

African-American History: The Global Dimensions of the Life and Legacy of Malcolm X

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I want to extend my appreciation for this invitation to speak once again at Henry Ford College during African American History Month. This is by far one of the most diverse higher educational institutions in the southeastern Michigan and we need to work very hard to ensure that it remains as such.

We are facing some of the most challenging times within the last two generations. The advent of the present administration in Washington, D.C. is merely a reflection of a much deeper crisis in how notions of representative government, democracy and the social contract are interpreted within United States society.

Since January 20, the U.S. and the international community have witnessed unprecedented opposition through demonstrations, rallies, commentaries and cultural expressions. Inevitably these protest actions will continue until either the people are convinced of their futility or that these manifestations can succeed in winning the objectives of a free and just system that can provide for the needs of the least fortunate among us.

The Significance of African American History

America has never been a great democratic country in its 240 years of existence. Prior to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, there were thirteen colonies controlled by the British.

Nonetheless, other European powers were also seeking dominance over what is now known as North America. France and Spain also had substantial colonies in this region of the Western Hemisphere where they sought to take control of the land and resources of the indigenous people of North America.

Of course the descendants of the British colonial system were victorious in driving out the direct agents of the Crown and establishing what they described as a "Democratic Republic." However, this republic was never democratic. In its incipient phase during the late 18th and first decades of the 19th century, the displacement of the Native Americans proceeded with full force across the land. At the same time there was the rapid growth of the importation and enslavement of the African people.

The Contributions of Malcolm X and the Worldwide Struggle for Liberation

Our topic today deals with the contributions of Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik Shabazz) who lived from May 19, 1925 to February 21, 1965. We will examine Malcolm X within the context of the global forces that shaped his outlook and organizational direction.



Over twenty years ago a biopic feature film was released in the U.S. which did not bother to examine key aspects of the social and historical events which framed Malcolm X into one of the leading figures of the 20th century. It is important to recognize that Malcolm X and his siblings were born into a political environment.

Malcolm X's parents, Earl and Louise Little, were both active members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) founded by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood Garvey in 1914 in the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Garvey had organized in the Caribbean, Central America and London prior to coming to the U.S. in 1916.

In 1919, the UNIA had held its annual convention in Montreal, Quebec (Canada). This is where Malcolm's parents met. The 1919 UNIA-ACL conference was pivotal and represented a turning point in the rapid growth of the organization.

During this same year, racial turmoil had erupted across the U.S., which had been characterized as the Red Summer. The most violent of these outbreaks took place in Chicago. Battles raged between African American and white communities from July 27 to August 3. Order was finally restored after the deployment of the Illinois state militia and numerous people had lost their lives and much property was destroyed. It is estimated that 1,000 African Americans were burned out of their homes by racist whites during the disturbances.

The post-World War I period represented an era of profound transformation in the world situation. It was not until the final year of the war that the U.S. became directly involved in the monumental and unprecedented conflict which in actuality was a struggle between emerging imperialist powers for the control of the world's resources.

Malcolm X's mother Louise Little wrote articles for the UNIA newspaper "The Negro World" which was founded in 1919. The paper was distributed throughout North America, the Caribbean, in Europe and on the African continent. Garvey's influence continued to grow between 1919 and 1922, when he was indicted, prosecuted and convicted on bogus federal charges of mail fraud.

It was the attorney general of New York state and the-then Bureau of Investigation (later known as the FBI) which concocted the case against the Pan-Africanist leader. After his conviction in 1923, Garvey spent several weeks in Tombs prison and was then let out on bond pending appeal. He continued to organize for the UNIA-ACL until 1925 when he was placed in prison for two years. Later in 1927, he was deported from New Orleans back to Jamaica, never to return to the U.S. again.

Racism and Colonialism Continues

Segregation and institutional racism was the law of the land in the U.S. during the 1920s in both the South and the North. Nonetheless, it was during this period that a massive movement was initiated in the political, economic and cultural spheres.

Popularly known as the "Harlem Renaissance," African Americans engaged in mass migration from the rural South to the urban North and West; joined the UNIA in the millions; wrote pamphlets, books, plays and musical compositions; created and grew mass organizations and literary societies; entered left-wing politics in the Socialist and Communist Parties; and vigorously fought the widespread lynching and racial violence levelled against them on a daily basis.

Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1925. He said that his parents' home was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan due to his father's activism in the UNIA. The family later moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and eventually to Lansing, Michigan.

Earl Little had repeated clashes with the white authorities in the Lansing area. He sought to build a home in a neighborhood where African Americans were prohibited. His home was burned down again by whites. Later he was killed and found dead on street car tracks in 1931. The family believed that he was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan or the Black Legion, which was a para-military group funded by local industrialists, seeking to prevent African American advancement and labor organizing.

The Little family faced hardships during the 1930s when the U.S. was in the depths of the Great Depression. Louise Little was driven into insanity and later institutionalized. The family was broken up and Malcolm stayed in foster homes for many years.

In 1941 Malcolm went to Boston to live with his older sister Ella Collins, the offspring of Earl Little with a previous wife. It was hear that he worked menial odd jobs eventually falling into criminal activity.

During World War II he worked as a waiter on the train routes along the East coast. He was deemed unfit for military service after telling the selective service agents that he could not wait to get his hands on a rifle so he could kill the first white person that he saw.

However, by 1946, Malcolm and his friend Malcolm Jarvis, along with two young white women, were implicated in a burglary ring. Malcom and Jarvis were convicted and sent to state prison in Massachusetts.

Malcolm Little was converted to Islam while serving his sentence in prison. It was his brothers who worked to bring him into the Nation of Islam headed at the time by the Hon. Elijah Muhammad. The NOI was founded in Detroit by W.D. Fard Muhammad in 1930. Fard left the city in 1934 creating a power struggle for control of the organization. Elijah Muhammad eventually settled in Chicago and was able to build an organization with

followers in several U.S. cities including Detroit.

After leaving prison in 1952, Malcolm X, by then, came to live in Inkster and Detroit. He was appointed to be the Assistant Minister over Temple Number One in the city.

He worked at several jobs including a salesperson at a furniture store and in an automobile factory. In his spare time he recruited heavily for the NOI. He later was sent to Boston in 1953 to become the minister over the Temple in that city. In 1954 he was appointed as the minister of Temple 7 in Harlem.

Post-World War II and the Anti-Colonial Uprisings

It was after the conclusion of World War II that the struggle against imperialism erupted in full force. Numerous territories in Asia, Africa and Latin America witnessed the growth of national liberation movements, several of which were led by communist parties.

In Vietnam and Korea, communist parties in alliance with other progressive forces took power in 1945. Later in October 1949, the Communist Party of China took control of that highly-populated Asian state.



nkrumah mlk

Also in 1949, Kwame Nkrumah and his comrades formed the Convention People's Party (CPP) in the West African British colony of the Gold Coast. Within a matter of two years Nkrumah, who had been imprisoned by the colonialists in 1950, was released and entered a coalition government heading towards independence in 1957.

Nkrumah declared on March 6, 1957, at the Ghana Independence Day ceremony, that "The independence of Ghana was meaningless unless it was linked up with the total independence of the African continent." This Pan-Africanist outlook permeated the entire African world influencing Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam along with the Civil Rights Movement.

Two important developments took place just two years prior to the independence of Ghana: the Bandung Conference in Indonesia and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama. These events signaled the rising consciousness and desire for unity among the nationally oppressed peoples both inside the U.S. and internationally.

Malcolm X was struck by the Bandung Conference which brought together the newly emerging independent states in Africa and Asia. He often referred to this historic gathering as being instructive in relationship to the plight of the African American people.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, catapulted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to national and world prominence. The unity exemplified by the African American population in Montgomery portended much for the future of what became known as the Civil Rights Movement.

By the late 1950s, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) co-founded by Dr. King represented in a general sense the two wings of the African American liberation movement. King maintaining a commitment to nonviolent struggle against segregation and for integration of public accommodation in the U.S. while Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad and the NOI advocated self-reliance, independent statehood and self-defense. Although the NOI was labelled as violent by the corporate media and the federal government, they never engaged in the advocacy of mass rebellion or armed struggle to achieve its objectives.



The NOI during the late 1950s and early 1960s, continued to insist that it was a religious group and not a political organization. King and the SCLC saw itself as a social movement seeking to influence the political order in a progressive direction.

By 1960, the student sector within the African American community moved to the vanguard of the struggle with the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April of that year. SNCC grew out of the sit-in movement beginning on February 1, which spread rapidly throughout the South and the North. Youth sought to engage in civil disobedience to break down legalized segregation noting that the legalistic approach of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which played a pivotal role in the Brown v. Topeka case of May 1954, that struck down the separate but equal rulings justifying segregation in public accommodations since the Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896.

SCLC was led by Southern African American ministers although women such as Virginia-born Ella Baker, who had served initially as its executive director and Septima Clark, the voter education pioneer from South Carolina, played an instrumental role in the organization. It was Baker who had encouraged the youth at the SNCC founding conference at Shaw University in North Carolina to form its own independent and autonomous organization.

By 1961, SNCC had established a field staff to work full time on Civil Rights. The organization took over the Freedom Rides in the spring of that year after the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) was forced to withdraw due to repression in the South.

Malcolm X and Dr. King had been impressed by the role of the students. They had entered areas of the South where racial terror was fostering inertia and fear. In rural counties in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee, SNCC sought to encourage and organize local people to become leaders of the struggle against segregation and the denial of the franchise.

Although Malcolm X praised the courage of the student leaders he questioned their tactics as well as urging them to clarify the overall objectives of the movement. In a 1961 debate with James Baldwin, the novelist, essayist, playwright and public intellectual over WBAI in New York City, Malcolm X parenthetically said that if the aim of the sit-in movement is freedom, justice and equality for African Americans then he was sympathetic. Malcolm X went to say that if integration can bring freedom, justice and equality then he could support this work. Nonetheless, he later emphasized that he did not believe that integration could liberate African American people and if it could not, then people needed to leave it alone.

Similar comments were made during a lecture at Brown University on May 11, 1961 when Malcolm X stressed that: “No, we are not anti-white. But we don’t have time for the white man. The white man is on top already, the white man is the boss already ... He has first-class citizenship already. So you are wasting your time talking to the white man. We are working on our own people.” (Associated Press, Feb. 5, 2012)

Malcolm X’s nationalism and internationalism was reflected in the early editions of Muhammad Speaks newspaper which published its first issue in May 1960. Initially entitled “Mr. Muhammad Speaks”, the subheading for the paper read: “Militant Monthly Dedicated to Justice for the Black Man”.

Inside this issue there is an extensive article on the trip taken by the Hon. Elijah Muhammad to several African and Middle Eastern states in 1959. Malcolm X had accompanied Muhammad on the tour that included visits to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Ghana and Egypt. The paper said the tour disproved the lies circulated in the U.S. that the NOI and African Americans in general were not accepted or recognized in Africa and the Middle East.

Another important report entitled “Garvey Foresaw Today” chronicles the work of the UNIA-ACL leader during the 1920s and then points to the anti-colonial movements that were raging throughout Africa. Photographs of Kwame Nkrumah and Marcus Garvey appear in the sharply worded article.

In yet another article entitled “Africa Moves Toward Freedom”, subtitled “Originals Revolt; Colonials Disturbed”, a survey of the various national liberation struggles during a five year period is outlined. Discussions on the situations in Cameroun, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, Upper Volta, Sudan, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali and other territories are reviewed.

Linking the independence movements with the plight of the African American people was made evident in an article on police brutality. The report covers a civil trial involving the New York police beating of Johnson Hinton in 1957. This incident had the potential of sparking a rebellion in the city. Malcolm X’s intervention in removing 2,000 members of the NOI and other nationalist organizations off the streets was credited with averting unrest.

Later the following year there was another incident involving the New York police in East Elmhurst where Malcolm X and John X, the-then two high-ranking Muslims in the city, had their home raided by law-enforcement officers. The wives of the two men were briefly detained while other NOI members living in the downstairs section of the building were subjected to an unlawful invasion and beatings.

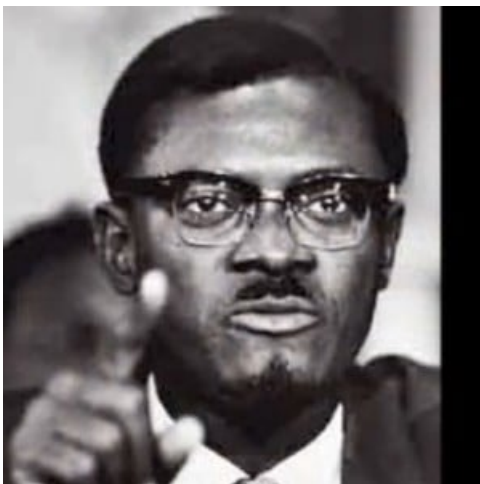
Under a section of the report entitled “Police Brutality Exposed” on page 13, Malcolm X is quoted as saying: “Where else and under what other circumstances could you find a situation where inhuman police can freely invade private homes, religious offices, breaking

down doors, smash windows and furniture, and threaten the lives of pregnant women and children, endangering their lives by shooting their way into the house. This could happen nowhere else on earth but here in America in a Negro neighborhood.”

Threats were made by the police against Malcolm. One section of the same article indicates that Harry Buffins testified in the civil trial surrounding the 1957 case that a police officer looked at Malcolm and said “we should break that bastard’s head since he is the leader.”

Consequently, threats against Malcolm from law-enforcement personnel were well established by the late 1950s. Other incidents involving police brutality against NOI members took place not only in New York. One of the most widely publicized of such situations occurred in Los Angeles in April 1962 that resulted in the death of the Mosque No. 7 Secretary Ronald Stokes. The incident brought Malcolm X to Los Angeles to organize a mass response to the killing of Stokes, the wounding and injuries of other NOI members as well as the imposition of false criminal charges.

A groundswell of support from broad segments of the African American community served to enhance the influence of the NOI and Malcolm X. The coroner’s inquiry declared the death of Stokes at the hands of the police as justifiable. Malcolm was outraged and wanted to fight the decision through civil action in the courts in California. Later he was recalled from Los Angeles by Elijah Muhammad.



It was these differences of approach and style of work that further exacerbated tensions between Malcolm and the Chicago headquarters of the NOI. By December 5, 1963, Malcolm X was silenced by Muhammad for ninety days due to remarks that he made surrounding the death of President John F. Kennedy. Malcolm noted in a question and answer period at the Manhattan Center on December 1 that the U.S. had been involved in the assassination of other leaders giving the example of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba who was killed at the aegis of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in January 1961. Malcolm said that the death of Kennedy was a case of the “chickens coming home to roast.”

By March 1964, Malcolm X announced his formal departure from the NOI. He then formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and later the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), after he returned from Hajj in Mecca and an extensive tour in several African and Middle Eastern states. In Ghana, during May 1964, Malcolm addressed a huge audience at the University in Legon, praising the political leadership of President Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and calling for the unity of Africans and African Americans.

After returning to the U.S. in late June 1964, the OAAU was launched at the Audubon

Ballroom in the Washington Heights section of Upper Manhattan. Malcolm soon left the country again in July to make a direct appeal to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Second Summit held in Cairo, Egypt.

In an eight-page memorandum circulated to the OAU heads-of-state in Cairo, Malcolm X said: "Since the 22 million of us were originally Africans, who are now in America, not by choice but only by a cruel accident in our history, we strongly believe that African problems are our problems and our problems are African problems. We also believe that as heads of the independent African states you are the shepherds of all African peoples everywhere, whether they are still at home here on the mother continent or have been scattered abroad."

He continued in the same document saying: "Some African leaders at this conference have implied that they have enough problems here on the mother continent without adding the Afro-American problem. With all due respect to your esteemed positions, I must remind all of you that the Good Shepherd will leave ninety-nine sheep who are safe at home to go to the aid of the one who is lost and has fallen into the clutches of the imperialist wolf. We in America are your long-lost brothers and sisters, and I am here only to remind you that our problems are your problems. As the African-Americans 'awaken' today, we find ourselves in a strange land that has rejected us, and, like the prodigal son, we are turning to our elder brothers for help. We pray our pleas will not fall upon deaf ears. We were taken forcibly in chains from this mother continent and have now spent over three hundred years in America, suffering the most inhuman forms of physical and psychological tortures imaginable."

Implications of the Legacy of Malcolm X for the 21st Century

Of course it was the combined efforts of the OAAU in both accelerating the national liberation struggle of the African American people in the U.S. along with a rigorous attempt to internationalize the movement for total freedom, which set the plot to assassinate him in motion. In many historical appraisals of the assassination of Malcolm X the allegations of responsibility lead directly to disgruntled leaders of the NOI.

Nevertheless, thousands upon thousands of FBI documents illustrate the degree to which Malcolm X remained under surveillance by the U.S. government from the time of his leadership within the NOI to his founding of both the MMI and the OAAU. Consequently, the authorities would have been not only aware of any conspiracy within the NOI to assassinate him and therefore placing this agency in a position to halt it and prosecute the perpetrators.

Other factors involved in this scenario is the claim by Malcolm at a press conference held at the Audubon on February 15, 1965, less than two days after his home was bombed in the early morning hours of February 14. Malcolm noted that several members of the NOI had come to him over the years with confessions of being police informants and officers. He said that "the Black Muslim movement was full of cops."

These lessons from the 1950s and 1960s have tremendous bearing on the political situation we are facing today as African Americans, oppressed peoples in North America and the working class as a whole. The capitalist system has exhausted its capacity to provide a decent standard of living for tens of millions of people. This reality of the Trump administration and its ideological racism and sexism is a manifestation of the inability of the ruling class to accommodate the growing populations of peoples of color who are demanding full political rights and economic equality.

However, poverty is increasing inside the U.S. and wealth is becoming even more concentrated at the upper echelons of society. There are no expressed intentions on the part of either of the corporate-oriented capitalist political parties to redress the imbalance in wealth and social status in the present period. Both failed Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and the Electoral College victor Donald Trump were loathed by millions in the country.

Millions of people have taken to the streets in the first few days of the Trump administration with thousands blocking airports in response to a ban on people from seven states in Africa and the Middle East. The issue has moved into the realm of the federal courts where a judge in Washington State placed a temporary restraining order on the Trump administration's executive order banning guests and even permanent residents from entering the U.S.

These events are taking place in conjunction with an escalation of racial tensions in the country involving unresolved killings by law-enforcement and vigilantes of African Americans. The blatant acts of police repression have resulted in several urban rebellions and thousands of mass demonstrations since 2013. Reaching the level of political upheaval, the unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, Dallas, Milwaukee and Charlotte serve as warnings of greater degrees of social conflict. The escalation in racial turmoil took place under the previous administration of President Barack Obama where the specific and special oppression of African Americans was routinely ignored. Various newspaper editorials published in Europe and other geo-political regions observed that America is by no means a post-racial society.

There has been yet another surge in the internationalization of the movement against racism and neo-fascism. In Britain demonstrations have taken place in opposition to a possible state visit to the country by Trump. The issue has even been debated within the British parliament with the Speaker objecting to a potential visit to the building.

The problems of race relations and the failure of migrant integration in the European Union (EU) were clearly perceived over five decades ago by Malcolm X when he visited both Britain and France in 1964 and 1965. In France he was barred from entering the country in early 1965. Malcolm said that the implications conveyed to him by French customs personnel were that this was being done at the aegis of the U.S. government under Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson.

U.S. imperialism through its economic and military warfare against the peoples of Africa and Asia has created the worst humanitarian crisis of displacement in world history. Up to 75 million people have been dislocated due to the wars of occupation and genocide carried out against the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Palestine.

The plight of the Palestinian people has been conveniently taken off the global radar in favor of largely irrelevant discussions about the proliferation of Jewish settlements and the relocation of the capital of Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. How can there be any genuine peace in the Middle East absent of the liberation of Palestine, the occupied territories of the Golan Heights in Syria and the halting of the imperialist policies of the Pentagon and NATO which have resulted in the deaths of millions in the last four decades.

The domestic campaigns against racism, sexism and national discrimination must be connected to the antiwar and anti-imperialist movements. There can be no compromise with the Pentagon war machine despite the false promises of jobs and business opportunities

made by successive administrations to the people of the U.S. This war budget has drained the resources of the working families for the last half century or more. From Vietnam to the present “permanent wars” in the Middle East, Central Asia and the African continent take resources away from solving the social problems which are worsening in America.

In addition, the wars of destruction, occupation and genocide breed greater hatred towards the ruling classes of the various imperialist states in Western Europe and North America. The future of the world cannot realize stability unless the drive for global domination by imperialism is overthrown. Trump’s attacks on people from African and Middle Eastern states are clearly a continuation of the war mongering that has left societies broken with genuine development stifled and reversed.

The awareness and activism of people inside the U.S. must be harnessed into a movement committed to fundamental transformation of the exploitative and oppressive system. Consequently, those who must take leadership in the present conjuncture are the social classes and oppressed nations that have the most to gain from revolutionary change.

These are the issues that we must grapple with in the coming weeks and months. Studying the life and ideas of Malcolm X can shed light on what is needed in 2017 and beyond. Youth, students and intellectuals have to remain engaged in the present era. Let us move forward with the necessary optimism and scientific inquiry and practice required for total victory.

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