

# The New Afro-American Nationalism

By John Henrik Clarke (Fall 1961)

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No people are really free until they become the instrument of their own liberation. Freedom is not legacy that is bequeathed from one generation to another. Each generation must take and maintain its freedom with its own hands.

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The February 1961, riot in the gallery of the United Nations in protest against the foul and cowardly murder of Patrice Lumumba introduced the new Afro-American Nationalism. This nationalism is only a new manifestation of old grievances with deep roots. Nationalism, and a profound interest in Africa, actually started among Afro-Americans during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the new Afro-American nationalism is really not new.

The demonstrations in the United Nations gallery interpreted the murder of Lumumba as the international lynching of a black man on the altar of colonialism and white supremacy. Suddenly, to them at least, Lumumba became Emmett Till and all of the other black victims of lynch law and the mob. The plight of the Africans still fighting to throw off the yoke of colonialism and the plight of the Afro-Americans, still waiting for a rich, strong and boastful nation to redeem the promise of freedom and citizenship became one and the same. Through their action the U.N. demonstrators announced their awareness of the fact that they were far from being free and a long flight still lay ahead of them. The short and unhappy life of Patrice Lumumba announced the same thing about Africa.

Belatedly, some American officials began to realize that the foreign policy of this country will be affected if the causes of the long brooding dissatisfaction among Afro-Americans are not dealt with effectively. Others, quick to draft unfavorable conclusions and compound misconceptions, interpreted this action as meaning there was more Afro-American interest in African affairs than in the affairs of the United States. Both interpreters seemed to have missed a vital point—the United States has never had an official policy based only on the granting of complete citizenship to Afro-Americans, nor has the United States ever had an official policy based on the complete elimination of, or approving of the complete elimination, of colonialism in Africa.

Patrice Lumumba became a hero and a martyr to Afro-American nationalists because he was the symbol of the black man's humanity struggling for recognition. The life of Patrice Lumumba proved that he was a product of Belgian paternalism and misrule in the Congo. In more favorable circumstances, he might have become one of the most astute national leaders of the twentieth century. When the Congo emerged clearly in the light of modern history he was its bright star. Lumumba was a true son of Africa and was accepted as belonging to all of Africa, not just the Congo. No other personality in African history has leaped so suddenly from death to martyrdom.

This spirit was a natural choice to rekindle the flame of Afro-American nationalism.

Harlem has always been the incubator for Black Nationalism in too many organizations and too many leaders with conflicting programs. Some of these "leaders" are self-seeking money changers who have found a haven, and a bonanza in the African nationalist movement. The major nationalist groups and their programs are briefly outlined here:

*Nation of Islam:* A nation-wide organization, dating to 1930, led since 1933 by Elijah Muhammad, born Elijah Poole in Georgia sixty-three years ago. Headquarters in Chicago. Temple No. 7 in New York is led by 35 year-old Minister Malcolm X. The Black Muslim movement is presently the most dynamic force for protest and change in the United States. Of all the Afro-American nationalist groups this is the one that is most feared by white people. More about them later.

*Muslim Brotherhood:* This group claims to be authentic Muslim and is hostile to the Nation of Islam group, whose followers are massive and growing fast. The hostility between these two groups has been overplayed by the press. Muslim Brotherhood is led by Talib Ahmed Dawud, husband of singer Dakota Staton.

*United African Nationalist Movement:* This group was started in 1948 by James R. Lawson, formerly an official in the Harlem Labor Union. Lawson's many enemies insist that his movement is mostly on paper. This accusation notwithstanding he continues to be one of the most active of the Harlem group of nationalists. He maintains liaison with most of the African missions at the United Nations, he says, "to exchange information, ideas and techniques and to coordinate demonstrations in the common cause."

*The Universal African Nationalist Movement:* This organization has been led by Benjamin Gibbons for over twenty years. This is one of the numerous groups that was formed after the breaking up of the major "Back To Africa" movement. The Universal Negro Improvement Association, after the decline of Marcus Garvey, who was the most colorful and the most effective of all African nationalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This group still uses Garvey's old slogan, "African for the Africans—those at home and those abroad."

*Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage:* This group is important because it represents the entry of Afro-Americans from the entertainment field into the nationalist movement. Headed by a dynamic personality, singer Abby Lincoln, who participated in the demonstration at the U.N. In defense of her group, she says, "We Afro-Americans will be heard by any means you make it necessary for us to use." She is without reservations in denouncing, "crumb-crunching, cocktail-sipping Uncle Tom leadership paid by colonialist."

The African Nationalist Pioneer Movement headed by Carlos Cooks, is the most active of the splinter nationalist groups born out of the breaking up of the Garvey Movement. Other groups in this category are: The Garvey Club, United Sons and Daughters of Africa, and the First Africa Corps.

The most active of the new nationalist groups are: Liberation Committee for Africa, On Guard Committee for Freedom and the Provisional Committee For a Free Africa.

The National Memorial Book Store, operated by Lewis H. Michaux is the main gathering place for Harlem nationalists. It is called the Home of Common Sense and Proper Propaganda, Headquarters, of Black to African Movement. The backroom of the bookstore contains a collection of pictures of the great personalities in the history of Afro-Americans. The area in front of the store has been renamed "Harlem Square."

Of all the nationalist groups in the United States, the Nation of Islam, called the Black Muslims, are the most written about and the most misunderstood. The interpreters of this group have not been able to decide whether the movement is religious or political. In a recent interview with Malcolm X, he said to me : "Our religion is mainly trying to find a way for the black man to get some heaven while he is down here on earth."

To accomplish the above-mentioned objective, the Black Muslim Movement will have to be both religious and political. It will have to be a spiritual, political and economic force.

A recent convert to the Black Muslim Movement, explaining why he joined the movement, and the basis of its appeal to an increasing number of Afro-Americans, said: "I am a man of forty years of age. I fought against people who were supposed to be this country's enemies in the Second World War, and my father fought in the First World War. I have been a patriotic citizen and I have always obeyed this country's laws. Yet, I have never been able to feel like a citizen or a man. I was a 33<sup>rd</sup> degree Mason and I have been a deacon in two different churches. I am a first class cabinetmaker and I've had my own shop for nearly ten years. In spite of all of this, white people still treated me as if I was a boy. The Muslims have taught me that I am a man—a black man—and that's something I can feel proud of."

This convert has stated the case for the Black Muslims, in capsule. The drama of this search for dignity, definition and direction is old, the cast of characters is new. To some extent the Black Muslims are a latter-day version of the Garvey Movement, with a new sounding dogma which is basically the same as Marcus Garvey's.

To the Black Muslim the American promise and the American dream have grown sour with fulfillment. They have lost faith in the United States as a democratic nation.

The Black Muslims in the United States have created what is essentially a proletarian movement. This is the largest movement of this nature to emerge among Afro-Americans since the heyday of Marcus Garvey and the collapse of his "back to Africa" dream.

In the following quote from Eric Lincoln's book, *The Black Muslims in America*, he explains why the Black Bourgeoisie "leaders" have been a complete failure with the Afro-Americans who make up the growing Black Muslim Movement.

*"Organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, for all their virtues, have not caught the imagination and adherence of the Negro masses. Their memberships tend to comprise middle and upper-class Negroes and whites, in each case the least disprivileged of their race. The Black Muslims, by contrast, are undeniably a mass movement. From their present base of more than 100,000 members, they are reaching for the support of the entire Negro lower class and ultimately, of all other black Americans."*

With this program it can be clearly seen that the Black Muslims have flung down a challenge to all other existing Afro-American organizations. How this challenge is answered will determine the future of the people of African descent in the Western World.

### *Religious convictions involved*

The explainers of the new Afro-American Nationalism have given most of their attention to the Black Nationalist splinter groups, heirs to the once powerful Garvey movement, and the Black Muslims. In taking this all too narrow approach, they have neglected another vital manifestation of the new Afro-American Nationalism. Afro-Americans are turning away from both Christianity and Islam. There is a growing tendency to study and adhere to religions and customs that originated and developed in Africa.

The most notable trend in this direction can be observed in the rise of Voodoo cults in Harlem and other large Afro-American communities. The name of the cult, like the cult itself is of West African origin. In Africa these cults were once predominant among the Fon people of Dahomey and the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. This African religion, now being reintroduced is not new to the people of African descent in the Western world. In Janheim Jahn's book *Muntu, The New African Culture*, he gives the following report of the early manifestations of Voodoo in the slaves who were brought to England, the West Indies and the United States:

The reason why it (Voodoo) was the religious conception of Dahomey in particular that came to prevail in Haiti is apparent from a London report of 1789 which tells us that ten to twelve thousand slaves were exported yearly from the Kingdom of Dahomey. The English exported only seven to eight hundred of these, the Portuguese about three thousand and the French the remainder. In other words more than six to eight thousand a year, were shipped to the French Antilles, above all to Saint-Dominique, as the principal French colony of Haiti was then called.

Moreau de Saint-Mery, a relative of the Empress Josephine, wrote several volumes on the plantation life of the transplanted African in the West Indies. He describes, among other things a Voodoo ceremony.

"According to the Arada Negroes Voodoo means a great supernatural being, a snake that knows the past and the present and, through the medium of the high priestess foretells the future.

These two are called King and Queen, Master and Mistress pr Papa and Mama." "The meeting takes place," he says, "only secretly and at night, far from profane eyes. The initiated put on sandals and wrap themselves in red clothes. ♦ Sacrificial gifts are brought, the King and Queen receive them. The receipts are used to meet the expenses of the community and assist needy members. Then follows an oath similar to that at the opening of the meeting and 'As fearful as the first,' an oath of secrecy and obedience."

In a recent announcement to his Afro-American brothers, Ofuntola Oserjeman, the self-proclaimed Priest of the Yoruba Temple of New Oyo (Harlem's new African name) called for a return not only to African religions, but to an African way of life in its entirety. In his message he says:

*We must Africanize everything! Our names, our hats, our clothes, our clubs, our churches, our religion, our schools, home furnishings, business, holidays, games, arts, social functions, political parties, our manners and customs, etc., etc., etc.*

*Begin with yourself today. You have nothing to lose or fear. It is as natural for persons of African descent to take and maintain the customs, dress and traditions of their motherland, as it is natural for persons of European descent to continue European customs and traditions in America. It is distinctly unnatural and degrading, even ridiculous, for persons of African descent to have and keep European customs and habits forced upon them during their enslavement. Our liberation must be complete. Every technique of slavery must be wiped out. We must begin with our so-called leaders. Support Africanization! Note to men: adopt the African look: cut the brim off your hats, you will look like you should, and less like an imitation. Change!*

And thus the Afro-Americans' search for identity continues. The search is both heroic and pathetic. In growing numbers Afro-Americans are turning back to and African religions and ways of life at a time when some Africans are beginning to turn away from them. The new African-minded Afro-Americans are accepting old African religions and ways of life, literally, at a time when the Africans are accepting these religions and ways of life, selectively and with some reservations.

All African life is now going through a period of transition and modernization. An attempt is being made to preserve the best of old African ways of life. In increasing numbers, Africans with a western education and a western oriented religion, principally Christianity, are beginning to feel spiritually unfulfilled. Now, with new insight, Africans are looking back and reevaluating the worth of old African ways of life, while concurrently looking forward to the building of modern and industrialized African states. Therefore, the direction and predicament of the African and the Afro-American is basically the same ♦ being both progressive and regressive. Distance, years of separation and alien ways of life imposed by rulers not of their choosing, have created misunderstanding and a lack of coordination of effort between these two African people. This fact notwithstanding, the Africans and the Afro-Americans are traveling different roads to the same ultimate goal ♦ the realization and projection of themselves as full-fledged and dignified human beings. The notion that Europe and North America represents the only accomplishment that can be called a civilization is no longer accepted and believed. The European concept of the Africans and the North American concept of the Afro-American is now being both questioned and challenged.

Among the Afro-Americans, particularly, very often the question is awkward and the challenge is ill-prepared. This is due, in part, to the fact that the new nationalist movements among Afro-Americans are led, mainly, by aroused proletarians, unlike the nationalist movements in Africa, whose leadership consist of a more articulate educated elite. The new Afro-American nationalism was born, and is growing without the encouragement of the so-called "Negro leadership class."

The new Afro-American nationalists, with all their awkwardness and inadequacy, have learned a lesson and discovered a great truth that still eludes the "Negro leadership class" referred to here. They have learned the value of history and culture as an instrument in stimulating the spiritual rebirth of a people.

The cultural heritage of a people is directly related to their history. There can be no true understanding of the people of African origin in the United States until there is a better understanding, and more respect for, their African background. The culture of a people is the fuel that feeds the fires of their ambition, pride and

self-esteem. There can be no meaningful advancement without this stimulation. A people must take pride in their history and love their own memories in order to fulfill themselves. This is the lesson, I believe, the new Afro-American nationalists are trying to learn and teach.

I think I can bring the picture clearer into focus by paraphrasing a statement made by Saunders Redding at the first "American Negro Writers Conference," in March 1959.

A people's ultimate purpose is to use their gifts to develop their awareness of themselves in order to become a better instrument for living together with other people. This sense of identity is the root by which all honest creative effort is fed. A people's relation to their culture is the same as the relation of a child to its mother's breast.

In spite of the charlatans and money changers who occasionally invade the camps of the new Afro-American nationalists, their influence continues to spread. Their numerous and conflicting programs leave much to be desired. There is a hunger among Afro-Americans for a new and more dynamic leadership. This hunger often drives them from one inadequate leader to another. The smug middle class leadership of organization like the NAACP and the National Urban League have missed (or misjudged) the new tempo of restlessness among the Afro-American newly alerted masses. They still seem to think of this group as being uneducated, unwashed and unorganized—worthy of being led but not worthy of being touched or listened to. The American dream and the American promise of full citizenship, with dignity, after being so long delayed, is now being discarded as a hope and an objective by large numbers of Afro-Americans. Africa has become the magic word and the new hope. There is now, in Harlem, an African oriented political party. This party—called the Alajo Party—recently sent out the following summons to action to its present and potential followers.

#### "UNITY, ACTION, POWER"

*The re-Africanization of the black people of America has begun. Like yeast in a hot oven we are suddenly beginning to rise. Each person must do his part.*

*In traditional Africa every person of 14 years of age must join a society to learn the culture, history, and political aims of his nation and his people. For 100 years blacks in America have grown old with little or no knowledge of themselves or political aims to which they should aspire. Now, for the first time the ALAJO PARTY has a school for the training of our people and their leaders.*

*All leaders must be educated by their own people in their own aims. Our present leaders are not. That is why our power is wasted. The U.S. owes us millions of dollars in indemnity for slavery. We must have strong leadership to collect this money which is due to each family. You and your friends should join the ALAJO PARTY now to petition the U.S. to pay its debt to us.*

Admittedly, the chances of collecting this vast indemnity are thin indeed. That is not the important point here. The fact that this issue has been placed on the agenda of things desired by the Afro-Americans and a demand has been made for its consideration represents a new and extreme approach to the plight of the people of African origin in the western world. This approach also represents a concession. There is now a growing number of Afro-Americans who have given up all hopes of ever being completely integrated American citizens.

The Priest Rev. Ofuntola Oserjeman Adefunmi, of the Yoruba Temple, Ogboni (Keeper of Ancestral Customs) is also chief and founder of the Alajo Party. According to his literature:

*By his initiation into the Priesthood of the Orisha-Vudu-Religion, he is the first of the blacks of America to return wholeheartedly to the culture and traditions of Africa. He is bound therefore to uphold and establish the national customs of his Ancestors. He and the members of his party, and all who join them are adding new glory to the pageantry of West African civilization, as they sacrifice, not for barren integration or separation but to restore to Africans, born in America, the foundations of their cultural genius.*

The position of Priest Rev. Adefunmi (like it or not) is clear♦much clearer than the position of the moderate Black Bourgeoisie "leaders," who are not leading. The Afro-American today represents a revolutionary force in the United States. Again, I think I should emphasize, the leadership of this force is basically proletarian. By proletarian I do not mean communist. The new Afro-American nationalists, like the African nationalists, are gravitating toward a form of African Socialism. This new African Socialism will be nothing more than a rehash and an updating of the old communal Socialism that existed in Africa for more than a thousand years before the European Karl Marx was born. An increasing number of thinking Africans and Afro-Americans are now looking back at their history and culture, and within themselves, for the spiritual and philosophical stimulus for their survival and direction.

On this matter the position of the new Afro-American nationalists is extreme, and presently there is no apparent middle ground. The Yoruba Temple nationalists represent a more articulate manifestation of this extreme position. Unlike most of the other Afro-American nationalists, they have created a sizeable body of literature explaining their point of view.

"The Yoruba Temple," the Priest Rev. Adefunmi explains, "is the advance guard for the change now being felt in the minds of every awaking Afro-American. It is farther ahead in its program for the future of the Afro-American than any society of its kind. In fact it is the only society of its kind in America. It is the only society which is the same in West Africa, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and Brazil, because it is African through and through.

"The soul of the black is his religion. The Yoruba Temple does not believe we can ever fully succeed by trying to act and be like Europeans (Americans). This is ridiculous when you stop to think what foolishness this is. There is only one thing we can be♦Africans, because that is what we were meant to be♦face it!"

Well! Let's brace ourselves and face it. So far as the greater number of Afro-American nationalists are concerned, the showdown is now. The issue is clearly joined. In spite of the diversity and contradictions in words and objectives, all of the Afro-American nationalists basically are fighting for the same thing. They feel that the Afro-American constitutes what is tantamount to an exploited colony within a sovereign nation. Their fight is for national, and personal liberation. No people are really free until they become the instrument of their own liberation. Freedom is not legacy that is bequeathed from one generation to another. Each generation must take and maintain its freedom with its own hands. In this regard the Afro-American nationalists have extended the basis of their fight to include the reclaiming of their African heritage. In identifying their fight for national liberation with the new resurgence of Pan-Africanism (actually an Afro-American creation) the Afro-American not only as an instrument for the unification of Africa, but as a broader means for the unification of all people of African descent the world over. In taking this historical step they have turned away from a leadership that was begging and pleading to a more dynamic leadership that is insisting and demanding.

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