

Revolutionary Family Building is an Intentional Creation

kwame osagyefo kalimara

Abstract: *What did slavery do to the institution of family among black communities that were brought to the United States of America? In this autobiographical account combined with a literary review of the proposed ideas by an array of black intellectuals in the USA, kwame informs of the damage done so far to the black family, the ideals to abide by, and the way forward to build a revolutionary family structure for the generations to come. It provides anecdotes, literary insights and discusses how breaking down of family structures was a way of fracturing revolutions carried out by the oppressed people in the USA. By evoking words and memories of Afrikan intellectuals kwame urges the future generations to do the work required in building families that carry forward the legacy of the struggles of the Afrikan people.*

Keywords: Black Family, Afrikan Family Structure, Slavery in America, MXGM.



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Revolution begins with the self, in the self.... We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. Mouth don't win the war.

My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth.

Toni Cade Bambara

Toni Cade Bambara has issued black people a bold challenge, to build a revolutionary family with revolutionary values. Revolutionary New Afrikan family structures were not necessary prior to the enslavement and colonization of Afrikan peoples. Afrikan traditional societies, although varied, were 'group centered', not individualistic, thus the need for the development of a 'revolutionary' family was not envisioned. European invasion into the Afrikan continent and America's invasion changed the Afrikan, forced the Afrikan into creating a martial survival culture. Combating enslavement and colonization did not allow for creating and building stable families and communities.

Afrikan families in Angela Davis' "Reflection on the Role of the Black Woman in the Community of Slaves" (Davis, 1972) tells its readers family life was 'purposefully disorganized' to destroy social structures of resistance. Pre-existing Afrikan cultural foundations were antithetical to the building of the United States of America. Afrikans coming from the same nations/communities were separated. Young children were branded and sold. Slavery was contrary to Afrikan family development and harmony. Davis (1972) also noted that both Afrikan men and women provided for the slave master equally and mothers were treated no better than men.

After slavery was abolished, New Afrikans sought to unite families and build black communities. According to "Building the Black Community: The Family" in 1865 a formerly enslaved Afrikan walked more than 600 miles searching for his wife and children who were sold during slavery ("Reuniting families," n.d.).

Fast forward to Jim Crow, the Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Liberation Movements, New Afrikans are still challenged by horrific conditions. Does history repeat itself? We are living in hot and critical times. The current conditions created by racism/white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy appear to be reminiscent of America's reconstruction and Jim Crow era where black and brown peoples were being lynched because of who they were.

The Equal Justice Initiative founded in 1989 in Montgomery, Alabama, by Attorney Brian Stevenson prepared a research report published in 2015 which documented an excess of 4,400 lynchings between 1877 and 1950 (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). Their latest study entitled “Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence After the Civil War” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020) concluded that the overall death toll between 1865 and 1950 amounts to nearly 6,500.

Wealthy and poor whites justify the genocidal experienced by peoples of color because of their belief in racial superiority. The ruling class perpetuates this ideology to maintain power and to secure poor white participation and support. The illusion of white privilege is that all poor whites needed to be in lock step with the white ruling class.

The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States in 2019 said that “police violence is a leading cause of death for young men in the United States. Over the life course, about 1 in every 1,000 black men can expect to be killed by police.” Moreover, Black women and men and American Indian and Alaska Native women and men are significantly more likely than white women and men to be killed by police. Latino men are also more likely to be killed by police than are white men (Edwards et al, 2019).

Last year in May 2020 the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said “I am dismayed to have to add George Floyd’s name to that of Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and many other unarmed African Americans who have died over the years at the hands of the police – as well as people such as Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin who were killed by armed members of the public.” (UN High Commissioner, 2020)

The condition of any family structure within society is dependent on the material conditions of the people. What I have reported above, Black movements have characterized as genocide. I support this characterization and signed on International petitions personally. One of the earliest formal petitioning was in 1951, the Civil Rights Congress described the decades of lynching and long-term racial discrimination as genocide in their petition to the United Nations. William Patterson was the presenter and the petition was entitled “We Charge Genocide” (Patterson, 2017).

In the 1970s it was revealed that for decades the U.S.. government sponsored the compulsory sterilization. The best documented source of this practice and more is “The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America (1982)” by Samuel F. Yette.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argues in her “From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation” that the War on Drugs, War on Crime, and War on Poverty had detrimental effects on the black family and community.

The above history and commentary are to give clear context on why it is required for New Afrikan people to create revolutionary family units. Inherent in this configuration is resistance to white supremacy/racism, patriarchy, capitalism and all other forms of oppression and exploitation. Family units must have agency to make change.

I have been a human rights activist for nearly 50 years in the Black Liberation and New Afrikan Independence Movement. One of the movements teaching relative to this writing is 'family is a unit of struggle.' It means that the only way to create a self-determined New Afrikan community and nation is to build individuals and families who internalize a great sense of love for our people fused with active participation in revolutionary movements for human rights. What follows is a small snapshot of my personal sojourn.

I grew up in San Francisco in the late 1940s, early 1950s. School busing was ordered by the U.S. supreme court, challenging racial segregation in education. As per this judgement the Court ruling stated that laws establishing racial segregation in public schools are unconstitutional (*Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954).

My family lived in a Victorian house where six families were raised, four were family (aunts, uncles, cousins) the latter two were Afrikan and Haitian. Our neighborhood was only four blocks from public housing. This black community was middle class and poor. My grandparents worked. My parents worked. My father worked two jobs. Our economic survival was created by pooling our resources collectively. This was a neighborhood where if I demonstrated bad behavior out in the community it was not uncommon that I got a whipping by Mrs. Dashiell who lived 4 houses away. My grandparents and parents got a piece of me also. Our neighborhood looked out for us all. They were the protective force to see all of the community children behaved and went to school safely.

Our community experienced racist police action. But our community held together the best way we could. When it was necessary to march against segregated housing, employment and health care, everyone was up front and present.

One down side of my community, although it provided love and good values/ethics, was the absence of important Afrikan legacies, training, i.e. rites of passage/transition for all stages of human development. Afrikan people created training and rituals honoring birth, childhood/adolescence, adulthood, marriage and eldership. Afrikans were emotionally balanced which nurtured empathy. Emotional support and sharing are what balanced families and communities are made of. Enslavement experiences forced many to hide feelings, positive and negative. As a boy, euro-centric America taught us crying was weak. I never saw my father cry. I would suck it up when I hurt my knee from fall. It would take the birth of the civil rights movement to usher traditional Afrikan values. Particularly the black liberation movement would

introduce to our communities Afrikan values and other notions of family and community. “It takes an entire village to raise a child.” “Each one-teach one.” Afrikan proverbs were being advertised in pamphlets in black bookstores in our communities.

The mid 1960s saw heightened protest momentum. I remember the 1964 presidential campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater. The racist whites supported him. What I recalled particularly about the Goldwater for president campaign was driving from San Francisco to Petersburg Virginia to visit my grandparents. All along the way in these Southern towns the signs of ‘whites only’ and ‘colored only’ were coming down based on the laws being changed. But when we went to the restaurants to get food and over the gas stations to fill up your gas and use the public restrooms, the hateful attitudes of the white people were very present. What they saw in Barry Goldwater’s campaign run for president was a signal they could return to ‘whites only’.

It was in the late 60s during the time of the San Francisco State College strike (1968) which became the first institution to establish a black studies program (and ethnic studies) in a predominantly white institution. It was in 1969 where I would meet my black nationalist parents, Drs. Raye and Julian Richardson, who owned Marcus Bookstore that would truly expand my perception of what family is. They taught that family is beyond the nuclear family and beyond my neighborhood family. They essentially affirmed my experience of my life in my grandparents’ home and expanded it. The Richardson’s were also principally responsible for my involvement in a political activist organization.

Kwanzaa (an annual holiday celebrated from December 26 to January 1 which emphasizes the importance of the Pan-Afrikan family and community social values) was created in 1966, peaking in popularity in the 1980s and 1990. For me in 1969, Kwanzaa was just emerging and as I would go out, I would see all of the beautiful women, black women, in *geles* (headwrap), Afrikan print garments and mud-cloth. The men wore dashikis and crowns. The Kwanzaa ceremonial program would introduce us to all the symbols of love, education and community. We would listen to the political speeches and the various Afrikan myths and creation stories. We were taught how Afrikan proverbs from all over the African continent were one of the many versions of human rights text and standards of ‘good’ human behavior.

We were taught how we needed to remove ourselves from materialism and embrace spiritual values. Afrikan people as a ‘spiritual people’ was emphasized. Other community programs and events illustrated how men can hug their children and tell them they are loved. On the continent of Afrika two men could hold each other's hands and that was a demonstration of community love. It was through these teachings that I was able to be able to kiss my father and share with him that I love him.

Family as a unit of struggle must be looked at from many different dimensions and angles. I was feeling this struggle externally but more importantly internally. This New Afrikan family, a political family, gave my son what he needed to be a whole human-being.

My involvement with political organizations, particularly with the Provisional Government of New Afrika (PGRNA) heightened in the seventies after the Republic of New Afrika 11 case (1971 Jackson, Mississippi shoot out provoked by the F.B.I. and the Mississippi State Police). I met President Imari Obadele who was out on bail at the Marcus Bookstore. We had to deal with FBI surveillance as well as state and local surveillance and repression. The FBI and CIA were recruiting on college and university campuses all over the country.

I also attended the University of San Francisco law school in 1974 and they were also present, recruiting and surveilling my political activities as well as others. In 1978, I left San Francisco headed towards Detroit, I was awarded a Reginald Heber Smith Community Lawyer Fellowship from Howard University. This was a time when anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Azania, the country's indigenous name) was very strong. U.S. government surveillance monitored New Afrikan relationships with progressive and revolutionary continental Afrikans.

By 1980, I moved to Chicago, worked for Legal Services for a year, consulted for a library system providing services for the residents (inmates) of the Statesville Correctional Center in Illinois. I got married in 1983 and we birthed a son. However, my relationship with Statesville was short lived. The prison found a flyer in the cell of a Puerto Rican Prisoner of War which included me as a program speaker along with a prominent Chicago Puerto Rican community educator and organizer for the Puerto Rican independence movement. I was walked out of the facility and barred from any reentry. The First Amendment issues are outlined in that appeal (*Kwame Kalimara v. Illinois Department of Corrections*, 1989).

The Puerto Rican independence movement taught valuable lessons for the New Afrikan independence movement and reinforced others. Both movements took the political position of 'non-collaboration.' 'You do not offer any information to the state' contributing to its surveillance of political movements. When the F.B.I. knocks on your door, 'do not say anything.' You do not lie under any circumstances because telling a lie is a federal crime. Besides that, any information shared provides them with something to corroborate with others whom they have spoken to.

The one lesson in particular we were taught by the Puerto Rican movement was the value of educating your personal family on the movement goals and objectives. Preparing them for possible visits by the FBI or state and local government representatives were essential. Whenever I leave the state or go out of the country I would inform my father. I also made certain he had the phone number of my comrade attorney Chokwe Lumumba. He was to call Chokwe if he was visited by the government or required any kind of support. I also learned the importance of not being isolated

in the community in which I was living. I would participate in the civic and spiritual activities of the community. The community knew who I was as a contributing member.

In 1985, my wife and I had irreconciled issues where our marriage could not be salvaged. I sought custody of our son and in 1985 (he was born in 1984) I was awarded temporary custody. The FBI visited my wife and the fact that I was an activist became an issue in some of the hearings. Two years later, I was about to be awarded the dissolution of my marriage and custody of our son when my attorney informed me that the files were missing. It meant we had to wait an additional two years to be able to get permanent custody and the dissolution of my marriage. My attorney believes that the FBI, with the assistance of local authorities in Cook County, removed documents to add stress in my life. We had to rebuild my file.

In 1985-86, I moved to Detroit with my son and then to Atlanta in 1989. In 1984, I co-founded the New Afrikan Peoples' Organization (NAPO) and in 1990 the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM). It was NAPO and MXGM which provided me with support in raising my son as a single custodial parent. When we created and built these formations we all understood that 'family is a unit of struggle' and our movement is 'family.'

My movement family provided childcare and any emotional support we needed. When my mother transitioned in 1989, they paid for our flight to California enabling me to coordinate her final rites. When organizational family members transitioned, we would sit with the biological family as members.

My son is now 36 with a family of his own. They have two children, both boys, one 12 years old and the youngest is 16 months. The other founders of NAPO and MXGM also have grown children who have families, revolutionary families. As a national formation, we created the New Afrikan Scout Organization which includes rites of passages/transition programs for youth ages 6 through 17 years of age. We created Camp Pumziko which taught survival skills for both rural and urban environments. Our young children and community children are now in leadership of these programs and in independent schools and other community institutions imbued with revolutionary family values. Was this kazi/work easy? No! It took hard work building programs to support youth and the community. Mistakes were made and we are still doing our best because we have a responsibility to our people and our ancestors who have led the way.

This sojourn continues. What lessons should be gleaned from this narrative? It is that the creation of any family structure takes work. If family exists in an oppressive and exploitative environment the potential for healthy families is negated by the society which seeks to destroy it. Only revolutionary families have the agency to create critical mass to eventually secure sovereignty. The development of revolutionary families and communities must be intentional! This is hard work! I trust some lessons here are useful.

A family is like a forest, when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place. - African Proverb

A united family eats from the same plate. - Baganda proverb

The Black family of the future will foster our liberation, enhance our self-esteem, and shape our ideas and goals. – Dorothy Height

Ancestral blessings. Free the Land!!!

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