

‘Malcolm X Grassroots Movement Aligns with Just and Right Struggles Everywhere in the World’

Akil Bakari

***Abstract:** Interview with Akil Bakari from Malcom X Grassroots Movement and New African People’s Organization, Mississippi, conducted by Noel Didla. This interview focuses on the organizing principles of MXGM, its philosophical guidelines, and its past and present engagements at the local, national and international levels.*

Noel Didla: Akil, give us an overview of Malcolm X Grassroots movement (MXGM), its history in Mississippi and in the United States.

Akil Bakari: OK, MXGM was founded in 1990 in Jackson, Mississippi, it is the mass association of New African People’s Organization better known as NAPO. The founders of NAPO, which is a cadre-based revolutionary organization understood that NAPO’s philosophy and ideology as a cadre group may not be as attractive to the masses of people in America, particularly oppressed Black people. As such, they felt and knew that Black people have always struggled against oppression and lack of self-determination within the US empire. So, the idea was to create an organization that would allow people the space to struggle on with whatever level they were in relation to the oppression they were experiencing.

One of the founders was the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, who was dispatched to Jackson, MS in 1988 with his family along with Safiya Omari and her family. Their mission was to organize within Jackson and MS as other families were dispatched to the Black belts of South. There were people who were dispatched to Atlanta, Georgia, there were those dispatched to South Carolina, others dispatched to Alabama, and even to Louisiana. Again, the idea was to come back to the South where the largest population of Black folk existed in America historically and in contemporary times. The land masses of Georgia, MS, Louisiana, S Carolina, and Alabama are all contiguous, they border each other. Again, traditionally speaking and in contemporary times, that constitutes the large mass population of Black folks within American empire.



Akil Bakari: Akil@netzero.com

Noel Didla: noelestherdidla@gmail.com

That land historically has been where Black people have struggled, have fought, have died, have raised their children, have created in the theory of the late Imari Obidele, a new gene pool. Enslaved Africans were brought from many different areas of Africa and many different nations of Africa.

The destructive nature of the Middle Passage and the brutal dehumanization of enslavement and the resistance of all those groups forged a new gene pool which was characterized and named by Imari Obidele and other theoreticians within Republic of New Africa, as new African, in essence, we are still obviously of African descent, but we have emerged through all the oppression, all of the resistance and the many years of struggle within the American empire.

Just a little backdrop of what MXGM comes out of. It is founded on 6 principles, self-determination, human rights, anti-genocide in all its forms, reparations, the freedom of political prisoners and prisoners of war and the total liberation of women. The idea is that, maybe people don't agree with all of those in totality but there is something within at least one of those principles people can agree, that is where our point of union will start and that is where we begin to work in the spirit of moving our people into a more revolutionary mindset and actually continue the legacy of struggle that is within our genetic makeup here in America.

My entry into MXGM actually predates MXGM, as I stated earlier, Chokwe Lumumba and his family, Safiya Omari and her family came to Jackson in 1988. I was privileged to meet them and MXGM did not exist, it was there in theory but not in practice. So, my first entry point was to become a member of NAPO and I was privileged to be at the founding meeting of MXGM here in Jackson, MS. That is the jump-off point. The idea as it was stated was to organize our people. NAPO theorizes that the first and basic unit of struggle is your family, and from that, you organize your block, then from there, you organize your community, and then the larger spaces of the city and the larger spaces of the so-called state. The whole idea is around self-determination, we feel as an oppressed group of people in this country, that we have the right to self-determination, and have every right to decide how we should be governed and who should govern us. We don't reserve that right simply for ourselves, we feel that there are other groups within American empire, including North American whites, who are an oppressed group in a different sort of a way.

Of course, we have solidarity with NA whites, some of those who are forward and revolutionary thinking, the Latino revolutionary movement, the indigenous revolutionary movement, as such we are Pan-African as well and we are also internationalists. And the idea is that we are in solidarity with all struggles for self-determination and human rights amongst all people all over the planet. That is the basis in which we try to work, and that work manifests itself again through MXGM. We have been here doing this work for roughly 28 years to this day. We have had peaks, we have had valleys, we have had high points and we had low points. But what I am most proud of is that we have been consistent and that whatever our condition is, if we were at our peak and at our height of our organizing or if we are at a low point, we still exist and we still have some impact on how the struggle is shaped within Jackson, MS and around the country because we have chapters in other parts of the American empire, be it Atlanta, Washington DC, Philadelphia, New York, Bay Area, Los Angeles, we have affiliates in South Carolina, and as well as Louisiana and we are looking to expand beyond those spaces. We are also working with people in Tennessee and Florida.

The idea again is trying to best prepare our people or expose them to what we feel is the only way forward for any oppressed group of people within American empire is exercising self-determination, how we control the economics, the political, the defense of our communities, how we educate our children, how we try to build a resistance to the destructive path in which America and other so-called Western nations of the world are on right now, with climate change, with neo liberal policies, over commoditizing everything on the planet, literally destroying the very air, water, and food that we eat and literally destroying the planet which sustains all of our lives.

Now, when we are dealing with people who are at the brunt of this oppression, most of the time, and rightly so, they can only see what is in front of them, because they are not sure what's going to happen from one day to the next, whether it is housing, whether it is education, whether it is food or whether it is employment, all of those things that sustain life. And so, we have to understand that and be extremely patient with our people and actually figure out a way as we are trying to engage them in more critical thinking but also understanding their material conditions have got to be such that they change. Until they can see that one thing leads to another, the rhetoric is just that, rhetoric, and if people can't see any tangible benefit in any of it, they are not interested and quite frankly, I don't blame them.

So that is the nature of work of MXGM. Historically, we engage in wherever we feel the struggle is most needed. And so over time, different tactics changed, the strategy is always the same, obviously, self-determination where we control our own destiny in every avenue of people activity. However, the tactics change. In this period currently, we are in the electoral arena, fully understanding the constraints and the contradictions of electoral politics.

The structures and systems were not built or designed to empower anybody other than the ones who control them. We are fully aware of that. That is the difficult part. As we are in Jackson, MS as we endeavored into the electoral arena. Actually, running candidates from MXGM began in 2009. We have been behind the scenes in some political initiatives as far back as 1992, with grassroots conventions here. As we were approached about the idea of Black people actually creating a process where they vet a candidate, they select who they want for a particular office and arm that person with an agenda that serves the larger community. Which was a great idea, we felt it was too. And we entered into that process to make sure that it served, and it was people-centric. Moving forward, another model we used around in reaction to Katrina and the devastation that occurred on MS coast and in Louisiana and how it impacted our people tremendously. Our people were literally ethnically cleansed from the New Orleans area and shipped to all parts of the American empire, with the idea that they would never return. We did work in those areas, the models we used then are currently called Peoples Assemblies, they were called something else during that time, but they were the same models. And these are nothing new or unique to us, these processes and spaces exist in all parts of the planet, and people have used them to great success, even more success than we have, all over the planet.

The latest iteration of that is what we called the Jackson People's Assemblies. The peoples' assemblies in conjunction with electoral initiatives is a two-fold strategy, in our view. As I stated earlier, the structures are not designed to empower people and we fully understand that. Our job as we see it is to try to transform those structures to the extent that we can, to make them as people

centric as possible, but more important is to build alternative structures outside of the current electoral order. And the vehicles we are using are the People's Assemblies. If we are successful in institutionalizing the assemblies and really making them viable and attractive to our people to use, we feel that we can really build alternative governing structures that our people can then exercise that emerge as an alternative forte to the current electoral order. It is a tall job, but the times are such that we have to think of ideas in creating structures, again, the structures that are in place are not designed for people centered upliftment and empowerment. And they are failing all over the American empire, they are failing all over the planet. And people are resisting, and people are actually attempting to build alternative structures.

So, we think that the assemblies at this point are the vehicles to further that change. MXGM is at the heart and the center of that. Our idea is that they don't belong to us, however, it is up to us to make sure they serve the purpose in which they would have served in the beginning, and that is to empower our people to understand that they have the collective power to make the collective change that they are seeking. Nothing else, nobody is going to send us anything. Nothing is going to fall out of the sky, whatever we are going to do is going to build our power with our own labor, our own ingenuity. As such as I said in this period, through the electoral arena, we are trying to figure out how to make it as responsive and conducive to what we are attempting to do, but we have no illusion that these structures will not be all that we need them to be. That is the part of the contradiction of the work that we do. When you are inside these structures, you have to also absolutely be outside to build. And to point out those contradictions to our people is a very difficult job. So many of our people are suffering within the late stage capitalism, and the ravages and the extractive nature of it. And how do we maneuver and try to change these systems at the same time trying to maintain and build within these capitalist structures is extremely difficult. But again, I have faith and confidence in the genius and ingenuity of our people and I am very proud of the young people here in Jackson of all stripes who seem to be up to the challenge.

Noel Didla: In closing question one, could you give us some information for the international audience on who the founders of NAPO and the founders of MXGM are?

Akil Bakari: The founding members of NAPO are the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, Watani Tyehimba, Ahati Tyehimba, Chinganji Akinyele, Aminata Umoja, Akinyele Umoja, Makungu. The founding members of MXGM are all of the above members and Akmed Obafemi and Safiya Omari.

Noel Didla: Akil, how does MXGM interact with radical movements locally, statewide, regionally, nationally and internationally?

Akil Bakari: Part of our philosophy is that we are internationalists, in the sense that they are organic nature of struggle against imperialist oppression, rabid capitalism, militarism and destruction of the planet, we align with any and all groups philosophically that oppose it. Now, specifically, here locally, whether it is the NAACP, whether it is Nation of Islam, whether it is the LGBT groups, whether it is religious groups, there is what we call Operational Unity. Every group and each individual are not going to agree with you on everything, particularly philosophy and ideology. But the idea is to find the area of unity whereby you can work, and then work towards

greater unity. Operational Unity is very important in that as I said people have different ideas, different philosophies, different ideologies and you don't want to get into ideological conflicts as to who has the best way. That is not productive, matter of fact, it is counterproductive. And so, our model is to try to use that framework. It has manifested not only locally with the groups I mentioned, but nationally with other groups in what we call the New African Independence Movement (NAIM) which has a common theme, the groups and individuals in NAIM understand and agree that Black people have a right to self-determination and as such we should strive and struggle for that, that no one knows our problems better than we, and no one can solve our problems better than we, and in order for us to flourish, we should be the agents of our own liberation.

We also understand allies, and as such we have aligned with NAIM, we have aligned with revolutionary Latinos, we have aligned with revolutionary North American whites, we have aligned with radical LGBTQIA groups, we have aligned and worked with those groups. On an international level, going back to Libya, particularly before the assassination and murder of Gaddafi, the Basque groups, Cuba, groups in Venezuela, Afro Venezuelans, Afro Cubans, even with revolutionary groups in Ireland, understanding that the nature of struggle and revolutionary change comes in all forms. Understanding that groups in South Asia, whether it is the Dalits and their struggles, whether it is the Africans on the continent, whether it is Palestinians and their struggles against Israeli oppression, wherever there is oppression there is resistance and our philosophical guidelines are that we align with just and right struggles wherever it is on the planet.

Noel Didla: Akil, what are the expectations and goals of the electoral strategy and the organizing principles?

Akil Bakari: I want to give a little context to that.

Noel Didla: Absolutely.

Akil Bakari: The whole idea around the endeavor into electoral politics actually comes out of the framework which was originated in contemporary times by the Republic of New Africa (RNA). And their idea was again organizing in the Black belt South, their particular focus area was the western portion of Mississippi, coming down out of the delta from Tennessee, Arkansas, all the way down to the western portion which is the MS delta going all the way to Claiborne County. Again, all of those counties are contiguous through Tennessee, Arkansas, MS, and the majority of those counties' populations are Black folks. The RNA and their theoreticians understood and studied that this is where Black people were and that if organized correctly, it can make a huge impact towards moving towards self-determination. The idea in their organization was to take to elected offices in those areas. The circuit clerk, county clerk rather, and the Sheriff's dept. Then and now, if you control the county clerk and the Sheriff dept. of any county in MS, you control the county.

Noel Didla: How?

Akil Bakari: The county clerk's office is where all of the land is recorded, and of course, the Sheriff's office is the law enforcement. Again, historically and even to this day, if you control those

two offices, you control the county. They understood that as far back as 1972. The original Kush Plan came out of the theory of RNA, their job as they saw it was to organize Black people in the western portion of MS, control those two offices and then hold a plebiscite. The plebiscite would ask a simple question. Black folk want to create an independent nation of self-governing Black people within the American empire, or Black people want to integrate into the existing structure and try to reform America within the existing structure, or Black people want to repatriate back to Africa or other areas of the globe where black people were in the majority. Those were the 3 questions. Now as we enter into contemporary times, 5 years prior to 2009, when it was decided by the organization that the late mayor Chokwe Lumumba would be placed into the council race for his ward, which is ward 2. By organization I mean, NAPO and MXGM, as we decided what tactics we would use for this period in history. And how feasible it would be to enter into the electoral arena and what we were trying to accomplish, there was a study around it and a modification of the Kush plan, to the extent that we would use that model for an urban Jackson.

Noel Didla: How many years did these conversations take place in to move towards using electoral platform as a strategy?

Akil Bakari: Roughly 5 years. There are ideological conferences that we hold every year, where we sharpen our strategies and tactics, where we study the changes in the world literally. How groups who were allies 10 years ago, may not necessarily be your allies today. How power shifts, and understanding how our people were in Jackson, MS in that period of time, and what would be the most impactful way to organize in addition to the other work we had done previously. The Jackson Kush plan comes out of NAPO and MXGM that is clear and unequivocal. There were some modifications around the model, the electoral portions, economic justice around cooperatives and a more inclusive type of economy whereby people would have more ownership over their labor and what their labor produces. And the assemblies would be vehicles of mass real democracy, cooperative, collaborative democracy. And actually, leading to building structures that would replace the existing imperialist structures. All of that came out the NAPO and MXGM unequivocally.

Coming out of those ideological conferences, studying Jackson, roughly with a population of 200,000 people, 85% of which were Black people; studying budgets of city budgets anywhere from 450-500 million dollars in any given year, a school district that is 97% Black with a budget of roughly 255 million dollars, sitting in a county that is 76% Black whose budget is roughly 120 million dollars. If you add that money up, it is right up to billion dollars. All of that is funded by majority Black people who get less than 5% of its benefit. So, we studied that, and we figured that if we could impact and redirect resources in a manner that could empower more of our people in addition to trying to organize and understanding self-determination, and how the constraints of the existing electoral order could not contain or empower us in the manner in which we need it to. So, you are trying to build on the one hand and also teaching and helping our people to understand that these structures will not serve us in the way we need them to serve.

This model called the Jackson Kush plan is how we are trying to implement. Again, this is not romantic, it is not glamorous, it will not happen overnight, you cannot build any co-operative of the backs of philanthropic or foundational grants. You may be able to start there, but you have to

build an independent economic model that is based on sound business principles in order for it to function. That is not easy to do. As Amilcar Cabral so succinctly exhorted us 'Tell no lies and claim no easy victories'. And whatever revolutionary ideas you have in your head if it does not impact the people's material reality, then it is something that is in your head. We strive, we are nowhere near where need to be, but keeping those idioms in mind, can guide us to trying to build those things. It is extremely difficult given the oppression in the American empire, the structures which don't want to see any of that happening, but that is the idea with which we have to move forward. The Jackson Kush plan is a model we are trying to execute to the best as we can. We are trying to organize our people to the extent that we can, we are trying to create as much space as we possibly can for young people. Actually, one of the huge reasons for us to even entering electoral politics was creating space for young people to take this way beyond what our imagination could, because they have got the ingenuity, they have got the imagination, the energy and the audacity to do it. And that is one of the real reasons why we entered electoral politics.

Noel Didla: Alright Akil, what are some of the most provocative memories you have of being a member of NAPO and MXGM?

Akil Bakari: The first memory that really stands out and comes to mind is the work around the anti-clan march and rally, and, it was much more than a march and rally. It was actually a defense. The sentiment was that white supremacist groups are not going to be allowed to parade down the streets of Jackson, a majority black city. And as such, leaders of the New African People's Organization – at that time, the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, Safiya Omari, others, Jackson Human Rights Coalition, Nation of Islam, all strategized to organize resistance. I was truly privileged and blessed to be a part of that endeavor and it was magnificent in that over 3000 people participated in that resistance and as we formed up on the corner of Farish and Griffin street, and how the organization of that, because we had older people, we had children from all walks and backgrounds of life, but also, the organization of making sure that they were safe. And our security was put in place. Security that you can see and the security that you didn't see. And how disciplined everyone was in that over-3000 grouping of people. And as we made our way to the spot that we were going to confront the Klan, which was a gateway into downtown through West Street that flows into downtown. To the left of us was the Confederate cemetery where the white supremacist group was going to pay homage to their white supremacist Confederate dead, and that's where we met them. And America being true to itself, manifest itself right here in Jackson, Mississippi, every law enforcement agency within the state of Mississippi was present.

There was Mississippi Highway Patrol members in riot gear in M16s that formed a skirmish line in front of us with M16s pointed at us. We had the Hinds County Sheriff's department to the right of us. The Jackson Police Department to the left of us. There were snipers on the roof behind us. And there were helicopters buzzing above us. And all the guns were pointed at us. But the reserve and determination of the group as women and children and those who, particularly women who did not want to be in there because again, women stood side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder with us in this defense but those who did not want to engage – women, children, and older people – moved to the back of the column that we had formed. And it was our determination that day that we were not moving, and the Klan was not going to march a step further than beyond where we were. Whatever was going to occur that day was going to occur. After about – it seemed forever –

but it was about forty-five minutes of a standoff, the Klan turned around and dispersed. And we marched then from there to downtown Jackson city hall and talked about the organization and self-determined nation of a group of Black people who said we were not going to allow this to occur in the city of Jackson. And it did not occur. That's one of my most poignant moments.

There were others where we did work around, um, there was a series of a lynching of black people in jails all across Mississippi, including here in Hinds County. And as we raised our voices as the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and New African People's Organization against that form of genocide, we also understood that beyond just rhetoric, we had to actually do something. So, we organized an investigative team to do parallel and post investigation behind the police around a lot of these issues. We expanded that to a situation that had occurred in Meridian where a strapping young Black man, 6'4", 250 lb. somehow hung himself on a twig of a very small, very small tree in Meridian, in Kemper County, in the Kemper County area, near Meridian. And we investigated that unfortunate situation. That's MXGM. We also formed an investigative team around that particular death and murder of that young man, and other incidents that occurred fast forward the work that we did around Katrina. We put together an assembly type gathering that we call the Survivor's Council where over 1,100 people from all across the country and outside the country as well as those who had sought refuge from Mississippi Gulf Coast in Louisiana here in Jackson, Mississippi, to strategize and plan on how we can resist the ethnic cleansing that was occurring and the roadblocks that were being raised to prevent people from returning to New Orleans – those were couple of things that stand out in my mind, of some of the work that we have done here.

And one other piece would also be, as we entered into the electoral arena and we as MXGM and NAPO, and how the established political order – both black and white – literally laughed at us. Because, in their minds, who were we to seek political office here. We're just these radical people who had these crazy ideas that Black people had a right to govern themselves. And how we have been able to organize ourselves and put plans together to take electoral power from the council seat with the late Mayor Lumumba to the Mayoral seat with the late Mayor Lumumba to the current Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba. Those are some of the things that stick out in my mind.

Noel Didla: What about the youth work through the center?

Akil Bakari: The work that we have done and continue to around youth initiatives, whether it was tutorial programs, self-defense, and physical education, whether they're with athletic teams of all manner – both male and female, whether it was just discussion groups, whether it was mentoring sessions, the work that we were able to do along with those that we align ourselves within the community and how so many young people that we were able to touch was extremely rewarding. So much so that a lot of those young people have grown up and are productive citizens and now, they are engaging in this self-determination work. Some of those young people may have gone astray and committed acts that were not conducive to the community have now come back and re-entered into the community and now are prepared to right some of the wrongs that they may have inflicted on the community and to give back. So that's extremely rewarding as well.

Noel Didla: How did you organize young people? I mean, you had a center back then, and how did the organizing happen? How long were you open?

Akil Bakari: The center was a place that we would have open every day. Now, all of us were involved – Mikea Kambui, his wife Chineso Kambui, and my wife Gwen Webster, the Lumumbas, the Omaris and others. We all worked. And as such, a lot of the work that we did was self-funded. And so, we would get off those jobs and go to the center. And then, go and literally knock door to door and alerting the community about what we were doing in the center and that it belonged to them, and they could come to the center for anything, whatever their issues were. But we primarily told we wanted them, but we wanted their young people too. And of course, the work involved being consistent because when you initially knock, people don't know who you are. They don't know what your intentions are or know what your motives are. So, the idea is that you have to knock every day. Every single day. And we would have forums every week. We start, we'd have five people one week, we have two the next week, we have ten one week, we may have five the next week, we may have twenty next week. But, the work was consistent. And we went all over the neighborhood. And as people begin to trust and see that we were consistent about what we were doing, not only did they come, but they brought their children. And, as we began to give them and expose them to information that they may not have been exposed to and following the teachings of Malcolm – it's not giving them my perspective of the information, it's actually exposing them to the information. And then they come out with their own conclusions. And mostly, 99% of the time, they came to the same conclusions that we did. They were just exposed to more information that they had not been previously. And so, the work of organizing anybody, in any group of people is not glamorous. It's not romantic. It's hard. And, the cameras are not there, the microphones are not there. It's just you and your people. And, the hard part is to convince them and convey to them your genuine intentions. Once you do that, then there's no other reward that's better than that. And that's what we attempted to do in our modest fashion.

Noel Didla: So, you had basketball camps too?

Akil: Oh, gosh! We had basketball camps! I'm a basketball fanatic. I played in high school and college. So, did the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba. So, we were obsessed with basketball. We played, and we organized teams. And these teams were entered into the AAU apparatus. And I would, would say conservatively, that basketball and the teams we put together was able to allow at least 200 – 250 young men to enter and get a college education.

Noel Didla: Talk about the children's component of MXGM.

Akil: There is the New African People's Organization. One of the institutions it built is called the New African Scouts and New African Panthers. There are some similarities around some of the training with the boy scouts in that you train in urban and rural survival skills, camping, sustainability in the rural, but we take it a step further. There are physical fitness and self-defense, and there is cultural and revolutionary education component. That's essential to giving our young people the idea of what they are supposed to be doing as they matriculate and grow into adulthood. I'm proud to say that that institution is into its 20th year. And many of those young people who

came through this scouts and Panthers are now working within the structure of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.

Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba came through the scouts, a young Rukia Lumumba came through the scouts, there are others in Atlanta, in the Bay Area and in D.C. In addition to that, one of the leading members of the New African People's Organization was a highly skilled educator. This is Aminata Umoja. She was a master teacher in Atlanta and in essence, her job was to teach other teachers how to teach. She understood that education and proper education is so key to the development of our children. So, she decided to start a school with those values. So, she has stepped out of the public-school education model in Atlanta and formed Kilombo which I am proud to say, Kilombo is roughly going into its 8th or 9th year of operation. And has molded young people in all areas of academics as well as at the revolutionary and cultural training. So, that model is something we have to figure out how to replicate. But again, I am proud to say that Kilombo is flourishing.