



The Us Organization, Maulana Karenga, and Conflict with the Black Panther Party: A Critique of Sectarian Influences on Historical Discourse

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**THE US ORGANIZATION,
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BLACK PANTHER PARTY**
**A Critique of Sectarian Influences
on Historical Discourse**

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The BPP [Black Panther Party] and Us, two Black extremist groups, are currently feuding. . . . It is important that Black extremist groups be kept divided so that their strength is not increased through united action.

*J. Edgar Hoover,
December 27, 1968¹*

In the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion, Maulana (Ron) Karenga, then a Los Angeles-based activist and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) graduate student in African Affairs, formed a cultural nationalist organization called "Us," which became a premier organization of the Black Power movement. Karenga viewed cultural revolution as an indispensable and primary aspect of the Black liberation struggle. Us was designed to be a vanguard formation that would ignite the Black cultural revolution by introducing an alternative value system, rituals, and aesthetic expressions to the broader African American community. Karenga named his organization's cultural nationalist philosophy *Kawaida*—a Swahili term that he translated as meaning "tradition and reason" and advocated the use of Swahili as a kind of lingua franca for African Americans. The holiday *Kwanzaa* is the most well-known alternative cultural practice established by the Us organization in the

1960s. It is currently celebrated by millions of people throughout the African diaspora. As a result of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) counterintelligence operations against the Us organization and Karenga's imprisonment, the Us organization's program and activities went through a series of transformations during the 1970s. By the 1980s, a renewed Us began to play an important part in the Afrocentric movement and Karenga began to receive wider recognition as a scholar and theoretician.

The writing of history of organizations that have participated in recent social movements—such as the Black Nationalist resurgence of the late 1960s and early 1970s (hereafter referred to as the Black Power movement)—is especially difficult when suspicion and antagonism produced by legacies of internecine conflict continue to shape perceptions and perspectives. The task is often further complicated by the notion that persons involved in organizational feuds, splits, and vendettas are alive and sometimes act as contemporary voices for yesterday's factionalism. My long-term project of writing a history of the organization's first two decades—1965-1985—has forced me to critically examine the way in which Us has been characterized in other works. Although there is a general tendency to ignore the significance of many Black nationalist organizations in African American history, most accounts of the Us organization's role in the Black Power movement are peculiarly reductive.

Many works have generally embraced the negative characterizations of cultural nationalists propagated by the Black Panther Party leadership and an array of other radical organizations. Rivalry between Us and the Black Panther Party reached a peak in 1969, when the two organizations engaged in violent, internecine conflict.² The intensity of the conflict was exacerbated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's systematic infiltration and disruption of radical organizations during the 1960s and 1970s via a wave of counterintelligence operations known as COINTELPRO (O'Reilly, 1991, pp. 305-309). Black Panther Party leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale contended that cultural nationalists were reactionary strategists intending to divert African American masses from the class struggle. Among the worst examples of their anti-Us/Karenga campaign was the Black Panther

Party's unfounded claim that Karenga was an agent provocateur for the United States government ("Cowardly Snakes," 1969, p. 6; Newton, 1970, p. 50; "Panthers Promise," 1969, p. 9; Willis, 1993, pp. 66-76). The absurdity of allegations of this sort is made clear by the FBI's horrendous assault on Us and Karenga during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which succeeded in crippling the organization (Federal Bureau of Investigation, sections 1-23). In any case, accusations and character assassination of this sort are commonplace within the sphere of intense political rivalry, especially the historical clashes between Black nationalist and Marxist-oriented activists. Throughout the conflict, Karenga and Us members also held negative views of the Black Panther Party. They tended to view the Panthers as undisciplined and inordinately influenced by White Left organizations. Yet, their sentiments were seldom put in print and had virtually no impact on the way in which the legacy of the Black Panther Party has been interpreted in historical discourse. The Black Panther Party's construction of the Us organization, on the other hand, continues to shape both scholarly and anecdotal accounts of the Us organization's role in the Black Power movement. This essay will illustrate how the polemics of the Us-Panther conflict have adversely affected the quality of historical analyses of the Us organization's role in the Black Power movement.

THE RHETORIC OF RIVALRY

In their recently published autobiographies, former leaders in the Black Panther Party David Hilliard and Elaine Brown restate their old party-line antagonism toward Us and Maulana Karenga. Brown frequently digresses into name calling and vulgarity—her references to Us are frequently accompanied by insults and conspiracy theories (Brown, 1992, pp. 108, 110, 114, 116, 163-164, 176-177, 184; Hilliard & Cole, 1993, p. 170). Given their overtly subjective character, autobiographies are afforded a latitude that scholarly research does not enjoy: For the most part, the evidence and methodology used to support a claim, no matter how outrageous,

goes largely unchallenged. Unfortunately, certain scholarly works that discuss the Us organization and its historical role have assumed a similar degree of latitude. As I will illustrate, they often accept the polemics of Black Panther Party's anti-Us campaign as historical fact without situating them within their politically charged historical context.

A 1983 UCLA, doctoral dissertation titled *Black Radicalism in Southern California, 1950-1982* written by Bruce Tyler makes the claim that during the Us-Panther conflict "the police sided with Ron Karenga and his Us group." Tyler, a former activist in Los Angeles, is sympathetic to the coalition of organizations who were competing with Us for leadership in the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion in 1965. He states that Karenga "sought to hide his real relationship in the conflict [with the Black Panther Party] as an agent of the government and the police" (Tyler, 1983, pp. 15-16). Tyler refers to Karenga as a "police spy" and "conflict manager" whose role along with other Black nationalist leaders "was to act as the most notorious public radicals to draw real or potential radicals into their orbit, [*sic*] organizations and spy, contain, and neutralize them or direct attacks on outside radicals" (pp. 242, 282-283).

Ironically, Tyler's claims are not supported by any substantive evidence. The dissertation is filled with invective accusations, the primary contentions of which hinge on autobiographical reflection and interviews with his former comrades. For instance, Tyler claims that

Karenga sought to channel physical rebellion into a benign cultural rebellion. And social protest was to be replaced with cultural protest which preferably would use traditional institutions—and also Karenga established a meeting hall to attract and contain cultural protest whereby Blacks milled about and shouted racial hoorays—these meetings were called "soul sessions." (p. 298)

The content of Tyler's footnote for this extensive accusation illustrates the unlimited latitude afforded him to refer to himself as the authoritative historical source. In fact, the sole reference in this footnote is himself: "Bruce M. Tyler. I often attended these sessions" (p. 310, n. 141).

Furthermore, *Black Radicalism in Southern California* employs a conspiracy theory based on suggestive misrepresentations. According to Tyler, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations (CHR) functioned as an agency through which the state pacified the Black community's radical sentiment during the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion via its monetary support for poverty programs and the Watts Summer Festival. He also claims that "groups [such] as Us organization under Maulana Ron Karenga . . . 'fronted' for the County, especially its CHR, to act as radical Black nationalists in order to compete with 'real' radicals or would be radicals" (p. 282).

Tyler attempts to substantiate the claim that Karenga was a spy for the CHR by noting that he worked for the county as a social worker. Tyler then interjects the following conspiratorial non sequitur—because Karenga was a "Los Angeles County social worker" from 1961 until 1966, he therefore was "probably transferred to the CHR . . . to repress the riot and its shock waves" (p. 225). In addition, Tyler falsely implies that Karenga's position as a social worker was a well-hidden secret exposed by his research (p. 247, n. 56). This is obviously contradicted by the Us organization's own literature, which proudly highlights Karenga's experience as a social worker as one of his "credentials" (Halisi, 1971, p. 3).

Even more problematic is the use of *Black Radicalism in Southern California* as a primary historical source by Nagueyalti Warren in her article "Pan-African Cultural Movements: From Baraka to Karenga," published in the *Journal of Negro History* (1990). For Warren, Bruce Tyler's background as an activist in Los Angeles gives his assertions an incontestable status. She characterizes his accusations about Karenga and Us as "findings." This simultaneously authenticates his assertions and divorces them from the context of an intense ideological struggle. "Bruce Tyler (himself a member of the Afro-American Association in Los Angeles)," Warren states, "reported [emphasis added] that the CHR used Karenga to intimidate the African American community as a whole and all of its factions, and social classes" (Warren, 1990, pp. 24-25).³ Warren uses quotes from *Black Radicalism in Southern California* as the only source to substantiate her condemnation of Kwanzaa, Us, and

Karenga. She repeatedly inserts Tyler's quotes within her accusatory phrases. For instance, she declares that "the Us Organization failed to become a far reaching mass movement, but certainly was successful in 'turning gangsters, criminals and cutthroats against the radicals[emphasis added],' namely the Black Panthers" (p. 26).⁴ The injected quote "turning gangsters" is taken from *Black Radicalism in Southern California*, and her footnote for that passage does not mention any other source to substantiate these claims.

Warren's (1990) use of *Black Radicalism in Southern California* as a primary source is exemplary of the process by which character assassination has been given intellectual credence in scholarly discourse. There are other examples of the acceptance of the Black Panther Party's anti-Us organization propaganda as historical fact. For instance, in July 1968, an article titled "Black Enigma" appeared, curiously, in *The Wall Street Journal*. It asserted that "civil rights observers agree that Karenga is typical of many militants who talk of looting and burning but actually are eager to gather influence for quiet bargaining with the predominately White power structure." The identity of these so-called civil rights observers was not revealed. The article also, without revealing any sources, alleged that Karenga had met secretly with the Los Angeles chief of police ("Black Enigma," 1968, p. 1).

Retrospective knowledge of the FBI's use of newspapers as a medium to create a climate of suspicion among the Black Power movement's rival organizations should lend itself to a critical, if not suspicious, view of the article.⁵ The article did, nonetheless, succeed in fanning the fires of the Us-Panther conflict. Six months later the Black Panther Party newspaper reprinted it in full, days after the shoot-out at UCLA on January 17, 1969. It was advertised as irrefutable evidence that Karenga and Us were agents of the state. In fact, the reprint of the article was titled "Wall Street Journal Exposes Karenga" (1969, p. 3). That a self-declared "revolutionary" organization would elevate *The Wall Street Journal's* status to that of an unquestionable and reliable source for political analyses of Black leadership is an obvious contradiction. Nevertheless, contradictions were commonplace within the adversarial context of the Us-Panther conflict. More problematic, however, is the way

in which scholars have cited *The Wall Street Journal* in the same fashion as did the Black Panther Party.

Robert Allen's early study of the Black Power movement, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History*, originally published in 1969, describes Karenga as "a brilliant orator and past master in the use of militant rhetoric." Allen goes on to state that "Karenga was described by *The Wall Street Journal* as 'typical of many militants who talk of looting and burning but actually are eager to gather influence for quiet bargaining with the predominantly White power structure'" (Allen, 1969, p. 165). Allen does not grapple with the probable motives for the article's appearance and, as did the Black Panther Party, assumes *The Wall Street Journal's* status as an unquestionable authority. Likewise, Herbert Haines in *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*, published in 1988, refers to the same quotation to support his charge that cultural nationalism "did not make overwhelming demands of Whites and rarely threatened violence" (Haines, 1988, p. 64). Both Haines and Allen have used the propaganda of the Us-Panther rivalry as a basis for their conclusions about Us and cultural nationalism. That some 20 years separate the publication of both books suggests that the passage of time, without critical challenge, further legitimizes errors of this sort. The discussions of Us in these two books, however brief, are similar to the previously mentioned works by Bruce Tyler and Nagueyalti Warren in that they lift the Us-Panther rivalry out of its context and accept anti-Us polemics as historical fact.

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of the acceptance and widespread usage of the Black Panther Party's anti-Us epithets is the repeated reference to the organization as "united slaves." The name "Us" actually means Black people: The pronoun "Us" as opposed to "them," the White oppressors—as an article written in the journal *Black Dialogue* in 1966 states, "US means exactly that—all of US (black folks)" (Batuta, 1966, p. 7). Nevertheless, the slur united slaves was commonly used by members of the Black Panther Party to ridicule Us, and it has unfortunately been repeated by many writers and scholars in spite of the fact that there are no documents or recorded speeches in which Karenga or any Us

organization members refer to their organization as such. Historians and social scientists such as Clayborne Carson (1987, p. 218), Kathleen Rout (1991, p. 102), Ronald Walters (1993, p. 66), and Gerald Horne (1995, pp. 198, 200, 370 n. 38), and many others, have mistakenly used this slur when referring to Us.⁶

THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF US AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The tendency to overlook cultural nationalism's political thrust is also, in part, rooted in the Us-Panther conflict. As stated earlier, in the aftermath of the deadly confrontation between members of Us and the Black Panther Party at UCLA, the newspaper *The Black Panther* ran a series of articles attacking Us, Karenga, and cultural nationalism. In one titled, "On Cultural Nationalism," Linda Harrison proclaimed that "cultural nationalism has no political doctrine as a rule" (Harrison, 1969, p. 6). Huey Newton had made similar assertions, stating that cultural nationalists "feel that the African culture will automatically bring political freedom. . . . We believe that culture itself will not liberate us, we are going to need some stronger stuff" (Newton, 1970, p. 50). Neither Harrison nor Newton considered the way in which Kawaida cultural nationalists included the politics of resistance within their definition and conception of culture. Reiterating this mischaracterization, Bruce Tyler's (1990) article "The Rise and Decline of the Watts Summer Festival, 1965-1986,"—albeit a departure from the overt character assassination and conspiracy model used in his dissertation—incorrectly juxtaposes cultural nationalism's emphasis on community values with the views of some political nationalists who contended that African Americans needed to wage violent revolution. He dismisses Karenga's brand of cultural nationalism in the 1960s as incapable of inspiring revolutionary violence. He views the insistence on cultural revolution as a diversionary "long preparatory stage" (Tyler, 1990, p. 63). This perspective conveys, yet again, a lack of familiarity with the very body of ideas that he seeks to criticize. For Karenga, culture and revolution were seen as comple-

mentary aspects of the Black liberation struggle: "You can't have a revolution without culture," Karenga contended in a position statement published in 1969, "because culture is the value system that will teach Blacks an appreciation for revolution" (Karenga, 1969, p. 14).

Jennifer Jordan's essay "Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s" also characterizes the activity of Us and Kawaida advocates as nonpolitical (Jordan, 1986, pp. 35-36). She claims that this lack of concern for politics was the basis for the Us organization's and other nationalists' failure to participate in the 1960s antiwar movement. Yet, a modicum of research demonstrates that Jordan's claim that "The war issue was seen as the province of the white left, although Vietnam and the disproportionate number of dead Black soldiers were always part of nationalist rhetoric" (p. 38), is absolutely groundless. For Us, the war issue was a focal point of resistance and the organization's critique of American imperialism was explained from the standpoint of its own cultural nationalist philosophy. For example, a position statement titled the "Us Statement on the Viet Nam War" declares

As members of the Kawaida faith we oppose the war because it violates two basic principles upon which our faith is based. (1) It violates the sixth principle KUUMBA which is creativity. As members of the Kawaida faith we are pledged to be creative rather than destructive. We consider creative that which promotes human life and development; and we consider destructive that which is negative to human life and development. (2) The Viet Nam war also violates our second principle, KUJICHAGULIA which is self-determination for it is a war that denies people of color of Asia their right to choose their own form of government and to promote human life and development in the way they see is beneficial to them and to their own needs and desires.

We, ourselves, are struggling for the right of self-determination on every level. We would be against ourselves if we fought to deny others of the same right. (Us Cultural Organization, 1967)

Furthermore, Karenga spoke out against the war at various rallies and demonstrations and encouraged resistance to the draft. In fact, the Black Congress newspaper, *Harambee*, describes one rally in

which he shared the rostrum with representatives from other organizations such as the Black Panther Party, Congress of Racial Equality, and the Black Union Student Alliance (“San Diego Rally Seeks,” 1967).

As shown by the example cited above, narrow conceptions of cultural nationalism can lead to historically inaccurate assumptions about the political character of the Us organization’s activities during the 1960s. Although the Us-Panther conflict has long since ended, for certain scholars, the term *cultural nationalism* continues to invoke uniformly negative images similar to those invoked by the Black Panther Party. Gerald Horne’s (1995) insistence that the Black Panther Party’s “revolutionary” nationalism was more of a threat to the established order than the Us organization’s cultural nationalism in *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* is reminiscent of the sectarian claims of exclusive vanguard status among certain radical organizations during the late 1960s (pp. 187, 202-203). This posture greatly facilitated the violent contest for unrivaled dominance in the movement. The tendency of some scholars and activists to regard competing traditions of resistance as “less revolutionary” than their own notwithstanding, the state’s indiscriminate repression of nationalist, Marxist, and even liberal organizations and activists during the late 1960s and early 1970s suggests that a discussion as to which organization posed the greatest threat to the established order is futile at best. Although the United States government’s violent repression of the Black Panther Party is well noted, the FBI’s assault on the Us organization—as well as other Black radical organizations—is often overlooked.

In the fall of 1969, after having spent a year and a half employing various disruptive counterintelligence measures against the Us organization, the special agent in charge of the Los Angeles branch of the FBI boasted in a report to J. Edgar Hoover that the membership of the Us organization had “dropped 50 per cent” as a result of their operations (Federal Bureau of Investigation, special agent in charge (SAC) Los Angeles to Director, September 3, 1969, section 13). In a report from the San Diego branch a year later, the bureau also took credit for causing a major split within the Us

organization: "US, incorporated in San Diego," the special agent in charge stated, "has disaffiliated itself from RON KARENKA and no longer maintains allegiance to RON KARENKA and this conceivably is the result of our Counterintelligence program" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, SAC San Diego to Director, September 10, 1970, section 21). By the early 1970s, many of the Us organization's leaders and rank-and-file members were serving sentences for various trumped-up charges, scores of active members left the organization (sometimes in fear for their lives), and the former commander of the organization's paramilitary wing was brutally murdered. The fact that Us and the Black Panther Party were both paralyzed at the hands of COINTELPRO should indicate that the state did not have a preference for either ideological thrust. As far as the FBI was concerned, both organizations were simply designated "Black extremist hate groups."

CONCLUSION

This brief look at how organizational rivalry has influenced the perspective and scholarship of those who have written about Us during the era of Black Power is not meant to downplay or censure informed criticism of the organization's activities, philosophy, and contradictions during that period. To the contrary, the tainted lens of sectarianism has thwarted a meaningful and much-needed discussion of Us, cultural nationalism, and the Black Power movement. The Us-Panther conflict continues to shape the way in which scholars write about the Us organization—and by extension how its role in the Black Power movement is remembered (as essentially reactionary archrivals of the Black Panther Party). For some, negative views of cultural nationalists are reflective of an ideological decision—one that supersedes an adherence to the minimum standards of scholarly research. On the other hand, an even larger number of scholars have unwittingly accepted rhetorical elements of the Black Panther Party's anti-Us, anticultural nationalist campaign and have based their analyses on slurs and character assassination.

Although the problem specified here has particular implications for the history of Us, it nonetheless raises issues relevant to the study of other recent social movements. Few, if any, Black nationalist or other radical organizations were completely removed from the sectarianism that plagued dissident formations during the 1960s and early 1970s—especially given that internecine conflict was often encouraged and provoked by state-crafted counterintelligence operations. Hence, the distinction between the antagonistic rhetoric of rival organizations and legitimate expressions of ideological difference figures prominently among the litany of tasks that encompass a sound study of recent social movements and organized resistance.

APPENDIX

Suggested Readings

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NOTES

1. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Director to special agent in charge, San Diego, December 27, 1968, "Black Nationalist Hate Groups File," 100-448006, section 6.
2. For the Us Organization's perspective on the shoot-out at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) campus January 17, 1969, in which Panther leaders Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and John Higgins were killed and Us member Larry Stiner was wounded, see "Maulana Ron Karenga Speaks" (1969), and Karenga (1978, July/August, pp. 55-57). For an extensive discussion of the UCLA shoot-out and a summary of the Black Panther Party's point of view, see Marine (1969, pp. 207-211).
3. It is important to note Warren's (1990) use of the term *reported* rather than *argued* or *asserted*.
4. The quote "turning gangsters . . ." is taken from Tyler (1983, p. 401). Also see Tyler (1983, pp. 24-25) for other examples of Warren's problematic usage of quotations from Tyler's dissertation.
5. An example of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's notorious "snitch jacket" campaigns can be found in O'Reilly (1991, pp. 300-301).
6. For another incorrect reference to Us as "united slaves," see Pearson (1994, pp. 151, 181 n. 236).

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