical formations fared no better. Police and counterintelligence crusades eliminated, captured, or drove into exile a small army of black political figures. What the power structure could not accomplish with repression it achieved through cooption. Corporate America thoroughly commoditized “blackness.” (Afro wigs could be purchased from Macy’s in shades of black, brown, blonde, and “auburn gray.”) President Nixon’s equation of Black Power with “black capitalism” subjected the latter phrase to derision while signaling the former phrase’s dwindling utility.

The nationalist movement had reached a plateau. Cynicism swept through the ranks. Even condemnation of militant posturing began to seem formulaic. The quest for correct political models led to contests over which ideological tendencies could claim the banner of revolution. Amid these developments, the reassertion of Pan Africanist ideals by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and other activists had an electrifying effect. By 1969, the commonality of black struggles across the globe had resurfaced as a central tenet of African-American thought.

The contradictions of the postcolonial world hardly troubled most American exponents of Pan Africanism. Even as political crises swept across Africa, black America’s popular conceptions of the continent remained sentimental, abstract, and rooted in domestic racial sensibilities. This reality only deepened enthusiasm for Pan Africanism, helping to ensure its status as a “consensus ideology” of the early 1970s. African-American theorists hailed the arrival of a genuine philosophy of the people—perhaps even the impetus for a revitalized mass movement. “We Are an African People” provided the intellectual grounding for an array of institutions, publications, and organizations.
“Pan African nationalism”—the simultaneous pursuit of black nationalist development and global black solidarity—emerged as the new precept of struggle. Hope for its fulfillment rested on the cadre model. Radical theorists held that disciplined, tight-knit circles of organizers working within individual communities constituted the vanguard of black liberation. These militants would disseminate the political concepts of Pan African nationalism. They would propel the struggle beyond sloganeering, building alternative institutions and delivering essential services to black urban neighborhoods. “It is the cadre or small unit of dedicated Nationalists [that] must be at the base of any conscious movement the total community will make,” artist-activist Amiri Baraka declared in 1972. Such units, he maintained, should be established “in each black community across this land” and “wherever Afrikan peoples are in the world.”

An old organizing tool, the cadre model had reappeared in the 1960s as young militants searched for decisive methods of revolution. In 1966, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC’s) Atlanta Project had sought new configurations that would allow organizers to pursue self-discipline, ideological development, and “a life superior to the former way of life” without forming de facto colonies or becoming “exiles among our own people.” The cadre, a Student Organization for Black Unity communiqué stressed in 1971, “is not a clique cut off from our people” but “an integral segment of the black community.” Yet the nature of the Pan African nationalist cell, an entity designed to support a strenuous lifestyle of work and study, suggested that some degree of detachment from the masses was inevitable. Part of the rationale for such formations, Baraka acknowledged, was the willingness of their members to practice “a value system superior to the one that enslaves our community.”

A further paradox of the cadre lay in its aims. While proponents of Pan African nationalism hoped to demonstrate the ideology’s practical relevance, they also regarded alternative institutions as mechanisms for socializing the black rank and file. Traditional issues like welfare rights, housing, job discrimination, and school reform were subordinated to the conceptual strategies of “national” development. Narrow preoccupation with the daily crises of oppression was seen as an error to be resolved through the political guidance of the cadre. “Without such a vanguard,” the Pan African Students Organization in America asserted in 1970, “the popular masses, abandoned in oblivion, cannot be awakened to revolutionary consciousness; they are like an army without headquarters.”

If Pan African nationalism was hampered by such elitism, it was also crippled by political myths. In the early 1970s, most U.S. Pan Africanists remained mired in the provincialism of cultural nationalism. The influence of Kawaida, Maulana Karenga’s “neo-traditionalist” doctrine, lent the Pan Africanist revival a mystical orientation. Its politics rehashed the racialism and anticommunism of Garvey while eschewing the progressive anti-imperialism of Du Bois. Only a closer encounter with the realities of revolution would engender a more critical approach.

“Masters of Our Own Space”: Amiri Baraka and the Congress of African People

Amiri Baraka embodied the Pan African nationalist quest. Baraka was a Greenwich Village Beat poet known as LeRoi Jones when he was struck by revolutionary black consciousness. A Newark, New Jersey, native, he fled the “superfluities” of Howard University and the “sickness” of the Air Force before embarking on a life of letters whose early offerings included Dutchman (a landmark play) and Blues People (a cultural history). A 1960 trip to Fidel Castro’s Cuba shattered his illusion of artistic
purity. In ensuing years, he demonstrated against Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s assassination and worked with left-leaning black organizations, captivated by Malcolm X’s rebuke of white supremacy. Awash with resentment and self-loathing after Malcolm’s death, he renounced the bohemianism of Greenwich Village and, abandoning his white wife and two children, headed uptown in 1965 to help fashion the cultural edifice of black militancy.\footnote{9}

Baraka built the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS), the springboard for the Black Arts Movement, in a Harlem brownstone. Toiling alongside a remarkable assemblage of cultural workers, including Harold Cruse, Larry Neal, and Sonia Sanchez, he helped establish the venture as a pioneering expression of the hunt for a “Black Aesthetic.” BARTS hosted festivals, political gatherings, and cultural productions. It prefigured black studies programs and Black Power liberation schools, offering classes for children and adults in everything from “Afro-American Cultural Philosophy” to drumming, drawing, and literature. It attempted to embody the ideal of black self-determination. “No vague ghosts with pale tongues” would obstruct the attempt to transform Harlem youngsters into “warriors gifted with the powers of creation,” a pamphlet pledged. But plagued by internal turmoil, the institution remained largely disconnected from the surrounding black community.\footnote{10}

Though BARTS collapsed after several months, the short-lived effort spawned cultural institutions across the country. Meanwhile, Baraka returned to Newark, determined to produce “art that would reach the people” and to formalize the “national” consciousness within black central cities. In Sylvia Wilson he found an able partner for both missions. Wilson (soon to become Amina Baraka) was herself a talented poet, dancer, and cultural worker. As Baraka’s wife, she would devote her skills to the charismatic leader’s political projects, even as she chafed under the patriarchy that cultural nationalism portrayed as African traditionalism.\footnote{11}

Throughout 1966 and 1967, nationalist development remained Amiri Baraka’s primary concern. Despite its more than 60% black population, Newark (p.135) was a grim industrial hub ruled by an Italian-American political machine and an ownership class of absentee landlords and merchants. Inspired by the nascent Black Power cry and the spirit of street revolts, Baraka resolved to transform the city into a center of black self-activity. Urban disorders had demonstrated the need for alternative infrastructure that could foster political awareness while addressing bread-and-butter needs. As the writer Robert L. Allen observed, “The rebellions put nationalist leaders on notice that, while more black people might be inclined toward nationalism, they were not in the least interested in idle dreams or obscure mysticism.”\footnote{12}

Striving once more to forge an institution on the axes of revolutionary art and politics, Baraka created Spirit House, a theater and multipurpose center, in a drab tenement within Newark’s Central Ward. He and Amina Baraka lived and worked in the rehabilitated building, producing plays and propaganda with the aid of a growing troupe of cultural workers. They used the residence as a base for grassroots organizing, attempting to influence educational struggles and other local issues. Then historical events interceded. Newark, a nexus of the police brutality, vanishing social services, dilapidated housing, and steep unemployment that had sparked conflagrations in other cities, finally erupted in summer 1967. The resulting violence caused more than two dozen deaths. Thousands of National Guardsmen and police invaded black neighborhoods. Amiri Baraka was savagely beaten and arrested during the
uprising, and his tenement theater was ransacked. Yet the destruction fostered a sense of renewal. “For me, the rebellion was a cleansing fire,” Baraka later said.  

As his political resolve deepened, the intellectual began conceptualizing Spirit House as the command post of a more purposeful mission. He embraced the teachings of Maulana Karenga, whose Kawaida philosophy and US organization exemplified the paramilitary discipline that many organizers associated with revolution. Baraka fashioned his Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), the umbrella organization for a host of grassroots projects, into a similarly regimented enterprise. Only highly trained, doctrinaire nationalists, he believed, could bring about the cultural regeneration of black neighborhoods. CFUN evolved into a coterie of more than 100 adherents whose zeal, asceticism, and African garb became paradigmatic elements of cultural nationalist practice.

CFUN represented the next phase of Baraka’s campaign to develop a science of black urban revolution. He saw the crusade to reconfigure inner cities as a struggle to control existing social structures while forming radical, alternative institutions. Despite Newark’s poverty and loss of industry and jobs, the leader continued to envision the city as a base for the implementation of Black Power. “We want our whole new Black selves as absolute masters of our own space,” he proclaimed.

(p.136) CFUN’s network of programs included cultural and educational centers, job training initiatives, theater and dance troupes, cooperatives, a community newspaper, and a small publishing house. The organization played a key role in the 1970 election of Kenneth Gibson, Newark’s first black mayor. Rather than acting as “cultural pundits inveighing from on high,” Baraka later insisted, CFUN workers became devoted servants of black Newark.

But the organization also exhibited many weaknesses. CFUN failed to address the practical limitations of “community control,” even as massive divestment ravaged urban centers. Its veneration of Kawaida doctrines precluded more rigorous analysis of structural racism. Its racial fundamentalism and patriarchy denied class distinctions and relegated women to subordinate roles. Its rigid social hierarchies mocked the idea of a creative, democratic movement based on widespread participation and grassroots leadership. Its preoccupation with the metaphysical wisdom of Karenga, its arcane ceremonies and rituals, its lack of self-criticism, its virtual deification of Baraka (who dropped “LeRoi Jones” for a designation meaning “blessed prince” while assuming the title “Imamu” or “spiritual leader”), and its obsession with moral and political re-education rendered its mission unintelligible to many working people.

Similar shortcomings plagued the Congress of African People (CAP), the body that succeeded CFUN as the major expression of Baraka’s leadership. An outgrowth of the national Black Power conferences of 1966–1968, CAP emerged from a 1970 summit that attracted more than 2,000 registrants, including a curious mélange of political luminaries. The purpose of the gathering was to establish a national black coalition, a united-front organization constructed upon the principle of “operational unity” and encompassing scores of nationalist-oriented affiliates in urban areas. Baraka and other CAP organizers hoped the new formation would spur the transition from “abstract ideological disagreements to a unity based on blacks working together on concrete programs.”

CAP conventions strove to create “an atmosphere of renewed seriousness” throughout the movement. By promulgating abstract political concepts, however, the organization also demonstrated
the pitfalls of black nationalist thought. CAP proclamations like “Land is changing hands!” sustained the fantasy that black empowerment was imminent or inevitable and largely a matter of stoking nationalist sentiment. The organization’s militant pronouncements masked its collaboration with a rising class of African-American professionals and functionaries who answered to Democratic Party elites.19

The 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, further highlighted the limitations of contemporary Pan Africanism and black nationalism. The summit, which drew more than 8,000 attendees to the task of setting “a black agenda,” represented “the watershed experience” of the era of Pan African nationalist hegemony in African-American politics. The affair’s ideological and organizational diversity seemed to validate the resounding cries of “Nation Time!” Gary advanced a comprehensive agenda for restructuring the social landscape. Its demand for redistributive economic policies reflected the influence of rank-and-file delegates and the momentum of countless grassroots struggles.

In the end, however, both the historic gathering at Gary and the National Black Assembly, the formation that it generated, represented less “a repudiation of existing American politics” than a confirmation of the political anemia of bourgeois nationalism. One of Gary’s principal failings was its pursuit of all-black unity—the notion that achieving symbolic, intraracial accord is an inherently progressive political end. By embracing blackness as the ultimate social reality and dismissing ideological, class, and gender divisions, convention organizers elided conflicts that must serve as points of principled debate and struggle in any genuinely transformative movement.

Professions of black solidarity failed to disguise the patriarchal nature of the CAP and Gary summits. Women who appeared on daises at such events—figures like Dorothy Height, Queen Mother Moore, Betty Shabazz, and Coretta Scott King—played only symbolic roles in the proceedings. The male personalities, for their part, hailed largely from the ascendant, managerial class that benefited disproportionately from social spending and the expanding ranks of black elected officials. Their preoccupation with centralized, bureaucratic organizations and the rituals of electoral politics signaled a retreat from grassroots battles for democratic rights waged in neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools.20

“It Must Be Liberation That You Teach”: African Free School and the Reclamation of Newark The black political conventions of the early 1970s revealed the significance of independent schools as vehicles for Pan African nationalism. Organizers from the School of Common Sense and Uhuru Sasa Shule of Brooklyn; Malcolm X Liberation University of Durham (and later Greensboro) North Carolina; the Nairobi complex of East Palo Alto, California; and Washington, DC’s Center for Black Education attended the founding CAP assembly in 1970. Creators of current or future Pan African nationalist academies played key roles during the conference, which called for the formation of a nationwide system of independent black education.21

As the major Pan African nationalist federation of the day, CAP strongly influenced the black independent school movement. Baraka, the guiding force and eventual chairman of CAP, was a leading proponent of Kawaida-style Pan Africanism as the philosophical framework for parallel institutions. His own African Free School (AFS) provided a critical prototype.
Like many grassroots initiatives in Newark's Central Ward, AFS began at 33 Stirling Street, the site of Spirit House. In a dreary tenement that had been converted into a theater and arts workshop, Amiri and Amina Baraka began building a block association in 1967. A group of neighborhood children frequented the center, where they helped produce a newspaper and perform plays, some of which Amiri Baraka had written for the youngsters. Many of the children struggled to learn the scripts; it soon grew clear that they could not read. The Barakas had wanted to politicize the neighborhood and promote the Black Power concept. Now a more basic intervention was in order.

Amina Baraka and other young women from a Spirit House study circle began gathering children from surrounding buildings and bringing them to the center for academic tutoring. Many of the youngsters attended the old, battered Robert Treat Elementary School nearby, where the average student scored three years below national reading norms. Intrigued by the relationship between childhood education and nationalist consciousness, Amina Baraka developed a rendering of the alphabet that linked each letter to a word associated with the black freedom struggle. A “Community Free School” (soon renamed “African Free School”) took shape as an after-school class within Spirit House. Though CFUN literature identified Amiri Baraka as the policymaker, Amina Baraka directed the venture and performed much of the intellectual and administrative work.

AFS initially operated three days a week, serving elementary and junior high students and rapidly expanding to include a preschool and full-time offerings. Amiri Baraka further enlarged the enterprise, writing a grant proposal and struggling with the city’s board of education and “reactionary forces in the community” before winning federal Title One funds in 1970 to create an offshoot AFS course in an experimental classroom at Robert Treat. There, under a red, black, and green flag, 30 youngsters, grades five through eight, many of whom officials had labeled “chronic slow learners,” studied Swahili, hieroglyphics, and Zulu folklore along with more traditional subjects. Though opponents of black nationalism criticized the public school component of AFS, Amiri Baraka vigorously defended the curriculum. “Nobody thinks of teaching the Bantu philosophers to the white middle class,” he noted.

AFS reflected CFUN’s short- and long-term visions of nationalist development. Amina Baraka’s original aim was to help students acquire basic academic skills. AFS operators also strove to influence public education in Newark. The premise behind the semiautonomous AFS class at Robert Treat was that the public school system, moribund though it seemed, was likely to remain the primary mechanism for educating black children, at least for the foreseeable future. The Robert Treat extension enabled the incorporation of Pan African nationalist concepts and the construction of a model that could be replicated by other African-American schools.

The approach bespoke the larger strategy of infiltrating white-controlled institutions in black inner cities. CFUN hosted conferences and produced literature designed to challenge public school materials that treated slavery as the origin of black history. The goal was to critique the anachronistic perspectives of “Negro history” while transforming mainstream education.

Ultimately, however, AFS was an expression of the search for permanent alternatives. Reducing black dependency on “enemy” structures, CFUN officials believed, required the provision of equivalent or superior services. “The most revolutionary Afrikans as far as the community will be concerned will be
those who can deliver those goods and services,” Amiri Baraka insisted. Though the leader acknowledged that AFS would never educate more than a fraction of the city’s black children, he believed that the construction of educational prototypes could help demonstrate black nationalism’s legitimacy. Amina Baraka continued to manage the expansion of the independent AFS operation, which acquired new furnishings and a handsome plant when it moved to a building on Clinton Avenue. There she pursued Pan African nationalism’s central objective: the forging of a new people.25

Even the name of the CFUN school reflected this mission. The original “African Free School” had been founded in New York during the late eighteenth century as a means of educating the children of free and enslaved African Americans. Established by white philanthropists, the institution had become an instrument of black self-determination, producing an august procession of abolitionists, educators, and black nationalists, from Alexander Crummell to Henry Highland Garnet. Newark’s AFS sought to generate an equally gifted leadership class, a body that could help “transform the values of our community from white and Negro values to black revolutionary values.”26

The practical challenges of this crusade were daunting. AFS charged no tuition and relied on tens of thousands of dollars in grants from the federal government, foundations, and private donors. One of the more generously subsidized Pan African nationalist institutions of the day, the school received tax-exempt status in 1972. The tithes of CFUN workers and the volunteer labor of parents supplemented the operation, but the absence of a major endowment meant continued dependence on external benefactors.27

Whatever contradictions marred their rhetoric of black autonomy, AFS officials remained trenchant critics of public education. Amiri Baraka maintained that all public institutions—“even the rundown schools full of black children deep in the ghettos”—were strongholds of white supremacy. Without an effort to both control and circumvent such establishments, he argued, “we leave our children to be crippled for life by enemies as old and deadly as our residence in the West.” The activist described the typical Newark teacher (a white, nonresident of the city) as “a mind distortion specialist” who extracted “hunks of black matter” from the minds of African-American children, only to “replace that living tissue with cancerous growths.”28

Newark’s educational realities hardly invalidated such rhetoric. The deterioration of the city’s schools had accelerated during the 1960s as the African-American student population had climbed from 55% to close to 80%. Most black students attended congested, aging schools that had been abandoned by Newark’s dwindling middle class. The high school dropout rate exceeded 30%; unofficial sources placed it closer to 50%. While 50 of its 75 schools were predominantly black, the district employed no African-American principals at the time of the 1967 uprising. A Governor’s Commission on Civil Disorders reported in 1968 that thousands of children in the city “either cannot read, or are such poor readers that there is little hope for an escape from the ghetto.”29

This was not news to black Newark, some portion of which had expressed its outrage in the streets the preceding summer. That was also the year that Spirit House organizers had joined the struggle for educational justice. Amiri Baraka had led an effort to oust the principal and assistant principal of Robert Treat while attempting to cultivate the nationalist sensibilities of local parents. (“Wouldn’t it be better to have a black principal at an all-black school?” he asked.) As the scale of miseducation at
Robert Treat and other schools was revealed, he, Amina Baraka, and other activists turned to open agitation. “We began to harass the school administration at Robert Treat to find out why the children couldn’t read,” he later recalled. 

Amiri Baraka’s gadfly role deepened in 1970–1971 as the public school crisis took the form of violent, deeply divisive teacher strikes. Like New York’s Ocean Hill–Brownsville conflict, the Newark affair pitted a largely white teacher’s union against the board of education and black parents and activists. The battle involved a complex blend of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. A predominantly Jewish- and Italian-American union struggling to assert collective bargaining rights clashed with an African-American community striving to translate demographic strength and the election of the city’s first black mayor into genuine social gains.

Over the course of the conflict, teachers endured mass arrests and jail while many African-American parents resisted the unionist agenda, fighting what they saw as a further threat to their children’s education. Supporters of the teachers accused Baraka and other Newark militants of fueling racial antagonism for political ends while obscuring the class dimensions of a complicated issue. Meanwhile, Baraka continued to castigate not only the teacher’s union but also black and Puerto Rican members of the school board and other figures who he believed had stymied the efforts of the black working class to seize control of Newark. “The Neo-colonial negro [sic] has now conspired with the white boy to break the growing power of the black masses in this city over the educational system,” he declared.

Despite such assertions, black Newark’s newfound influence did produce some changes, symbolic and otherwise, in the early 1970s. In the former category was the official rechristening of Robert Treat (originally named for a colonial-era governor, the school was now known as “Marcus Garvey”) and an effort to authorize the flying of black liberation flags in African-American schools. As time passed, however, the failure of a rising class of black officials to effectively address urban decay and other social crises led to Baraka’s disillusionment with electoral politics. Once hailed as a folk hero, Mayor Kenneth Gibson proved to be a prosaic bureaucrat who possessed neither the ability nor the inclination to oversee a transfer of power and resources to Newark’s working class. Contemporary developments thus reinforced the appeal of alternative institutions.

For its organizers, of course, AFS had remained a priority. It fell to Amina Baraka, who served as AFS principal, and to other mostly female teachers from the ranks of CFUN to educate the dozens of children—many of them sons and daughters of the organization’s members—who attended the community school. The instructors showed signs of creativity. Students learned hieroglyphics in art class and fashioned bead necklaces or African skirts and dashikis in home economics. They performed political plays and studied The Autobiography of Malcolm X. They visited not only libraries, museums, and theaters but also welfare offices and housing projects. “We want them to understand the community,” explained Mama Furaha, a veteran AFS teacher.

In general, however, instruction proved highly regimented. Students chanted slogans and saluted a red, black, and green flag. Catechisms and rote methods were used from preschool through the upper-level classes. Amina Baraka trained scores of teachers in such practices, preparing them for service in AFS and other Pan African nationalist schools. The emphasis on discipline and collective response was said
to complement the communitarian nature of black children. Instilling the “master teachings” of Kawaida and purging “the alien value system” were explicit aims. Education was defined as the inculcation of values. Pupils were graded on a seven-point system, with the highest rank defined as “the total African Free School student, with an African Personality.”

The preoccupation with values enhanced the status of female AFS teachers. Women were primary bearers of morality and social ethics in cultural nationalism’s worldview. Since achieving nationhood was thought to require systematic transmission of such knowledge, women were seen as essential agents of national formation. “It must be survival and liberation that you teach, Sister,” Amiri Baraka commanded. Of course, women’s symbolic value rested on their willingness to accept male authority. Submission was celebrated as a sign of familial loyalty and devotion. By labeling female teachers “Mamas” and male instructors “Babas,” AFS officials enforced both the bonds of fictive kinship and the principle of obedience.

Ultimately, AFS was designed to produce the disciplined sons and daughters an embryonic nation requires. Children ages 4 to 14 were taught a uniform system of symbols based on a central premise: *Sifa Ote Mtu Weusi* (All Praises to the Black Man). The dictation of standards, the exaltation of conformity, the standardization of black life—all were regarded as indispensable to the task of building community amid what was frequently described as the “chaos” of the inner city. An exacting education was seen as a means of imposing order and “predictability.” As Amiri Baraka noted, “ Tradition in a degenerated situation becomes innovation.”

“An Incorruptible Generation”: CAP Sites North and South

AFS influenced black independent schools across the country. Congress of African People units in more than a dozen cities developed similar systems, with circles of committed organizers creating and operating private schools. AFS also helped generate an educational renaissance within Newark. The 1967 insurrection that fueled Amiri Baraka’s imagination produced other local enterprises designed to satisfy a generation’s hunger for self-knowledge. The Chad School was among the ventures that emerged as part of the rebellion-inspired drive for experimentation and self-sufficiency. The establishment, which served youngsters up to age 15, was named after a Central African nation that had initiated a major campaign to develop its educational system. The Black Youth Organization, the coalition of high school and college students that founded the school, vowed to expand the institution through grade 12 before sending graduates to postsecondary ventures like Malcolm X Liberation University and the Center for Black Education.

AFS inspired institutions in Chicago as well. Desegregation battles in the 1960s had failed to win educational justice for the city’s black children, whose schools were ravaged by white flight, shrinking tax revenue, and systematic discrimination. As in other locales, increasingly assertive black parents and educators had clashed with an incipient teacher’s union whose attempts to expand professional rights were seen as endangering efforts to improve inner-city education. As was the case elsewhere, the cumulative pressure of structural racism had combusted, igniting a 1966 uprising that spread both destruction and dreams of rebirth.

Those dreams included efforts to expand Chicago’s traditions of black educational autonomy. Since the 1930s, the city had been home to one of the original branches of the Nation of Islam school system. In the 1960s, the Ruth B. Lott School, CAM Academy, and Communiversity furnished
additional models of self-determination. By the early 1970s, New Concept Development Center and Shule Ya Watoto had emerged as leading sites within the latest cohort of independent institutions.

New Concept was the creation of a ring of educators and organizers led by Black Arts poet Haki Madhubuti. Madhubuti (née Don L. Lee) had grown up on the streets of East Side Detroit and West Side Chicago. After college, the army, and a series of odd jobs, he had found success as a poet, publishing popular volumes like Think Black and Black Pride. Madhubuti’s didactic poems lamented what their creator saw as black people’s psychological dependence on white majority culture. Madhubuti viewed the black artist as a “culture stabilizer” whose task was to uplift and enlighten African Americans, a people who had strayed from their true spiritual selves.39 Black America’s foes, Madhubuti maintained, had

raped our minds with:
T.V. & straight hair,
Reader’s Digest & bleaching creams,
tarzan & jungle jim,
used cars and used homes,
reefers & napalm,
european history & promises.40

The solution to such debasement was black awareness and institution building. While a poem might momentarily capture an audience, Madhubuti reasoned, an institution could offer direction for years to come. In 1967, the poet joined writers Carolyn Rodgers and Johari Amini in founding Third World Press, a small publishing house. However, it was the Institute for Positive Education (IPE), an establishment formed in 1970, that truly embodied Madhubuti’s political visions.

IPE was conceived as a total resource for Chicago’s South Side. A cultural center and political forum, it was designed to elevate the consciousness of children and adults and to serve as a vehicle for the “redefinition and reeducation of our people.” In coming years, the storefront enterprise would issue pamphlets, develop food cooperatives, and offer tutoring services, youth programs, lecture series, and consumer advice. Madhubuti saw IPE as a means of correcting social deficiencies while offering concrete alternatives to the values of the white mainstream.

(p.144) IPE served as the organizational framework for a cadre fashioned in the style of CFUN. The institution’s cluster of young, marginally middle-class workers and volunteers included high school teacher and IPE cofounder Carol Hall (later Safisha Madhubuti, Haki’s wife). The group followed a strict regimen of work, study, diet, and exercise. Separate men’s and women’s councils enforced stringent protocols and duties. The IPE structure even included a naming committee, a body that bestowed on the former Don L. Lee a designation meaning “justice” (Haki) and “precise, accurate, and dependable” (Madhubuti).41

Madhubuti and his associates continued to seek practical methods of purveying values, which they defined according to the neo-Africanist tenets of Kawaida. Carol Hall convinced Madhubuti that early childhood, especially the preschool years, was the critical moment for academic and social intervention. Conceding that his own generation’s schooling had done little more than produce “white
nationalists,” Madhubuti concluded that only autonomous black education, starting as early as age 3, could reverse the pattern of cultural destruction.\textsuperscript{42}

In late 1972, along with several comrades, Carol Hall and Madhubuti (then just 27 and 30, respectively) established New Concept Development Center, the educational arm of IPE. Located in the African-American neighborhood of South Shore, the venture began as a storefront Saturday school for children ages 12 and younger. Academic subjects included “History of the Black Man,” “Geography of Black Nations,” reading, mathematics, Swahili, and nutrition. IPE staffers served as teachers; Carol Hall doubled as principal and instructor. By 1974, Hall had become Safisha Madhubuti, and New Concept had expanded to a full-time day school. Its aims included the cultivation of basic skills, the inculcation of a “black value system,” and the creation of what Haki Madhubuti described as “a secure, competent, work-oriented, incorruptible generation of black men and women.”\textsuperscript{43}

Chicago’s Shule Ya Watoto (“School for Children”) pursued a similar mission. However, rather than emerging from the efforts of a disciplined coterie of activist-intellectuals, it arose amid grassroots struggles for educational justice. Watoto’s senior founder, Hannibal T. Afrik, was a central figure in the Chicago school insurgencies of the 1960s. Born Harold E. Charles in Greenville, South Carolina, Afrik studied biology as an undergraduate at Ohio’s historically black Central State University before completing a master’s degree at Chicago Teachers College in 1962. He later did additional graduate work and served as an assistant biochemist at the University of Chicago. Afrik’s advanced education helped him secure a position as chair of the science department at Farragut High School on the city’s West Side.

As he began teaching in 1963, mass struggles were engulfing the city’s public schools. The 29-year-old joined the desegregation crusade. He marched with King in 1966 when the leader visited Chicago to confront northern racial (p.145) oppression. He helped organize Operation Breadbasket, an economic initiative of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Yet the nonviolent civil rights movement brought real democracy to neither the neighborhoods nor the classrooms of black Chicago. Educational struggles of the late 1960s grew increasingly militant, with African-American parents, students, and instructors seeking greater control over crowded schools with mushrooming black populations. Farragut was a locus of discontent, with an enrollment of 3,000 in a dilapidated building designed for half that number. While the school’s student body was more than 90% black, its principal and four assistant principals were white, as was more than half its faculty.

Amid the 1968–1969 community control battles, Afrik launched a campaign to remold Farragut. He led a coalition of African-American parents and teachers in crafting a “black manifesto,” a series of demands that included a black assistant principal, black studies, and the re-evaluation of disciplinary policies. The drive for more African-American staff reflected the belief that a black image of authority would serve the psychological and educational needs of Farragut students, most of whom hailed from the depressed, North Lawndale area. Afrik staged a series of protests at the school to underscore the manifesto’s demands, organizing sit-ins, “sick-ins,” and a marathon “teach-in” on black history before an overflow crowd of students. The Farragut movement helped fuel a larger rebellion of the city’s black and Puerto Rican students and teachers, who mounted school boycotts and mobilized for community control.\textsuperscript{44}
Afrik joined other black instructors in opposing Chicago Teachers Union strikes in 1969 and 1971. He assailed the union for failing to press for upgrades in black schools, and helped organize “liberation schools” to maintain the education of African-American students during the strikes. He also denounced local and federal desegregation edicts that he believed would strip experienced black teachers from African-American schools. The solution to educational inequality, he insisted, lay in community control and parity in school funding, not in “playing musical chairs with a few pupils based on tokenism and pseudo liberalism.”

Now cochair of Operation Breadbasket’s teacher division, Afrik rejected “cultural deprivation” as an explanation for the educational plight of Chicago’s black children. He dismissed efforts to attribute to “home environment” low African-American achievement on citywide academic tests. Evidence that the system itself had failed, he maintained, lay in the fact that black kindergarteners, initially on par with their white peers academically, fell progressively further behind as they matriculated through primary school.

Afrik sought alternative approaches to liberating the minds of African-American children. He designed a school governance plan featuring a parent–teacher–student council. He directed a black studies program that produced African fashion shows and other cultural events. He organized education conferences with workshops like “Gifts of Africa” and “Myths of White History.”

Meanwhile, he envisioned a more sustained exercise in “nation building.” He had called for “severing the umbilical cord” of black cultural dependency. Working with three college students, all recent Farragut graduates, he now began planning a new model of educational autonomy. As members of the school’s Black Student Alliance, Shebeta, Akidinimba, and Tiyi had been mentored by Afrik, who abandoned his given name (Harold) for that of a third-century North African military commander (Hannibal). The three young women took African names as well. With Afrik’s encouragement, they began exploring alternatives to public education. They traveled to Newark to observe African Free School, visited Black Panther political education classes in Chicago, and toured Pan African nationalist schools in Milwaukee and Washington, DC.

Later that year, Shebeta and other Black Student Alliance members designed the curriculum for a free Saturday school stressing “African folkways.” Afrik persuaded a Westside community organization to donate funds and two sparsely furnished rooms in its storefront building. In February 1972, Shule Ya Watoto, a program for Lawndale children ages 3 to 14, enrolled its first six students. Watoto conveyed concepts of African “familyhood” while covering basic academic subjects. Students studied Swahili and discussed the social origins of drug abuse. The volunteer staff of 10 instructors included Afrik and his Black Student Alliance cofounders. During the first four-month term, 60 children attended the school, with 30 youngsters enrolling in its summer program. By that fall, organizers began looking toward full-time operation, recognizing that Watoto students received “five days of garbage” during the regular school week. As Afrik declared, “We have so many negative aspects to overcome.”

The quest for re-education was not just a northern affair. Pan African nationalist institutions emerged in the South as well. One such effort was Ahidiana Work/Study Center of New Orleans. Like many of its counterparts, Ahidiana sprang from a disciplined cadre designed to inspire a reorientation of black consciousness. However, the New Orleans venture developed a stronger ethic of self-criticism and a
deeper appreciation for indigenous black culture than that which characterized many nationalist formations.

Much of the impetus for Ahidiana flowed from the art and activism of jazz poet Kalamu Ya Salaam. Born Valery Ferdinand III, Salaam helped lead the 1969 student revolt at Southern University’s New Orleans campus (SUNO). A native of the city, Salaam had entered the army and served in Korea before returning to Louisiana and enrolling at SUNO. In the spring of 1969, he emerged as a major organizer of a strike at the predominantly black, working-class school. Frustrated by inferior facilities and limited academic offerings, students at the state institution demanded major changes, including a black studies department, a draft counseling office, and the upgrade of physical structures.

The symbolic climax of the conflict came that April when students repeatedly lowered the American flag at the college and replaced it with the banner of black liberation. On one occasion, Salaam himself mounted a ladder to hoist the black nationalist colors over the administration building. Ongoing disturbances brought skirmishes with police, and the National Guard was later summoned to end a student occupation of the campus. But Salaam saw the protests as highly organized and democratic, with strikers meeting on a daily basis for collective strategy sessions designed to maximize the input of all participants.48

Even before the SUNO rebellion, Salaam had begun to hone his political skills as a leader of the Free Southern Theater (FST), both an expression of and a forerunner to the Black Arts Movement. FST began as a cultural arm of the desegregation struggle. Founded by SNCC organizers in 1963 as a means of combating Jim Crow’s grip on black life, FST was designed to help nurture a vocabulary of resistance and an ethic of creative self-expression among poor, African-American southerners. The touring company’s integrated cast performed plays like Waiting for Godot, free of charge, in humble, sometimes makeshift settings in some of the rural South’s most embattled locales. Its spirited productions were reviled by segregationists and cheered by black audiences. But the changing sensibilities of the freedom struggle soon exposed the contradictions in the troupe’s integrationist orientation, Eurocentric repertoire, and condescending mandate to fill a “cultural void.”49

FST underwent a radical transformation in the mid-1960s, becoming an all-black company and shifting its base of operations from Mississippi to the New Orleans district of Desire, an impoverished African-American neighborhood. Deeply engaged in the thrust for Black Arts, the ensemble of activists and actors—increasingly composed of native southerners rather than northern sympathizers—strove to develop a form of “black theater” relevant to the local community. Rejecting material authored by white playwrights, the troupe dedicated itself to celebrating an indigenous black, southern, working-class aesthetic. “Any theater which attempts to grow, to live by itself, justifying its own artistic ideals but failing to relate to the people around it, to the community, is grafted theater,” Tom Dent, an FST administrator, declared in 1968. “We have all realized by now that not only can this not be done, but the black masses have no need of such benevolence.”50

Salaam joined FST in 1968 amid the company’s quest for black cultural affirmation. The pursuit of relevant material and the desire to furnish black people with “true images of themselves” inspired the creation of BLKARTSOUTH, the community-based writing and acting workshop that Salaam helped develop within FST. BLKARTSOUTH led to a democratization of artistic production (p.148) in New
Orleans. A collection of cultural workers whose diversity reflected the character of the city’s native black population, the body gathered regularly to produce scripts and, more frequently, to create the kind of oral poetry that had recently been popularized by the Harlem group The Last Poets.

By 1969, BLKARTSOUTH had become a dynamic, local base for cultural and political activities, an enterprise roughly analogous to the Spirit House in Newark and the East in Brooklyn. The group staged performances of original poetry and one-act plays in public spaces—from bars to schools to churches to housing projects—in New Orleans and other southern cities. Often rendered in the vernacular, its compositions valorized black proletarian life while emphasizing political awareness and struggle. The aim was to stimulate black consciousness and combat self-destructive “Negro” mindsets.

BLKARTSOUTH eventually separated from FST. Like its parent outfit, it played a major role in cultivating a radical black public sphere in the South. The company continued to create popular material that celebrated the everyday life and culture of African-American communities. As its members strove to define their relationship to the liberation struggle, however, they were forced to confront critical questions. Were they to anchor themselves in the daily realities of black life, resisting an “outsider” mentality? Or should they adopt a purely Pan African lifestyle, rejecting all vestiges of “the American way of death?”

These questions lingered throughout 1970 and 1971. Some members of the ensemble stressed the need to avoid distancing themselves from the larger community. Others emphasized regimens of self-development designed to purge internalized “white” pathologies. In the end, the search for higher consciousness prevailed. The objective, Salaam maintained, was to escape the psychological bonds of “this straightjacket society.”

A core group of BLKARTSOUTH members concluded that cultural nationalism and Pan Africanism were paramount social realities. Artistic performance was subordinate to the tangible work of nation building. In their lives and labors, progressive nationalists needed to prefigure the kind of society that could succeed the current order. “We can design right-on sets and scenery,” Salaam noted, “but the question is, can we build a nation?”

Embracing an ethic of self-sacrifice that required synchronizing one’s personal life and political struggles, the cohort of 20 or so working- and middle-class intellectuals and artists reorganized as a study group, then a collective. Many of the participants were husband and wife; most had young children. The coterie gathered on weekends to exercise, study, and debate revolutionary theory. Its members bought and prepared food collectively and practiced communal child care, striving to eradicate individualism and model the transition to a communitarian society.

Like many of their New Left counterparts, the collective’s participants were drawn to the task of transforming themselves while building the archetype of a more harmonious civilization. Aline St. Julien came to the group amid a search for racial identity. Rejecting the privileged social status that her fair skin and creole background provided, she learned to embrace rather than deny her African heritage. She relished the opportunity to instill communitarian values in her children, discovering in the collective “a whole new cooperative way of living, caring and loving each other.” For Tayari Kwa Salaam (formerly Cicely St. Julien), Kalamu Ya Salaam’s spouse, what was most compelling was the...
chance to counteract black America’s “mentality of self-hatred.” She longed to help create an alternative cultural reality and style of living. She also wished to spare her children from the city’s public schools.\(^5^5\)

In late 1971, the collective organized Dokpwe Work/Study Center, a preschool. “We came to the conclusion that the education of our children was the key to making real and positive change in our people,” one member later recalled. The institution’s name, drawn from the West African work teams traditionally mobilized to perform communal tasks, reflected the collective’s belief in a continual process of practice informing theory (and vice versa). While some Dokpwe workers envisioned the project as a base for political struggle, others proposed a narrower pedagogical focus. As the divide deepened, some collective members adopted the name “Ahidiana,” meaning “promise” or “mutual agreement” in Swahili, as a reminder of their pledge to pursue communalism and Pan African transformation in every aspect of their lives.

In 1973, the group opened a second school, Ahidiana Work/Study Center, in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. The institution, which served preschool through third grade, was to be financed with tuition checks (fees had reached $75 a month by 1980) and the pledges of cadre members. Tayari Kwa Salaam served as head teacher and handled much of the curriculum development, fundraising, and administration. The school was small (for years enrollment hovered below 25) and largely working class. “We were not interested in operating a little ‘private academy’ populated mainly by the children of black professionals,” Kalamu Ya Salaam later recalled.\(^5^6\)

Ahidiana (the organization) operated a bookstore and a small press, hosted lectures by figures like Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, sponsored Kwanzaa celebrations, and participated in political demonstrations. Like Ahidiana (the school), these “mass-based” operations were designed to cultivate the surrounding, working-class black community. Yet like other Pan African nationalist collectives, Ahidiana also offered a kind of cultural insulation, shielding its members from elements of social decay within inner cities. “If you don’t believe change has gone down,” Kalamu Ya Salaam wrote in 1972, “check how black people are dressing. Check how black people are living. Check what we dancing to. Check \((p.150)\) what we’re smoking and shooting into our bodies.”\(^5^7\) Even at the height of Pan African nationalist activity, it was difficult to determine whether tight-knit cadres were bunkers against “white” cultural values or simply shelters from the most troubling symptoms of black demoralization.

“To Live Our Own Culture”: Africanization Versus Transformation

The central theme of Pan African nationalist rebirth was “Africanization.” The term originally had denoted the replacing of colonial administrations with African officials and emblems in the age of independence. Within the United States, Africanization (or “Re-Africanization”) signified the cultivation or revival of essential black cultural traits.\(^5^8\) Both versions of the concept masked conservative realities. Africanization on the continent had meant exchanging European bureaucrats for African elites without fundamental social transformation. Attempts to “Africanize” black America proved no more effective as a means of altering power relations.

For Pan African nationalist intellectuals, Africanization meant saturating black America with particular cultural symbols. Operators of independent black institutions circulated images and ideas designed to foster radical consciousness. Ruwa Chiri of Chicago’s Arusha-Konakri Institute created and distributed
a “Not Yet Uhuru” map that depicted Africa’s neocolonial subjugation. The goal was to highlight the need for a permanent African and African-American revolution that sought total autonomy rather than nominal self-rule. Chiri oversaw a crusade to persuade nationalists to spell “Afrika” with a “K,” a form he regarded as consistent with the dominant linguistic patterns of precolonial Africa. Adherence to the “K” spelling, he argued, constituted an act of intellectual “purification” that could help stimulate “the rebirth of the total Afrikan personality.”  

Organizers of Pan African nationalist schools distributed an “Afrikan Date Book” rendered in Swahili and English. They offered an adult correspondence course in the East African language, an endeavor designed to restore “ancestral bonds” and contribute to the creation of “a new people.” Even personal events furnished models of alternative practices. Held in a Chicago park, the African-styled wedding of the Institute of Positive Education’s Haki and Safisha Madhubuti featured homemade garments, elaborate vows, and a procession that included invited guests and “bloods from the street.” The ceremony was designed to demonstrate that “the best way to effectively fight an alien culture is to live our own.”

Africanization campaigns reinforced the idea that African descendants around the world share defining cultural attributes. Undergirding this principle was a collection of myths meant to sustain a counterhegemonic mystique of blackness. Chief among them was the concept of Negritude. Originally promoted by Francophone African and Caribbean intellectuals and literary figures during the period between the world wars, Negritude encompassed an array of ideas. A theory of racial essentialism, it was also a counterracist creed. A sentimental fallacy, it also provided a stimulus for anticolonial movements. Historically, however, radical critics had dismissed Negritude as a misguided fantasy that reproduced imperialism’s racist logic of European reason and African emotion.

Negritude’s origins lay in various black cultural movements of the early twentieth century. The related concept of the African Personality, another principle redeployed by Neo-Pan Africanism, had an even older pedigree rooted in black nationalist theories of the nineteenth century. More recently, eminent African spokesmen like Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré had promoted the ideal—defined by the former leader as “the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society”—as a way to bolster pride in African heritage and identity.

The tropes of Negritude and African Personality appealed to US Pan African nationalists because they offered a vocabulary of reaffirmation. They provided intellectual grounding for the vindicationist principles embedded in the concept of “blackness.” They justified therapeutic responses to white supremacy’s “depersonalization” of African Americans. They reinforced the belief that liberation requires a retrieval of lost values, a return to authenticity, and a metamorphosis from Negro to “Afrikan.”

Such schemas, however, were deeply flawed. Theories of universal African ontology attempted to reclaim a homogeneity that never existed. They replicated elements of the European thought they were designed to repudiate. They prescribed cultural and behavioral solutions for structural maladies. Failure to consider political economy compounded these errors. Few African-American theorists acknowledged that Leopold Senghor’s lyrical defenses of Negritude had facilitated the reconquest of Senegal by French capital. Nor did they recognize how effectively Mobutu Sese Seko’s policies of
Africanization and cultural “authenticity” had abetted that leader’s autocratic and corrupt rule of Zaire, the former Congo.  

The concept of “African Socialism” was equally misleading. Neo-Pan Africanism reinvigorated the theory of black people’s natural collectivism. African Socialism held that pristine traditions of agrarian communalism predated the continent’s colonial subjugation and continued to orient Africa’s scattered peoples toward the practice of cooperative economics. The doctrine found a concrete model in Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania, the East African country whose “Ujamaa” system of agricultural collectivization, partial nationalization, and socialistic development provided an ideological beacon for progressive (p.152) black intellectuals worldwide. However, African Socialism also reinforced the seductive belief that black people could escape capitalism’s ills simply by restoring ancestral practices. “We are historically a communal people,” members of Washington, DC’s Center for Black Education insisted. “Independent Africa worked to satisfy the basic needs of all our people.”  

Despite its romantic ideals, African Socialism mirrored the conservative logic of anticommunism. Many U.S. Pan Africanists denounced capitalism as a symptom of white immorality while dismissing scientific socialism as equally invalid. They echoed anticolonial pioneer George Padmore’s characterization of world socialism (delivered in his 1955 treatise, Pan-Africanism or Communism) as merely another system of white domination. Socialism, they argued, was as steeped in white supremacy as was capitalism; its “prolet-aryan” outlook, the author of an Institute of Positive Education tract opined, was incapable of advancing black freedom. Dialectical materialism was incompatible with black communitarianism. Class analysis was irrelevant because all black people belonged to the “class of the dispossessed.”  

Ultimately, African Socialism proved to be another delusion. The concept had been deployed by nations like Kenya, where governing elites had used its abstract tenets to justify or disguise policies of authoritarianism and neocolonial clientilism. Even staunch Pan Africanists like Nkrumah had come to recognize that visions of socialism must be rooted in the universal clash between laboring classes and their exploiters. Ultimately, Pan African nationalism’s romance with African Socialism reflected a crude repudiation of materialist struggle and a stubborn refusal to mesh theories of race and class.  

“Submission Is Peace”: Bourgeois Nationalism and Patriarchy

Neo Pan Africanism’s utopian formulas revealed the movement’s adherence to bourgeois thought. By and large, Pan African nationalist theories reflected the mindsets and interests of a relatively privileged middle class. Infatuation with vanguardism signaled a commitment to leadership by “experts” and a denial of “ordinary” people’s capacity for self-emancipation. Many operators of independent black institutions viewed themselves and their political comrades as “a handful of genuine revolutionaries” (to borrow Nkrumah’s formulation). They believed that the duty and wherewithal to conduct the struggle resided with those ideologues who possessed “neither the consciousness of the colonizer [nor] the consciousness of the colonized.”  

Historian Rod Bush notes that “The very idea of a cadre of professional revolutionaries seems like an astonishing departure from reality, but the world of (p.153) the 1970s was still part of the era of 1968, when revolution seemed to be on the agenda everywhere.” Cadre formation also reflected the cessation of street rebellions, a signal to some that a period of vanguardism had succeeded the stage of mass spontaneous mobilization. It was only later that activists like Amiri Baraka embraced the ideal of
collective leadership and the principle that radical intellectuals must harmonize their struggles with the perceptions and will of “the great masses” of working people.67

What author Robert L. Allen called “the vulgarization of the whole idea of black culture” further separated Pan African nationalism from the daily struggles of black urbanites. Attempts to substitute an imaginary African heritage for the lived experience of black America revealed a certain contempt for indigenous African-American folkways. This disdain was especially pronounced in the rhetoric of Haki Madhubuti, who lamented the ignorance and pathology of the American Negro—a “filthy invention” of the white oppressor. “We sick,” Madhubuti wrote, “because we don’t know who we are.” Disregard for the cultural validity of the black working class fueled campaigns of moral and social uplift. The need to reclaim “captive minds” and to foster a more “admirable” way of life served as rationales for imposing paternalistic visions of social control. “Most people are not rational, or they are just rational,” Baraka declared in 1969. “They function on a less than conscious level. The reason you have to teach people values, values, values is so they will do things that are in their best interest without trying to reason about it.”68

The further Pan African nationalism strayed from objective African-American realities, the more its theories degenerated into crude orthodoxies. Attempts to recapture “our traditional greatness” by reviving feudalistic African practices hastened the descent into idealism. Topics as obscure as ancient African architecture were presented as germane to black liberation. Racial fundamentalism deepened the confusion. Baraka of Newark’s African Free School celebrated African “biological roots.” Ruwa Chiri of Chicago’s Arusha-Konakri Institute exalted “our most ancient genes.” Kalamu Ya Salaam (Ahidiana of New Orleans) stressed the need to “genetically remain an Afrikan people.” Such formulations demonstrated the primacy of dogma over material reality and scientific analysis.69

Pan African nationalism’s myths converged in the doctrine of male supremacy. Neo-Pan Africanists subjected women to astonishing levels of repression in the name of “national liberation.” Karenga’s reactionary teachings about black women’s social “complementarity” (as opposed to equality) continued to define the movement. The use of what historians Barbara Ransby and Tracey Matthews call “a slightly modified language of biological determinism and essentialism” cloaked sexism in the mantle of cultural heritage. Black male domination was seen as an antidote to—rather than a symptom of—the values of the dominant order.70

(p.154) Even the crassest expressions of patriarchy were couched in the language of reverence. The West African–derived coronation ceremony designed by Baraka for use in African-American beauty pageants exemplified Pan African nationalism’s ritualistic exaltation of black women. Such adulation constituted what the feminist Frances Beale called “hypocritical homage,” for African-American women were to be both adored and controlled.71 Visions of women as objects of male power and manipulation shaped decrees about everything from clothing to human reproduction.

The righteous black woman was to shun abortions, which many African Americans associated with racist schemes of population control. In a 1972 missive to Essence, Jitu Weusi of Brooklyn’s Uhuru Sasa Shule denounced “family planning” and government-sponsored birth control initiatives as conspiracies to thin the ranks of black resistance. Similarly, Haki Madhubuti condemned “western butchers” who performed abortions on black women. Beneath such critiques lay the historical reality
of forced sterilization of women of color. Yet Pan African nationalism’s assault on reproductive freedom also reflected retrograde ideas about African-American women’s function as breeders of the black nation, a perspective rooted in long-standing beliefs about the link between “racial destiny” and reproduction.72

Of course, black women were not only to accept male control; they were also to provide inspiration. Pan African nationalists portrayed women’s acquiescence and deference as motivating factors for black men, the putative agents of revolution. While “the brothers” engaged in forthright political action, “the sisters” would nurture “the seeds of liberation” by lightening black men’s burdens. They would dutifully imbue children with black consciousness while laboring in the kitchen and bedroom to encourage masculine initiative.

Promoting patriarchy was hardly the exclusive domain of men. Gifted organizers like Amina Baraka were active collaborators in attempts to regiment women’s personal habits, dress, and behavior; to condemn abortion as a threat to the black family; and to portray submissiveness as natural and proper. At times the endorsement of masculine control bordered on self-abnegation. “Submission is peace,” Amina declared in a 1973 essay. If African-American women were to wash their men’s feet in the evening, she maintained, “it would probably be a cultural attitude … it would probably be nothing wrong with that.”73

Underlying such sentiments was the recognition that patriarchy offered security, as well as confinement. Scholars like Farah Jasmine Griffin have explored the attraction of some black women to the promise of patriarchal protection, an amenity that provided a measure of psychic and physical safety, as well as a historically denied “guarantee of purity,” even as it imposed an obligation to obey.74 Many Pan African nationalist women viewed “complementarity” as a genuinely liberating philosophy. For them, the reaffirmation of separate spheres heralded a return to dignity and order. Contributing to black liberation by inspiring and supporting male activists was seen as an essential task of “Afrikan womanhood.”

Women’s activities were to be confined to the arenas of education and “social development.” Ironically, such gendered roles enabled organizers like Amina Baraka (Newark’s African Free School), Safisha Madhubuti (Chicago’s New Concept Development Center), and Tayari Kwa Salaam (Ahidiana of New Orleans) to assume leadership positions in independent schools, occupying top administrative posts and shaping curricula and pedagogy.75 The flourishing of black feminist thought in the 1970s nevertheless deepened elements of dissent within hypermasculinist organizations. As the consciousness of Pan African nationalist women expanded to encompass class and gender analysis, even the most ideologically rigid cadres experienced internal challenges.

Resistance generally occurred underground. However faithfully they parroted party rhetoric, in practice, the women’s assemblies of groups like the Committee for a Unified Newark and Ahidiana rejected the outright subservience demanded by orthodox Kawaida. Female cadres opposed extreme expressions of male supremacy, struggling to avoid relegation to “the decorative fringe” of political activities. Combining elements of submission and self-assertion, “the Malaika” (“angels”) of CFUN embraced domestic duties like the maintenance of “Afrikan house décor” even as they claimed the right to set policy in African Free School. They insisted that black women were obliged to do
“whatever is needed by the nation” and maintained that “all who can work” on behalf of the nationalist cause were entitled to do so.\footnote{76}

The political evolution of female activists unfolded mostly in private, in contrast to the abrupt, public shifts that marked the ideological epiphanies of some male leaders. In time, however, struggles for equality within Neo-Pan Africanist formations transcended what Margo Natalie Crawford describes as black women’s “deft maneuvers” to subvert hypermasculinism.\footnote{77} As female activists came to see themselves as political comrades rather than mere consorts of men, they assumed more explicitly antisexist positions, demanding meaningful participation in all aspects of day-to-day organizing.

International influences aided their cause. Pan African nationalist women discovered in Third World models evidence that nation building meant marshaling all available human resources, irrespective of gender. Several African-American organizers attended the 1972 All Africa Women’s Conference in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where they met revolutionaries from Southern Africa and the Middle East and discussed the role of women in national liberation. Women’s conferences and retreats in the United States, including a key Newark summit in 1974, provided further opportunities for social analysis, political growth, and sisterhood. Female activists began forming their own support groups and seeking opportunities to engage in autonomous self-development.\footnote{78}

(p.156) Some organizers adopted avowedly feminist perspectives. Amina Baraka had once defined her social value in terms of the doctrine of complementarity. An accomplished organizer and the founder of Newark’s African Free School, she once described her primary role as the sustenance and encouragement of her husband, who she strove to inspire to create something “beautiful and beneficial to Afrikan people.” After the leftward political turn of the Newark cadre in 1974, however, she and Amiri Baraka abandoned the philosophy of Kawaida and began critiquing male supremacy as a manifestation of bourgeois culture. She now saw complementarity as counterrevolutionary. As her feminism deepened, she recognized that Pan African nationalism had absorbed the repressive characteristics of capitalist patriarchy. No longer willing to accept masculinist dogma, she resolved to explore new visions of freedom.

Tayari Kwa Salaam of Ahidiana, the New Orleans organization, underwent a similar metamorphosis. Feminism taught her that black freedom required the dismantling of all forms of oppression, including male domination. As she participated in women’s conferences and study groups in the mid- to late 1970s, awareness of black women as “triply oppressed based on race, sex and class” replaced her narrow cultural nationalist worldview. She began to define liberation not in terms of the “imposed reality” of idealized African culture, but rather, as the reversal of her own racist and sexist socialization under capitalism.

Ahidiana also evolved. Through strenuous self-criticism, the collective began formulating a genuinely antisexist ideology. By the late 1970s, its male members were expected to participate in the shared duties of child care and housework, and women were encouraged to take the lead in social and political initiatives. Yet struggles over gender equity continued. “Some of our men will not be willing, will not be able to give up their control over our lives, will be deeply fearful of the results, will believe that their manhood is weakened by the strengthening of our womanhood,” Tayari Kwa Salaam concluded.
“We sisters must be keenly aware of the threat we present to our men, [who were] born and reared in a male-dominated society.”

“A Mystical Unity”: The Pitfalls of Infantile Pan Africanism

If Pan African nationalism was to evolve, its adherents would need to address its underlying weaknesses, especially its attempts to recast provincial black nationalism as a creed of global liberation. In his final days, Malcolm X had mobilized a cosmopolitan anti-imperialism, identifying “white world supremacy” as the enemy of all revolutionary people. In the early 1970s, however, many of his intellectual heirs continued to practice what some contemporaries called “infantile” or Racial Pan Africanism.

Racial Pan Africanism reinforced the myth of uniform blackness. African-American theorists, political scientist Alex Willingham notes, “Started to speak of the African world as an organic community capable of systemic action.” International black unity was seen as a natural phenomenon. Haki Madhubuti pictured “an African people moving toward oneness” worldwide, while Baraka envisaged an “African World Party.” Illusions of homogeneity fostered dreams of a universal black ideology. During the 1970 Congress of African People, Baraka imagined the entire black world, “whether in Harlem or Johannesburg,” convening as “one people, one flag, one leadership, one identity.”

Neo-Pan Africanism thus consigned itself to the realm of metaphysics. The Pan African idea, writes sociologist Paul Gilroy, suggests “a mystical unity outside the process of history or even a common culture or ethnicity which will assert itself regardless of determinate political and economic circumstances.” Universalized blackness transcended the realities of time and place. Activists depicted transnational black harmony not as a fanciful abstraction but as a return to a coherent past. As Ruwa Chiri of Chicago’s Arusha-Konakri Institute declared in a poem about the African and African-American bond, “We are stone BROTHERS reuniting after four hundred years.”

Such ahistoricism preserved a blissful ignorance. The Nigeria–Biafra crisis provides a good example. Seeing “tribalism” as an anachronism that modern nationalism would supplant, many African Americans viewed Nigeria’s 1967–1970 civil war as an intraracial feud instigated by white, neocolonial agents, rather than as a consequence of long-standing ethnic, cultural, and regional antagonisms. Theorists like Haki Madhubuti presented the conflict as a case of European manipulation of petty factions. The issue in Nigeria was straightforward, operators of Washington, DC’s Center for Black Education insisted: “Africa for the Africans, or Africa for the Europeans.”

This binary logic led Neo-Pan Africanists to support authoritarian regimes. Black nationalism in the United States had a troubling record of backing reactionary political leaders—from “Papa Doc” Duvalier of Haiti to Mobutu of the Congo—whose rhetoric fostered the mystique of blackness. In the early 1970s, Idi Amin became the latest strongman to win the sympathy of some African-American intellectuals. Initially denounced as a neocolonial stooge, the Ugandan despot grew in the estimation of many Pan African nationalists as the Western press pilloried him as a tyrant and a buffoon. Some African-American ideologues reasoned that, considerable shortcomings notwithstanding, Amin was at least a nationalist who appeared to champion black self-determination.

Ostensibly progressive leaders were afforded greater leeway. Many African-American activist-intellectuals venerated Pan African protagonists like Sékou Touré of Guinea, Kenneth Kaunda
of Zambia, and Forbes Burnham of the Caribbean country of Guyana, seeing such heads of state as symbols of uncompromising “black manhood” and national vigor. Racial ideology and patriarchy shielded these figures and their administrations from critical scrutiny.

This shortsightedness was especially acute in the treatment of Kwame Nkrumah. The Ghanaian patriarch was both a torchbearer of African liberation and, prior to his ouster in 1966, the chief executive of a state controlled by a corrupt ruling party and a parasitic petit bourgeoisie. Yet U.S. Pan African nationalists all but canonized the leader after his 1972 death. Bristling at accusations of demagoguery leveled at the late statesman in the mainstream media, activists like Jitu Weusi of Brooklyn’s Uhuru Sasa Shule strove to counteract the defamation of an African hero. “You gave birth to black immortality,” Chicago’s Ruwa Chiri proclaimed in one tribute.85

According to these supporters, the very agents of “Negro mentality” and white deception that had toppled Nkrumah’s government were now conspiring to assassinate his character. There was little acknowledgment of what radical Pan Africanist thinkers (notably the eminent Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James and Guyanese historian Walter Rodney) stated forthrightly—that for all his genius, Nkrumah had “fail[ed] to lead a successful social transformation” in Ghana, an error that enabled the maneuvers of the opportunistic class that helped orchestrate his downfall.86

Many Neo-Pan Africanists remained blind to the crimes of Amin and the flaws of Nkrumah. Such rulers personified patriarchal authority and the maintenance of highly centralized, hierarchical structures—characteristics that defined vanguardist black formations within the United States. Adulation of charismatic heads of state precluded consideration of the popular aspirations of those they governed. Pan African solidarity was defined as the unity of presiding elites, rather than as a democratic expression of class struggle from below.87

“Strangers in a Strange Land”: Neo-Pan Africanism and the Quest for a Land Base

Contemporary Pan Africanism’s tendency toward abstraction fueled a debate over whether the United States or Africa represented the critical “land base,” or optimal site of African-American struggle. The revival of this “ancient riddle” of nationalist consciousness highlighted sharp philosophical conflicts.88 On one end of the spectrum lay Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), an exponent of the position that Africa (and especially Ghana) was the essential arena for nation building in concert with revolutionary elements of the black world. Similar outlooks motivated many of the radical, black American expatriates who in the 1960s and ’70s settled in Tanzania, Ghana’s successor as the primary site of politically inspired African-American emigration to Africa.

Organizations like Washington, DC’s Center for Black Education declined to wholly reject struggle within the United States. The center’s strategists deferred the question of whether African-American nationhood could flourish only on the Mother Continent or in scattered enclaves within America, as well. By 1970–1971, however, the institution began consciously prioritizing political work in East Africa. It initiated plans to shift 75% of its operations overseas, viewing activities within the United States as secondary to the struggle for “an independent African continent.” This outlook matched the line of Kawaida adherents, who strove to strengthen black American identification with Africa until the United States came to be seen “only as a sad but real political circumstance.”89
Some Neo-Pan Africanists sought a synthesis of priorities. While refusing to identify the United States as the permanent home of Africans Americans, Amiri Baraka acknowledged that “black people, circa 1970, ain’t going anywhere.” The physical territory African Americans currently occupied, he argued, must remain a principal social battlefront. Organizers of Chicago’s Center for New Horizons, a Pan African nationalist preschool, concurred. “America is ours by virtue of vested interest,” they proclaimed, “and Africa is our redeeming strength and physical land base.”

Offering a competing vision, the territorial nationalists of the Republic of New Africa argued that African Americans could “create Israel here” by claiming a portion of the Deep South as their sovereign domain. Meanwhile, left-leaning groups like the Revolutionary Action Movement and the Black Panthers continued to regard urban centers as the realm of revolutionary possibility. Some intellectuals noted that the drive to flee to distant spheres ignored the logistical obstacles of mass emigration and reflected an underlying political defeatism. The re-emergence of emigrationist rhetoric was a “symptom of withdrawal.” Expatriation was tantamount to “jumping into the sea to avoid the rain.”

As the debate continued, the complications of African “solutions” began to emerge. The trend of African-American travel to “the Motherland” brought to the continent sojourners who arrived replete with sentimental notions of “blackness,” only to confront sobering realities. “Africa is a continent riddled by external and internal subversion and division,” Black Panther theorist Kathleen Cleaver reported in 1972. Visitors who expected an expanse of militancy discovered a sea of neocolonialism. Rather than “Mau Mau Power,” the Center for Black Education’s Charlie Cobb observed, “we find European power.”

Those who sought kinship and solidarity at times encountered misunderstanding, mistrust, or indifference. Guests who ventured beyond the orbit of the petit bourgeoisie learned that in many cases, the material conditions of the masses had not dramatically improved since the formal departure of colonialism. African-American activists resented the efforts of U.S. opinion makers to dismiss as misguided or naïve the idea of meaningful political and cultural exchange between Africans and black Americans. Yet no simple homecoming awaited Africa’s dispossessed children as they fled the West. “Whether we realize it or not,” Ahidiana’s Kalamu Ya Salaam later said, acknowledging black America’s distinctiveness, “we are a tribe.”

One Harlem encounter underscored the tensions of the Pan African reunion. In 1969, Kenya Economics Minister Tom Mboya offended the sensibilities of a troupe of black American nationalists, an act, Jet later noted, that saw the visitor “driven out of probably the most afro-minded community in the country.” During a U.S. tour, the East African official stopped at a Harlem library and uttered what he presumed to be a truism: mass black emigration to Africa would constitute an act of surrender in the domestic freedom struggle. African Americans must not run from The Problem. Moments later, Mboya was booed and pelted with eggs. A local contingent of black nationalists had come to the talk prepared to censure the minister, who recently had opposed a proposal that Kenya offer automatic citizenship to African Americans. Amid the uproar (protesters cried, “Get with it, Mboya!” and “Africa is our home, too!”), the politician was escorted from the library auditorium by police. The ideal of mass flight to Africa had suffered another blow.
As abstract visions of an African homeland clashed with intricate realities, a more concrete proposal surfaced. The notion that African Americans could best serve the cause of African redemption by sending skilled technicians overseas to participate in nation building became a defining tenet of Neo-Pan African thought. The premise, a classic theme of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Pan Africanism, had been revitalized in the 1960s by the rise of independent African and Caribbean nations. The call of Nkrumah, Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, and other Third World leaders for African-American technical assistance further energized the concept.

As early as 1967–1968, SNCC activists had attempted to create an “Afro-American skills bank” to help Africa develop its resources and escape the clutches of neocolonialism. As the polemics of land base theory intensified, the idea of equipping the continent and diaspora with black American technicians emerged as a rare consensus position. Proponents of the strategy argued that African Americans represented “the world’s largest pool of black teachers and candidates for skilled and technological posts in the budding economies.” Rather than join corporate America, college graduates could put their skills to use “where they can do the most good.”

Aiding the development of young nations offered an opportunity to exchange abstract notions of racial kinship for more substantial ties. The New York City–based Pan African Skills Project (PASP) served as a clearinghouse for the provision of African-American specialists to the black world. Headed by former SNCC worker Irving Davis, the organization was established in 1970 as a means of recruiting African Americans to address skilled labor shortages in countries like Tanzania, Zambia, and Guyana. PASP officials insisted that African solidarity must transcend symbolism. African Americans, they suggested, were uniquely equipped to help free black nations from reliance on the technical expertise of “white, Anglo-Saxon countries.” PASP, which had sent 300 African Americans to Tanzania and other sites by 1973, was regularly accused of “ripping off brothers and sisters” from the domestic movement. Yet by highlighting the indivisibility of African and African-American struggles, the project enriched the philosophical framework of Pan Africanism. “When you work in Africa,” PASP representatives told black trainees, “you are working for yourself and for your people.”

“Return to the Source”: The Maturation of Pan African Nationalism

Though hardly devoid of romanticism, the shift toward providing technical aid for the black world signaled a positive rejection of political abstraction. By 1972, the deficiencies of a Pan Africanist worldview rooted in racial mysticism were conspicuous. The ideological turn of the late 1960s had hardened the lines of theory. Infantile Pan Africanism had produced mechanistic formulas and true believers while failing to galvanize a mass base. The movement’s dearth of coherent political strategies precluded engagement with popular forms of resistance at home and abroad. “If we can’t help Mississippi,” Atlanta’s Institute of the Black World acknowledged, “we can’t help Mali or Mozambique.”

Radical intellectuals searched for ways to reinvigorate the struggle. Some resumed the quest for objective analysis, quietly shedding fanciful doctrines. Without relinquishing the principle of vanguardism, they again sought modes of struggle informed by the everyday needs of the black populations they aspired to serve.

International developments spurred the reappraisal. One such event was the summer 1969 Festival of Pan-African Culture in Algiers, Algeria. Among the African Americans attending the affair were artists
and intellectuals Ted Joans, Ed Bullins, and Michele Russell; political leaders Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panthers; and Pan African nationalist organizers Jimmy Garrett and Charlie Cobb of the Center for Black Education and Haki Madhubuti of the Institute of Positive Education. Many of these figures arrived in Algiers eager to witness an affirmation of Pan African heritage. What ensued was a dismantling of cultural nationalist ideals.

At the time, Eldridge Cleaver and Ture were engaged in a public dispute over the role of white radicals in anti-imperialist struggle. Yet the very setting of Algiers, a sanctuary for revolutionary movements from around the world, seemed to transcend racial binaries, including the divide between North Africa and the Sub-Saharan portion of the continent. Algeria’s capital city had been immortalized by *The Battle of Algiers*, the 1966 film about the Algerian revolution that had become an instant cult classic within New Left circles. Now African Americans themselves navigated the famous metropolis while conferring with insurgents from Palestine, Vietnam, and Southern Africa.

The festival reinforced leftist influences. Third World figures rose in multiple sessions to denounce Negritude as a reactionary myth. Sékou Touré of Guinea and other prominent intellectuals dismissed black cultural essentialism as an anachronism, a mystification of the material and political dimensions of liberation. Festivalgoers were urged to view culture not according to a vague “theory of melaninism,” but as an arm of economic and social struggle. If the summit’s predecessor, the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, had showcased Negritude and its notions of racial ethos, the 1969 gathering represented a sharp turn toward scientific rationalism and anti-imperialism. In Algiers, African Americans received a firm reminder that the racialism that shaped Neo-Pan Africanism at home had been repudiated by much of the revolutionary world.

Other international encounters further discredited elements of idealism in black American struggle. Two visits by West African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral proved especially significant. Cabral, leader of the liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, communted with African-American activists during trips to the United States in 1970 and 1972. Cabral had orchestrated the armed struggle that emancipated portions of Guinea-Bissau (“Portuguese Guinea”), an agricultural country of 800,000 people and a remaining outpost of European colonialism. The leader was well known among African-American activists; identification with guerilla campaigns in Southern Africa and the Portuguese colonies was a defining characteristic of contemporary black radicalism. Cabral was a brilliant philosopher-tactician, a heterodox Marxian thinker who generated strikingly original revolutionary theories. His U.S. appearances prodded Pan African nationalists toward greater lucidity.

During his initial visit, Cabral lectured at Syracuse University in Upstate New York, delivering remarks that were circulated widely among African-American theorists. The winter 1970 talk addressed the role of culture in national liberation. Cabral offered a portrait of the social dynamics of revolutionary struggle. An oppressed people’s culture, he maintained, is inseparable from their history and economic and political circumstances. Failure to recognize culture as “an element of resistance” may cripple liberation movements. Yet culture reflects prevailing material conditions; it is neither an abstraction nor the possession of elites. In the process of self-liberation, oppressed people must “return to the upward paths of their own culture;” rediscovering their native vitality and strengths. The movement’s leaders must embody and defend the popular character of indigenous culture.
Invariably, however, the petit bourgeoisie from which the revolutionary leadership hails becomes estranged from mass culture. To avoid replicating the colonial order, revolutionary leaders must subordinate their economic and social privileges to the aspirations of the people. They must undergo a process of cultural reconversion, a change that occurs only as they fight alongside the popular masses. Male chauvinism and other retrograde traditions must be rejected. In the end, however, revolutionary leaders who immerse themselves in grassroots struggle will discover in their own elitism and colonial mentality the movement’s greatest cultural impediment. In Cabral’s words,

The leaders realize, not without a certain astonishment, the richness of spirit, the capacity for reasoned discussion and clear exposition of ideas, the facility for understanding and assimilating concepts on the part of population groups who yesterday were forgotten, if not despised, and who were considered incompetent by the colonizer and even by some nationals.99

Cabral explored similar themes during his fall 1972 return to the United States. His appearance at historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania drew a throng of activists; platform guests included Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Ruwa Chiri, Nelson Johnson (of Student Organization for Black Unity), Gene Locke (of Lynn Eusan Institute, a school in Houston, Texas), and Malcolm X Liberation University’s Owusu Sadaukai. Cabral warmly embraced an adolescent who presented him with a check for the Guinean and Cape Verdean movements on behalf of the Congress of African People. Then he issued his remarks, addressing the question of “Identity and Dignity in the Context of National Liberation.”

The indigenous population under colonial domination, Cabral asserted, retains the weapon of culture, a means of resistance that persists even when political, economic, and military measures fail. However, having internalized the ruling culture, indigenous elites form a marginal class positioned between workers and the colonialists. In the course of national struggle, the revolutionary petit bourgeoisie must relearn its identity from “the native masses.” Not simply a matter of reviving “tradition,” this “return to the source” entails absolute (p.164) identification with the revolutionary desires of the lower stratum. It means explicit rejection by the petit bourgeoisie of “the pretended supremacy of the culture of the dominant power.” Black America’s claim to an exclusively African identity, Cabral suggested, was “another proof, possibly a rather desperate one, of the need for a return to the source”—a reaffirmation of the cultural values of the African-American masses.100

A few days later a remarkable gathering of organizers enjoyed a more intimate exchange with Cabral. At the West African leader’s behest, 30 black American organizations spanning a range of ideologies sent representatives to an informal meeting with the theorist. More than 120 activists responded to the call, squeezing into a small reception room in Harlem to converse with a man they considered one of Africa’s preeminent freedom fighters.101

Cabral offered greetings on behalf of the people of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, declaring that “All in this life concerning you also concerns us.” He suggested that the relationship between insurgent Africans and African Americans must transcend fraternal affinity, becoming a genuine fellowship of struggle. He assured the gathering that he and his compatriots were aware of black America’s circumstances. “We think that our fighting for Africa against colonialism and imperialism is a proof of understanding of your problem and also a contribution for the solution of your problems in this
continent,” he said. The inverse was also true; achievements in the African-American movement represented “real contributions to our own struggle.” Revolutionary Africa, Cabral reported, was encouraged to learn that “each day more of the African people born in America become conscious of their responsibilities to the struggle in Africa.” While black Americans should not relinquish their African heritage, he added, they must never abandon the struggle to transform the United States.

Cabral confronted the question of racialism, proclaiming, “We cannot answer racism with racism.” Despite the terrorism of the colonialists, Africa’s enemy was neither the Portuguese masses nor all white people. Only principled antiracism and anti-imperialism could defeat the true global adversary. “If a bandit comes in my house and I have a gun, I cannot shoot the shadow of this bandit, I have to shoot the bandit,” Cabral said. Beneath the global fallacy of race lay the reality of imperialism—the material basis of oppression. It was necessary, the theorist cautioned, to avoid conflating the two.

Cabral emphasized the need to wage struggle based on the concrete realities of one’s society. He rejected the colonial analogy of black American oppression. Though the systems were related, subjection to racial caste was not equivalent to domination by a foreign power. In response to a question about the role of women, the African revolutionary affirmed the need for full gender equality in the struggle and in the new society. “We have (even myself) to combat ourselves on this question,” he acknowledged.

Finally, the theorist made a plea for painstaking, methodical organizing. “You see, my sister, you here in the United States, we understand you,” he said, replying to a question. “You are for Pan Africanism and you want it today. Pan Africanism now!” Yet meeting the challenges of political, social, and economic transformation—on the African continent and elsewhere—demanded patient groundwork; it required commitment to “preparing the field” of possibility for tomorrow.

Cabral then left the gathering to attend to diplomatic duties, expressing regret that he could stay no longer, and inviting the assembled to “come to my country and see me and see our people.” Precisely four months later, at the age of 48, Cabral was assassinated by Portuguese agents operating within his own party. News of the revolutionary’s death stunned African-American activists and intellectuals. The enthusiastic response of Pan African nationalists to Cabral’s U.S. visits had reflected their immense respect for the leader’s versatility and integrity as a revolutionary thinker.

Though shaken by the assassination, black American theorists continued to digest the ideas of the man they had addressed as “Comrade Cabral.” The late leader had broadened their conceptions of liberation, revealing that political links between Africa and African America trumped putative ties of blood. Cabral had rejected racial chauvinism, positing anticolonialism and anti-imperialism as causes that belong to all the world’s exploited classes. However, the theorist’s greatest contribution was his modeling of a deliberate, reflexive, revolutionary praxis. Cabral demonstrated that liberation requires sober confrontation of objective realities, not utopian or derivative formulas; that successful movements rally the oppressed around material needs, not obtuse doctrines; and that the duty of radical leaders is to foster critical consciousness, not blind conformity.

Some African-American activists embraced Cabral’s insights. According to Maulana Karenga, the martyred rebel had “taught us through his service and sacrifice the profound possibilities inherent in man.” He had “demonstrated that the decisive element in the struggle for national liberation is the
people and their internal capacity to create progress, their flexibility and moral fiber—regardless of external forces.” Ultimately, Cabral had shown that truly revolutionary culture enlarges and liberates consciousness. In so doing, Karenga concluded, “he took us all beyond ourselves.”

“Preparing the Field”: The Transition to Left Pan Africanism

Many activist-intellectuals recognized that rebuilding the liberation movement required new approaches. This realization led to intensified combat with Neo-Pan Africanism’s regressive elements. Some proponents of the philosophy overcame their entrenched aversion to Marxist thought. International travel, exposure to veteran radicals and revolutionary texts, and growing identification with armed liberation struggles hastened the transition to a left-oriented Pan Africanism anchored in anticapitalism and anti-imperialism.

Though the shift to Left Pan Africanism was neither uniform nor universal, some activists began gleaning from the writings of Cabral and other figures the intellectual tools of a more scientific critique. Amiri Baraka’s leftward turn accelerated as his disgust with “the sellout of black mayors and neocolonial leaders the world over” increased, and as he developed a new pantheon of revolutionary heroes that included Mao, Samora Machel of Mozambique, and leaders of South Africa’s Pan African Congress. Under Baraka’s influence, the political rhetoric of the Congress of African People evolved from Kawaida to “Revolutionary Kawaida” to “Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Socialism.” Some of the organization’s leaders began invoking the concept of dialectical materialism.

The Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) also underwent a rapid transformation. Formed in 1969 by young activists, SOBU was closely linked to Malcolm X Liberation University and the Center for Black Education. An advocate of black independent schools, the organization sought to politicize African-American college students and prepare them for nation-building activities in Africa and the Caribbean. SOBU organizers initially viewed blackness as an all-encompassing reality. They saw class conflict within black communities as a divisive force that undermined the quest for political independence.

By 1971, however, SOBU leaders had revised their racial triumphalism. They groped for more rigorous analytical frameworks, striving to combat dogmatism. They combined race and class critiques. They strove to rescue Pan Africanism from the formulations of “bourgeois opportunists.” They rejected sloganism and escapism, viewing engagement with African-American social and economic realities as an essential expression of radical internationalism. “It will be necessary to destroy colonialism, racism, imperialism and all the other obstacles we face from the bottom up,” SOBU workers declared, “not merely chase them away from our window to prey upon other Africans elsewhere.”

SOBU exemplified the philosophical changes that reshaped many Pan African nationalist organizations. Awareness that “We cannot be free in Chicago if we remain oppressed in Conakry, or vice versa” replaced crude political analogies. The turn to materialist analysis, and ultimately to Marxism-Leninism, was hardly devoid of mechanistic thought. Yet two developments heralded continued intellectual growth. First, Pan African nationalists, recognizing the political complexity of Africa and the scope of neocolonial sabotage, shifted their focus from independent nations to liberation fronts engaged in armed campaigns against Portuguese colonialism and white settler regimes. Second, some of these organizers rediscovered the lessons of SNCC. They strove to reunite with the
struggles of black students and workers, conceding that, “A cadre can never be a substitute for working with the people,” and reaffirming the need to relate to, intermingle with, and learn from nonideologues. Few people embodied these revelations more fully than did Owusu Sadaukai of Malcolm X Liberation University.

Notes:


(10.) Flyers and materials on Black Arts Repertory Theater and School, 1965-1966, Box 26, Folders 22–23, JOP, ARC; Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a “Populist Modernism”*


16. See, in general, Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation*.


18. Ibid.; July 24, 1970, Hayward Henry, Jr. letter to multiple recipients, Box 32, Folder 17, VHP, EUM.


(29.) “Report for Action,” 1968, Governor’s Select Commission on Civil Disorder, State of New Jersey, New Jersey State Library.


(57.) Kalamu Ya Salaam Delegate Questionnaire Application, Box 2, Folder “SPAC Na Delegates,” 6PAC, MSR; Kalamu Ya Salaam, “Food for Thought,” *Nkombo*, June 1974, Box 88, Folder 7, FST, ARC.


(83.) Don L. Lee, Don’t Cry, Scream (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1970), 43; The Pan African, January 16, 1970, Box 54, Folder 4, JOP, ARC.


(103.) Ibid., 86.

(104.) Ibid., 85–92.


