

REVOLUTIONARY BLACK CULTURE: THE CULTURAL ARM OF REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

BY ERNIE MKALIMOTO

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"A revolution which disparages or ignores the cultural domain will see this vacuum filled from the eroded ladle of the dominant culture"

GENTLE rain of dark consciousness upon the Mother-Earth/new dawn singing in a bobbing sea of cocoa-hearts/sway of ebony breasts cradling the nation in spirit-fires of black rebirth/dark warriors take their place upon the soil, *our* soil, bearing chants of the dead who are not dead: Chaka, Vesey, Toussaint, Garvey, Malcolm . . . New energies released upon eroded, stale rhythms of the planet/trembling earth/burning sky/SUNRISE! Exploding in the rainbows of a new dawn, of

spiritual rebirth, chanting the Word as it sows the seeds of the new Man who has come to claim his earth again, to claim his right to govern again, to claim his will to live again, this is Black Nationalism, the political, economic, and cultural expression of the black, colonized nation of North America.

But what is Black Nationalism? In its most general terms, Black Nationalism may be defined as the *feeling* among African-Americans that their destiny is a common one, that "whatever affects one black person ultimately affects all black people." This feeling—by definition a subjective phenomenon—is rooted within the objective, historical factor of a common racial oppression which black people have undergone within the United States, a process which began in slavery and which has continued up to the present day. And it is out of the jagged wound of racial oppression that Black Nationalism has flowed

into being: strongly evident at times, such as during the era of the pre-Civil War nationalist movement in the North, the Garvey movement, and the present historical period; at other times more covert, such as during the period of Reconstruction, as well as the abortive integration plunge into "the mainstream" fostered by the educated black middle class following World War II.

On the other hand, what is black culture? If culture in its most general terms may be defined as the *way of life* of a people, the reflection in the minds and manners of men of the politics and economics of their given society, black culture, then, is the way of life of black people, the life-style of African-Americans who have been forced to live under the oppressive politics and economics (as well as culture) of a domestic colonialism within the United States. And here it is essential to distinguish between culture in general, which is life-style, and the artistic and literary works which constitute the embodiment—some would say refinement—of this culture (these works constituting only a small portion of the totality); for black culture is not only Pharoah Sanders overstepping the bounds of western consciousness in his probings of Karma, or the revolutionary poet, Askia Muhammad Touré, rapping from the vibrant heights of Harlem's Black Mind; or even Leon Thomas doing some down, black

yodeling to the African rhythm of bells at the foot of Mt. Morris park; but black culture is also the thunder of maroon pants, orange dashikis, and green alligators splashing out of hot, swirling summer clouds of Lenox Avenue blues people, is black talk and C. P.-time, is black life-style, is Christian heritage, is the way in which black people live/hope to live. And as culture is the expression of national consciousness (Fanon), the vehicle par excellence by which the life-forces of the nation are canalized, it is impossible to speak of Black Nationalism without considering at the same time the question of black culture; *culture and nationalism cannot be separated*. And this is why one must be extremely careful in the use of the term, "cultural nationalism," an expression which almost takes on the appearance of redundancy, and which today has been programmed by certain obfuscators of the struggle to mean almost anything from "traitor" to "racist". But then, what is "cultural nationalism?" To answer this question necessitates a return to our preliminary remarks.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM

All nationalism begins with feeling, a common sentiment which is anchored within certain objective factors (a common oppression, history, language, territory, etc.). From the social foundation concretized in this unity of feeling arises the edifice of nationalist

ideology (representing a step forward from the relatively "primitive" stage of folklore and stereotypes: the first stirrings of national consciousness); like any other ideology it may be passed through the political spectrometer where it separates into its three fundamental components: politics, economics, and culture. The cultural component of nationalism rests upon two pillars:

1. the development of a *system* of national values and mores

2. the development of a national history.

Through emphasis upon the particular life-style and historic achievements of the nation's people (and, by projection, of the achievements to come) a sense of national pride, of patriotism, is instilled in the hearts of the people, resulting in a fusion of human energy forces which, depending upon which national class is leading the struggle (or heading the government, whatever the case), may take on a variety of political directions; in the case where culture is allowed to prevail over politics (*bourgeois-oriented leadership*) this phenomenon is known as "cultural nationalism."

"Cultural nationalism," then, is the expression of the struggle to promote/sustain a particular way of life, a devotion to that way of life within the national community, but a struggle either divorced from politics, or one in which so-called cultural imperatives are allowed

to dominate political necessities. Manifesting itself for the most part within the confines of small sects or cults having no tangible relation to the masses of the black nation, this form of nationalism may perhaps pretend to its reflecting the totality of black culture, but in reality that would be false, for it apparently does not consider the revolutionary struggle of African-Americans as being worthy of inclusion within the black cultural dynamic. Not that "cultural nationalism" in every case closes its eyes to the realities of the present, but when it finally does address itself to the question of white oppression, it does so many times under the guise of a terminological confusion out of which it can justify, at least on the surface, its unwillingness to meet imperialism on a toe-to-toe, no-holds-barred, revolutionary, political terrain.

Here the oppression of African-Americans is defined as "cultural": the imposition of an alien way of life upon black people. From a cultural problem must emerge a cultural solution, the creation of a new way of life in contradistinction to the old. But divorced from politics this stance is rendered absolutely meaningless, for the suppression of the original black cultures in North America was not carried out primarily through either the verbal or written negation of its existence by the colonizer—that would come later. The suppression of black language, black religion, black names,

black vestment, and the black family—in short, black life-style—was enacted by *political* means, by the pale fist of white state power wielded against the black collectivity by the slavemaster. And so today, even though it is the arm of a cultural imperialism which constantly attempts to distort and destroy the foundations of an independent black life-style within this alien land, this encroachment is only possible because of the political power of the white state which lends teeth to the cultural jaws of our political oppression here on this continent. Our collective problem is, at base, no more a “cultural than a “moral” one.



REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

On the other hand, in the case where politics evolves into a *revolutionary* struggle for control of the state (the seizure of state power), when the leadership is one which represents the broad masses of the nation, then the parallel struggle waged on the cultural front for the purpose of supporting national revolutionary politics is no longer the strictured enigma of “cultural nationalism,” but the assertion of *revolutionary culture*, the cultural arm of Revolutionary Nationalism in which politics assumes the leading role. This is the point where

culture links itself with the day-to-day aspirations of the people, guiding these collective energies to the crystallizing point of revolution and laying a new basis of values for the emerging society. In this sense, the struggle along cultural lines cannot be considered simply as a catalyst for Revolutionary Nationalism, and then once having fulfilled this role losing its *raison d'être* and falling to the wayside of history; for revolutionary black culture, the new system of black values and mores reflected in the politics and economics of the black communal society to be born in the flames of revolutionary struggle, not only primes the struggle for national liberation, but is the aim of this struggle as well: a way of life which will restore the harmonious relationship of Man to himself and to other men, of Man to the changing forces of Nature. To this end, revolutionary black culture, the cultural arm of Revolutionary Black Nationalism, must unite black people, must arouse the collective consciousness of the black nation and pose an alternative to the moribund, decadent culture of the oppressor, challenging every move it makes on black terrain. And perhaps most important of all, revolutionary black culture must reveal to African-Americans the way in which their oppression must be brought to an end. Otherwise the question would no longer remain one of culture, but of pure and simple mystification.

All nationalisms have had re-

course to the development of a national history, to an unearthing of treasured historic facts buried deep within the nation's past, for it is only through the projection and study of this history that a *solidarity in time* (Césaire) is provided for the nation, that those bobbing leaves reflected in the gropings of the present can ultimately be joined to the stable roots of the past, lending anchor to the national base. For the African on the mother continent as well as abroad this development (or rather, redevelopment) of national histories is of crucial necessity in light of the *historic discontinuities* which were savagely introduced within our lifestyles by the colonizing west. And the historic discontinuity present within our culture today is not only that which separates the experiences of the present generation of black militants from those of the "twenties" and "thirties" (Cruse), but in a much more general sense that which separates the entire captive black nation from its history here on this continent, as well as the knowledge of the leading role which our ancestors played in Africa as molders and shapers of human civilization upon the planet.

Black history must continue to be resurrected on these two fronts and taken to the people. But in doing so, Revolutionary Black Nationalism submits that knowledge of the past can in no way change the material conditions of the present; only that this knowledge can enable black people to more effectively

deal with the present (instead of *vice-versa*), to redevelop the sense of collective self, and to avoid the dangers of known pitfalls characteristic to struggles of national liberation. And in contrast to certain forms of "cultural nationalism" which wallow in the insanity of fantastically concocted mythologies, in the exchange of black irrationality for white irrationality, Revolutionary Nationalism holds that in the further development of our national history—though in part a reaction to the sterile myth perpetrated by the technological barbarians of the west that the black man never invented anything, never created any great civilizations, never possessed a written language, indeed, never had a history—we have no need of producing a counter-myth which only ends in the further confusion of our people. Our history stands on its own merits, and has no need of escapist fantasies which warp black psyches . . .

MISGUIDED CRITICISMS OF BLACK CULTURE

There exists a justifiable basis upon which "cultural nationalism" can be criticized, then, once one is brought to a face-to-face understanding of the only really valid meaning of the term. But the recent assaults upon this singularly popular scapegoat from the "psychotic fringe" of the struggle are only harbingers of more ominous forces which see in nationalism the

fundamental threat to black people determining their own destiny on the American continent; like the case of the blind men examining the elephant, the extremities of nationalism are taken for the entire phenomenon, and consequently these attacks can be given either one of two interpretations: either the negro "revolutionary" possesses a total ignorance of the role of the cultural within the revolutionary process, or he understands too well, and in either case these attacks can mean nothing other than a *deliberate, systematic attempt* to destroy the cultural dynamic of black nationalism, and, since there can be no question of separating culture from nationalism, *they constitute an attempt to destroy black nationalism per se*, all in the sacrosanct and therefore apparently unchallengeable name of "the revolution."

Unfortunately, the present trend in this direction dictates that one will see in the coming months an attempt by sandal-lickers of the 'negro revolution' to associate more and more the question of black nationalism with that of "black racism", an obvious parroting of the ideology of the white power structure (take note). And when these attacks upon "cultural nationalism" heave from the ramparts of slick, white-controlled "leftist" magazines (of ambiguous financial backing), then the circle is fully drawn, and one begins to understand clearly the implications: the "revolution" to which our confused

militants aspire will revolve around a *white*, western-oriented cultural matrix . . .

What is the significance? It is a phenomenon which reveals in no uncertain terms that the concept of revolution in the minds of our "new breed" of leaders does not mean a return to the best of the ancient values and practices left to us by our ancestors, but is instead reduced to nothing more than a synonym for turning white—*integration*, if you will, but this time with "guns and force" in lieu of picket signs and pray-ins. Thus, what began originally as a desire to whiten the struggle (and thereby become white) has today evolved into the form (and only form) of an intense "ideological" debate in which the question of coalitions with whites—already resolved in practice during the 1930's and again within the brief period of Civil Rights struggle during the early 1960's—are rehashed and chewed again like stale vomit for the benefit of none and the confusion of all. For behind the veil of revolutionary rhetoric, of hysterical cries of "class struggle," and of united fronts against a fascism which does not yet exist lies—and this must be said—a basic hate of self and kind, with "politics" used merely as the legitimizing factor.

White; therefore non-black; therefore alienation, that is to say, alien to our nation; therefore a revolution plagued with abortion even *before* its inception. For if revolution means struggle on the

politico/military front, it means no less a struggle on the ideological/cultural front. And if a given revolution finds itself bathed in the light of brilliant military successes, it is nonetheless true that this very same revolution can discover its political gains *reversed* if proper attention is not paid to work in the ideological/cultural areas.¹

For a revolution which disparages or ignores the cultural domain will see this vacuum which it has neglected filled from the eroded ladle of the *dominant* culture, that is to say the culture of the *dominant class or nation* (in this case, white America), and if it is in the name of a new way of life that are willing to shed the last of our blood and expel our last, wavering breath, our neglect of the cultural aspects of our revolution would lead to the early demise of our newborn nation-state and a return to the value system of the old.

Our cause, then, is not to struggle against black culture, but against the mystification and mis-

use of that culture (which only increases and perpetuates the psychology of escapism inherent in the life-styles of Black Americans), not against those of our artists and cultural leaders who are attempting to revolutionize within the domain of the cultural universe, but against those ever-present armies of parasites upon the struggle who would have us play political "ostrich" in a world where the dodo bird has already become quite extinct. For though the gun is without a doubt a primary weapon in any revolutionary struggle, we should constantly remind ourselves that it is not the *only* form of struggle, nor is it by any means the only *necessary* form. Black poets, actors, writers, and artists, as well as political and military cadres, must *all* join hands with the masses of our people in one common effort—"different strokes for different folks," certainly, but all swimming in the same general direction: *black people governing themselves again*. Planet power to the peoples of color. We will win!

¹ Witness the intensity of struggle along these lines within the Chinese Cultural Revolution: the struggle waged by the Chinese in order to keep their revolution from straying along the path of bourgeoisification, or in terms used by the Chinese, of the "restoration of capitalism."



Ernie Mkalimoto, author of the article, "Revolutionary Black Culture: The Cultural Arm of Revolutionary Nationalism," is a poet and former member of the editorial board of Soulbook. He currently is co-director of education and culture for the Black Mind in Harlem. A contributor to black journals, Mr. Mkalimoto is completing work on a book entitled *Revolutionary Black Nationalism: A New Ideology for a New Age*, which is scheduled for publication in 1970.