

50 Years On: Reclaiming Malcolm X for Revolutionary Pan-Africanism

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From street hustler to powerful orator, Malcolm X's life was cut short when he was brutally murdered in front of family, friends and supporters. Fifty years on he is still at the forefront of political debate, but his legacy as a towering revolutionary pan-Africanist with important messages for our time is not in doubt.

Many people are aware that 21 February 2015 will commemorate 50 years since the brutal assassination of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz – Malcolm X – in front of hundreds of supporters, including his wife and children. There has certainly been much said and written about Malcolm over the last 50 years. There is the several-hundred-page controversial biography from Manning Marable that spawned two counter-position books as well as a number of other biopic works, which focused on Malcolm's ideas, actions and influences on the activism that developed after his murder.

In the course of this dialogue, many from other ideological and political frameworks have worked to proclaim Malcolm as their own. The white Left, starting with the Socialist Workers Party in the 1960s, claim Malcolm as a Marxist/Leninist and even Trotskyist. Elements within the Nation of Islam have suggested for years that Malcolm's true desire was to re-join their organisation. And, within recent years there's even been a push to reframe Malcolm as a Barack Obama supporter. In fact, even his daughter Ilyasah Shabazz has stated as much, although she has also admitted her very limited understanding of her father's actual political work.

A cursory study of Malcolm's life quickly illustrates the reasons behind his popularity and the desire of so many to move him into their political camps. Malcolm's well-documented journey from street hustler to world renowned spokesperson and organiser for African liberation reflects the hard work and determination that many of us can only dream about. His fearlessness in articulating the problems of white supremacy and capitalism and his unique ability to take difficult political and economic concepts and break them down for common consumption and understanding were skills that motivated millions since Malcolm first joined the Nation in the 1950s.

His organising skills are often overlooked; however, he built two organisations after leaving the Nation of Islam – the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). Most of us have a difficult enough time just belonging to and participating in one organisation. Even with including discussions about Malcolm's personal shortcomings, such as his occasional ruthlessness towards some Mosque persons when he was a leader within the Nation of Islam and his patriarchal attitudes towards his wife Dr. Betty Shabazz, we are still impressed with Malcolm's ability to acknowledge those shortcomings and to grow from

them.

So it's easy to understand why and how Malcolm was so attractive to so many people. His sincerity and honesty were qualities that all of us who are just loving people strive to reach in our own work and lives. His commitment, discipline, and determination were all characteristics that define the level of greatness required in order for our people to be propelled forward. Of course, the only proper way to pay homage to those qualities within Malcolm is to properly acknowledge who he was as a person and what ideals he dedicated his life towards. This is important because we believe it was his dedication to those particular ideals that ultimately cost him his life.

We believe that understanding Malcolm X means understanding his growing commitment to and relationship with Africa. The book *The Final Speeches of Malcolm X* (not to be confused with *The Last Speeches of Malcolm X*) provides a vision of where Malcolm's head was. Those last twelve speeches were those he gave leading up to that Sunday meeting on February 21st, 1965 where his life came to an abrupt end. In all of those final speeches Malcolm's focus was specifically on Africa. Much of what Malcolm had to say about Africa in those last two weeks of his life has been edited out and eliminated from the public discourse on what drove Malcolm's evolving thinking but those final speeches give much insight into this question.

It was during those last two weeks that Malcolm began to clearly spell out his developing understanding that the struggle for African freedom and self-determination within the US was only part and parcel of the worldwide struggle for African liberation, freedom and socialism and that this struggle was in fact the struggle for Pan-Africanism, which was properly defined as one unified, socialist Africa.

Malcolm's final speeches are filled with invectives for Africans in the US to stop expecting freedom in the US, while Africa was subjugated because Africa's freedom was dependent upon releasing the very same forces that keep Africans in the US oppressed. Malcolm characterised this reality with his statements that Africa "is at the centre of our liberation" and that socialism is "the system all people in the world seem to be coming around to".

The writing on the wall had been provided to Malcolm by his meeting Pan-Africanists like Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure. For anyone who doubts the impact these meetings had on Malcolm's thinking all one has to do is read his own words in his autobiography. Malcolm described his meetings with Nkrumah as "the highlight of my travels" and "the highest honour of my life". These words are true despite those meetings being ignored in Spike Lee's 1992 biopic film and in pretty much everything else portrayed about Malcolm's life.

Still, Malcolm illustrated his commitment to those statements by returning to the US and starting the OAAU, which was to be patterned after the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which Nkrumah started in Africa the previous year. In Malcolm's mind, as he articulated in speeches during those last two weeks, the OAAU was to be the US branch to the OAU since the ideas both men were developing were focused on organising the African masses worldwide towards the Pan-Africanist objective.

Also, it should be understood that Malcolm and Nkrumah's relationship extended far beyond a few meetings. Nkrumah had designs on building a political relationship with Malcolm around doing Pan-Africanist work and if one knows anything about Nkrumah's history in

Ghana, this shouldn't be difficult to fathom. With Ghana's independence came Nkrumah's call for Africans all over the world to come to Ghana to help build Africa (Pan-Africanism).

George Padmore, the Pan-Africanist from Trinidad, heeded the call and moved to Ghana to become Nkrumah's advisor. Both Shirley Graham DuBois and her more famous husband, W. E. B. DuBois also heeded that call along with many other noteworthy Africans (Louie Armstrong and Maya Angelou). Nkrumah's book of letters *The Conakry Years*, which consisted of all of Nkrumah's personal letters written and received while he was in Guinea after the Central Intelligence Agency's sponsored coup that overthrew his government on February 24, 1966 (almost a year to the day after Malcolm was assassinated) contains letters Nkrumah wrote to Malcolm and to others about Malcolm, detailing Nkrumah's efforts to persuade Malcolm to stay in Ghana and become a part of Nkrumah's staff to work on their Pan-Africanist objective. Nkrumah's letters to others indicate that Malcolm weighed the offer before indicating he could not just pick up and leave his work in the US and that it was unlikely that his wife would be willing to suddenly move to Africa anyway. Nkrumah's letters mention that he confided in Malcolm that Ghanaian intelligence forces had revealed that Malcolm would be killed within months if he returned to the US but according to Nkrumah, that revelation seemed to spark Malcolm's desire to return to the fire-hot situation against him in the US. Still, Malcolm collaborated in his recently published diary his intense desire to become a part of this network of Pan-Africanists in West Africa.

Malcolm's personal notes point to a dinner discussion he had with Sekou Toure in Guinea-Conakry where Toure praised his work and told him that Africans need dignity, not money. The way Malcolm recalls that conversation in his diary entry indicates great affection and respect for Sekou Toure's commitment to African self-determination as well as the extent to which Malcolm was being continually influenced and broadened by the thinking of revolutionaries like Nkrumah and Toure.

It's also worth noting that three short years later another African revolutionary from the US ended up accepting Nkrumah's offer to move to Guinea-Conakry and become his political secretary. Kwame Ture - then known as Stokely Carmichael - left the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party and agreed to accept the task of building the All-African People's Revolutionary Party (A-APRP). The A-APRP is the political formation that Nkrumah birthed in his *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare* in 1968, a book Nkrumah wrote as a response to his developed understanding of the role neo-colonialism played in Africa and the reasons why the OAU, a government top-down organisation, would never bring about any true liberation in Africa. The thesis of the handbook was that the A-APRP would be the mass revolutionary alternative to the OAU.

Before Kwame Ture emerged and decided to dedicate himself to Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist vision, it's clear that Nkrumah had designs on Malcolm X as the person to step into that role and the writings of Nkrumah and Malcolm confirm that. Perhaps, if Malcolm had been in the same situation that Kwame Ture i.e. was younger, single and childless history would have taken us in a completely different direction but either way, the point is that Malcolm clearly had developed a commitment to African unity, the primacy to Africa in our fight and an understanding that there is no freedom for African people in the Western world as long as Africa is not free, liberated and socialist.

Finally, it is necessary to talk about the assassination of Malcolm X. Recently, a white writer wrote an article about Malcolm X's influence on US politics. In that essay the writer casually mentions that the Nation of Islam killed Malcolm X. Although this theory is widely accepted

by white scholars, even the ones supposedly on the Left, within Pan-Africanist and African/Black nationalist circles, it has been repudiated ever since the day Malcolm was murdered.

There's little question that people within the Nation had some involvement. The antagonism between Malcolm and the hierarchy of the Nation of Islam at the time, including National Secretary John Ali, Elijah Muhammad Jr. (son of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad), Minister James Shabazz from New Jersey, Clarence X Gill the Fruit of Islam Captain from New Jersey and others, is well documented.

The troublesome statements against Malcolm made at the time by Minister Louis Farrakhan (then Louis X) are also well documented. Still, writing that the Nation of Islam killed Malcolm X is no different than writing that James Earl Ray killed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing John F. Kennedy when there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The same is true of the murder of Malcolm X. It may be easier for white scholars and activists to casually write that the Nation killed Malcolm because they had no affection for an organisation that had historically been known to refer to white people as a race of grafted devils but that doesn't change history.

There's no refuting that Malcolm was diagnosed as being poisoned in Egypt and his recollection of the experience in his diary will make your own stomach tighten up. There's also no doubt that the French Government, which had no policy of rejecting entry to persons, refused Malcolm entry into their country shortly before his murder while the rumours swirled that their decision was based on their desire to not permit Malcolm to be killed on French soil.

This is especially triggering when remembering Nkrumah's harrowing admonition to Malcolm. The US Government had the same interest in neutralizing Malcolm that Nkrumah had in recruiting him. Imagine a respected and articulate African revolutionary who came from the streets of the America being on the world stage criticising US racism. Then think about it in the context of the relationships being forged at the time between African revolutionaries like Nkrumah and Toure and other revolutionaries like Nguyen Ai Thoc (Ho Chi Minh) from Vietnam, Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara from Cuba and Mao Tse Tung in China.

Malcolm was to become a central player in that alliance. He was to be the African voice from the belly of the beast. Something the US certainly could not risk happening. Thus, it comes as no surprise that files released under the Freedom of Information Act provide proof. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report indicates a still un-named top-level informant for the FBI was paid a "bonus" of \$300.00 USD and congratulated "for a job well done" immediately after Malcolm was murdered.

So, in quoting an often stated comment within the African liberation movement: "they (the Nation) may have pulled the trigger but they didn't buy the bullets!" And, to write that they did without putting all of that in context does no service to African people or our movement for liberation.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that we have to explain these things about Malcolm; we have spent the last 50 years dispelling half-truths and miss-representations about Malcolm. Even his daughter's comments about her dad and Obama are not surprising despite the fact nothing in Malcolm's history would suggest he would even consider supporting any

candidate for US president. My own daughter loves me as her father. She's a conscientious young woman but she doesn't possess a deep understanding of my Pan-Africanist work because she's not involved in it. So although Malcolm's daughter would be a great person to ask about how he was around the house (if she remembers), she isn't the best person to ask about his political ideology.

Malcolm X was without question at the point where he was a Pan-Africanist and being so means he understood that the total liberation of Africa under scientific socialism is the solution to the problems facing Africans everywhere. Nothing about anything he said, did or suggested indicated that he felt the capitalist system could be reformed or that anything short of revolutionary struggle could bring us what we need.

And nothing indicated that he was confused about the primary, not secondary, not cursory but primary role Africa will always play in our liberation struggle. We are completely aware that it is the job of our enemies to confuse people about whom we are and who our leaders are, so the Malcolm X postage stamp and every other way the capitalism system makes a concession to recognising the revolutionary Malcolm is only happening because they want to frame his image before we do.

It won't work. Sekou Toure was correct when he said "truth crushed to Earth shall rise a thousand times". Malcolm was a Pan-Africanist, that's why there are as many, if not more, tributes to him outside of the US as there are inside. The people of Ghana expressed their understanding of this phenomenon in 1964 when they named him Omawale - "the son who has returned home".

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