

Looking Back to Move Forward: The First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria, 1969

Five decades ago thousands gathered in Algiers to recommit to revolutionary transformation around the world

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Fifty years ago this year from July 21-31, 1969 in the capital of Algeria, thousands of people gathered for a groundbreaking Pan-African Cultural Festival (PACF).

Official delegations were sent to the manifestation from over 30 independent and contested nations on the African continent. A strong contingent of artists, intellectuals, journalists and political activists from the United States were also in attendance.

This ten day extravaganza had been in the making for two years after it was mandated by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1967. The location of Algeria was significant in light of the protracted armed struggle waged against French colonialism by the people of this North African state beginning in 1954 and extending to 1961.

Algeria gained its independence in 1962 under the vanguard armed organization turned political party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), whose charismatic leader **President Ben Bella** exemplified the emerging youthful and foresighted figures shaping the progressive currents within the post-World War II period. The formation of the Conference of Independent African States and the All-African People's Conference in April and December of 1958 respectively in Ghana under the presidency of **Dr. Kwame Nkrumah**, had laid the framework for the OAU, established in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on May 25, 1963.

However, the African independence movements which gained strength after 1945 were not of the same political orientation. Ideological and philosophical divergence would surface based largely upon the class character of the individuals and organizations involved in the struggle.

Image on the right: Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers during July 1969 at the Afro-American Center hosted by the Black Panther Party International Section.



In many respects the PACF of 1969 was designed to emphasize the anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist character of the independence and post-independence movements and parties. The invitations extended to the African American delegates were based upon the notions of revolutionary Pan-Africanism and Proletarian Internationalism.

Just three years prior to the PACF, there had been a First Festival of the Negro in the Arts held in Dakar, Senegal convened in April 1966. The then **President Leopold Senghor** was an artist as well as a politician. He embodied the cultural philosophy of Negritude, which had been synchronized by Martinique-born Aime Cesaire through his poetry and discourse.

Dr. Frantz Fanon, also of Martinique, a French colonial territory in the Caribbean, had been influenced by Cesaire in his early years. Fanon, who was trained in psychiatric medicine in Lyon after fleeing the Vichy fascist regime on the island and later being enlisted in the Free French Forces, broke with the Negritude approach while working in Algeria during the revolutionary war of liberation. Fanon would join the FLN and served the movement as a journalist and diplomat.

The Dakar festival of 1966 came in the immediate aftermath of the United States engineered military and police coup against the Convention People's Party (CPP) government of Nkrumah in Ghana. If not widely known and appreciated at the time, the Festival was encouraged by the U.S. and the imperialist nations, particularly France, which had formerly colonized Senegal.

Subsequent revelations from the period documented the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. State Department in selecting and shaping the character of the African American delegation which attended the Dakar gathering in April 1966. As far as the West was concerned, African culture should be celebrated if it is done within the social and political context of imperialist domination under the existing world capitalist divisions of labor and economic power. Senghor and the Negritude ideologues were committed to an independence policy that closely allied itself with imperialism. In essence it was anti-communist and rejected an ideological approach based upon historical and dialectical materialism.

The African American intellectual and cultural imagination had been heavily intertwined with yearnings for a return to the homeland on the continent. The early institutions formed by Africans in North America during slavery were reflective of this phenomenon. A cursory examination of this history points to the African Baptist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Free African Society, etc. Emigration back to Africa and other geo-political

regions of the globe was a recurrent pattern in the intellectual and political culture of the formerly enslaved people of the Americas, North and South.

Consequently, the role of writers, artists and other involved in intellectual work was of concern to the colonial and neo-colonial powers based in the West. The ideological struggle within the cultural spheres was a hallmark of the two Congresses of Negro Writers held in Paris in 1956 and Rome during 1959. African and African American public intellectuals such as **Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Horace Mann Bond, J. Price-Mars, George Lamming, Cheikh Anta Diop** and others participated in these conferences to debate the place of culture in the liberation process. (See [this](#))

A striking limitation of the First Congress in Paris in 1956 was the absence of women making any significant intellectual contribution. African American artist Josephine Baker who lived in Paris was recognized as a patron of the gathering. There are existing photographs of women in attendance in France.

This omission of women's involvement in the discourse was recognized and commented on by African American novelist and essayist Richard Wright. Chirstiane Diop, the wife of Presence Africaine journal founder and Congress architect Alioune Diop, was key organizer of the events, however, she remains obscured in regard to intellectual contributions to the confab. Wright, the then Paris-based author, stressed during the Congress:

"I don't know how many of you have noticed it - there have been no women functioning vitally and responsibly upon this platform helping to mold and mobilize our thoughts. This is not a criticism of the conference, it is not a criticism of anyone, it is a criticism that I heap upon ourselves collectively... In our struggle for freedom, against great odds, we cannot afford to ignore one half of our manpower, that is, the force of women and their active collaboration. Black men will not be free until their women are free." (See [this](#))

An outcome of the two Congresses of Negro Writers in Paris and Rome was the founding of the Society of African Culture (SAC). The U.S. component, known as the American Society of African Culture (ASAC), would later become embroiled in controversy due to reports of funding and manipulation by the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department. (See [this](#))

Black Power, Black Panthers and the Casbah



Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria during July 1969 with joint press conference hosted by the Black Panther Party and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

At the opening parade of the PACF on July 21, there was an impressive display of cultural expressions from throughout the continent. Delegations from the Republic of Guinea-Conakry, Congo-Brazzaville, Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC), the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and many others marched through the main thoroughfares of Algiers.

Although Fanon had passed away from Leukemia at the age of 36 in 1961 at a hospital in the U.S., his writings had gained monumental influence during the mid-to-late years of the decade. African American radicals and revolutionaries viewed his book "The Wretched of the Earth" as the subtitle suggested, A Guide to the Black Revolution Sweeping the World Today."

The Black Panther Party by July 1969 was under severe attack at the aegis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the Justice Department. Hundreds of its cadres were indicted and imprisoned on largely trumped up criminal charges. Other members were assassinated or driven into exile including Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver.

Cleaver was a well-known best-selling author by 1968. His book "Soul on Ice" had generated enormous attention by the literary community and the general public. The articles and essays which made up the book had been written and some were published while he was an inmate at Folsom Prison in California.

After observing the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPPSD), its previous name, led by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, confront police officers on the streets of Oakland he committed himself to the organization. He played a leading role in the Black Panther newspaper while at the same time serving as a contributing writer for Ramparts, a left-wing magazine which opposed the U.S. war in Vietnam and supported the Black Power movement.

As a result of the police shooting which resulted in the death of 17 year old Bobby Hutton in Oakland on April 6, 1968, Cleaver was jailed for several months. After being released, he was charged with violating his conditions of parole and threatened with being imprisoned again. All the while in the same year, he was nominated to run for president on the newly-formed Peace and Freedom Party ticket. After the 1968 elections, rather than be incarcerated, Cleaver fled the U.S. to Canada and then Cuba. He remained in Cuba for several months and was later invited to Algeria to open up an International Section for the BPP in the capital of Algiers.

According to the recollections of his then wife, Kathleen Neal Cleaver, formerly of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who said:

“I’d met Eldridge Cleaver, the information minister of the Black Panther Party, at a student conference on black liberation held in Nashville over the Easter weekend of 1967. We fell in love and by Christmas we were married. In late November 1968, Eldridge fled imprisonment in the wake of a gun battle between Black Panthers and Oakland police, and by the time I set out to join him I was seven months pregnant. Determined to be with my husband when our first child was born, I headed off for Havana, but discovered en route that the place we would meet was Algiers instead. Half a year after his clandestine departure from the United States, Eldridge Cleaver, celebrated author of *Soul on Ice* and fugitive revolutionary, was enthusiastically welcomed to Algiers on the eve of the Pan-African Cultural Festival.” (See [this](#))

The Panthers through their propaganda declared that they were the vanguard of the Black Revolution in the U.S. Others organizations and entities had also recognized them as such. Their widespread coverage in the national news media began in May 1967 when they marched on the California State Capitol building in Sacramento with arms to protest the debate surrounding the Mulford Act, which would ban the public brandishing of weapons. The bill was targeted against the Panthers and the African American community in general. Later in October of the same year, Newton would be wounded, arrested and charged with the gunning down of two white police officers, one fatally, in Oakland. An international campaign demanding his release gained currency across the U.S., Europe, Africa and Asia.

Growing media attention, the rapid growth of the organization nationally during 1968 and the frequent clashes with law-enforcement agencies in various cities, contributed to the notion of the Panthers opening up an armed struggle against the state. The organization emerged during the advent and growth of urban rebellions led predominately by African Americans during the period of 1964-68.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Algerian government would invite the BPP to open up an office in this North African nation. During the PACF of 1969, an “Afro-American Center” was set up on a major thoroughfare in Algiers where posters of Newton, Cleaver and other Panthers were on prominent display along with the art work of Minister of Culture Emory Douglas.

Kathleen Cleaver in the previously cited article went on to note that:

“On July 17, every seat inside la Mutualité, the auditorium where his press conference took place, was filled. Students, revolutionaries, Arabs, Europeans,

Africans, and Black Americans all applauded Eldridge's arrival, acknowledging his presence in Algiers as a symbolic triumph over America's racist power. I felt electricity surge through the crowd when I walked onto the stage with Eldridge and his interpreter who translated his words into French. The charisma and authority in his voice, added to his imposing physical presence, brought an unexpected element into the excitement generated by the upcoming festival. Being in Africa, for him and the entire movement he represented, held deep significance for our fight for black liberation within America."

Image below: ALGERIA. Algiers. Pan-African Festival. North Africa. ALGERIA. Algiers. 1st Panafrican Cultural Festival. Stokely CARMICHAEL (Leader of the Black Power) and Eldridge CLEAVER (a leader of the Black Panthers). Hotel St. George. Wednesday, July 23, 1969



Nonetheless, there were sharp ideological and political divisions that had surfaced in the BPP during 1968-69. Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) had initiated the Black Panther independent politics concept during his field operations in Alabama in 1965-66. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) was formed during this period as an independent political structure outside the framework of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The Black Panther was utilized as the symbol of the LCFO.

The successes of the organizing work in Lowndes County and other areas of Alabama set the stage for a statewide Black Panther Party as early as the beginning months of 1966. This approach to organizing attracted the attention of other activists across the U.S. resulting in the formation of several Black Panther organizations in various cities such as New York, Detroit, Cleveland, etc. Obviously these efforts influenced Newton and Seale along with others in California to set up separate branches of the Black Panther Party in Southern and North California. By 1968, the Newton and Cleaver grouping had declared dominance and became known as the "official BPP" on a national level. Carmichael, the former Chair of SNCC, H. Rap Brown (now known as Jamil Al-Amin), James Forman and others were drafted as leading officials in the Oakland-based BPP during 1967-1968. Carmichael was appointed as Honorary Prime Minister, Brown as Minister of Justice and Forman given the title of Foreign Minister, since he had served as the first International Affairs Director for SNCC after May 1966.

However, disagreements and misunderstandings arose in 1968-69 leading to the former SNCC leaders departing from the BPP based in Oakland. Carmichael sought to publically distance himself from the Panthers and issued a letter of resignation which was published on July 4, 1969. For the previous six months, it was announced by his then wife Miriam Makeba, a world famous singer and concert performer from the-then apartheid South Africa, noting Carmichael and her had relocated to the Guinea-Conakry.

In evaluating these schisms in the Black Panther movement it is imperative to take strong

consideration of the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO) which devoted enormous resources aimed at destroying the BPP along with other radical, revolutionary and even more liberal and moderate organizations. The BPP was infiltrated by informants from the federal government, local law-enforcement agencies and even military intelligence.

The aim of the COINTELPRO operations directed against the BPP were to frame leaders for criminal offenses; to provoke violence between local police agencies and the Panthers; sew divisions among the organization and other groups to the point of violence; and to destroy the credibility of the Panthers and other revolutionary groups among African American youth, community members and within the organization itself prompting disaffection and demoralization. (See [this](#))

Carmichael and Makeba were in Algiers for the PACF. Makeba's stunning performance in a concert at the Festival was well received by the audience. Carmichael met with Eldridge Cleaver during the period in which he and Makeba were in Algiers. Later Cleaver would issue his own public letter to Carmichael suggesting that his resignation came a year to late and that he was not up to the job of serving in the leadership of the BPP.

Other African American cultural, journalistic and political forces were in Algiers for the PACF. A concert was delivered by saxophonist and Jazz composer Archie Shepp where musicians such as pianist Dave Burrell, trombonist Grachan Moncur III, Alan Silva on bass, Sunny Murray on drums, Clifford Thornton on cornet and poet Don L. Lee (later known as Haki R. Madhubuti) contributed on stage along with Tuareg percussionists and vocalists. A report on the Archie Shepp concert based upon a documentary film on the PACF directed by William Klein, recounted the words spoken by an African American poet at the opening of the performance which emphasized:

“We are still Black and we have come back. Nous sommes revenus [‘We have returned’]. We have come back and brought back to our land, Africa, the music of Africa. Jazz is a Black Power! Jazz is a Black Power! Jazz is an African Power! Jazz is an African music! Jazz is an African music! We have come back!’ proclaimed African American poet Ted Joans as he stood before an audience in the overcrowded streets of Algiers, Algeria, at the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in July 1969. He continued the poem, emphasizing his French phrases to ensure the largely Francophone African crowd would understand him: ‘Nous sommes revenus. Nous sommes les Noirs Americains, les Afro-Americains, les Africains des Etats-Unis. Mais, le premier chose, nous sommes Africains.’ [‘We have returned. We are Black Americans, Afro-Americans, Africans of the United States. But foremost, we are Africans.’]¹ Next to Ted Joans was an animated and commanding Archie Shepp, pacing across the stage playing his saxophone. Riding over and through Shepp's melodies were the rhythms of the Algerian Tuareg musicians who stood nearby, beating at their drums. The audience responded with uproarious applause and spurred on what was to become a classic jazz recording, Archie Shepp's Live at the Pan-African Festival. Shortly after the performance, Shepp was interviewed about the experience by the Algerian national newspaper, El Moudjahid. He described the moment's meaning in personal and political terms: ‘In my opinion, jazz is the music of all the long-lost Africans in America.’” (See [this](#))

Social Scientist and journalist Dr. Nathan Hare attended the PACF and wrote an extensive article published in the first issue of Black Scholar released in November 1969. Hare had been hired as the first Chair of a Black Studies Department established at San Francisco State College (SFSC) in 1968. A protracted struggle over the independence of the

department and other issues impacting African Americans, Chicanos, Asians and radical whites resulted in the longest student strike in U.S. history.

After the resignation of two presidents at SFSC and the appointment of Japanese American academic S.I. Hayakawa, Hare was terminated from his position as Chair of Black Studies in early 1969. Later the same year after attending the PACF, he along with Robert Chrisman and Allen Ross, started the Black Scholar journal.

Musicians Nina Simone of the U.S. and Oscar Peterson of Canada attended and performed at the PACF. Julia Wright, the daughter of legendary novelist Richard Wright then living in Paris, aligned with the BPP as the director of the Afro-American Center in Algiers.

Algeria, Africa and Pan-Africanism Today: 2019

Looking back on the First Pan-African Cultural Festival of July 1969 raises questions related to the status of national liberation, anti-capitalism and revolutionary transformation at the conclusion of the second decade of the 21st century. Since 1969 many of the liberation movements which participated in the PACF have won their independence.

There have been the socialist-oriented policies enacted over a period of years from the 1960s to the 1980s in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Congo-Brazzaville, Tanzania, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Benin, Guinea-Conakry, Somalia, Egypt, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Ghana, Mali, etc. These policies ranged from the nationalization of industries, expulsion of U.S. and other imperialist military bases, formations of self-help collectives, state-owned farms, the creation of import substitution firms aimed at reducing demand for foreign products, founding mass organizations concerned with the plight of women, youth, workers, intellectuals and artists.

The continuing domination by international finance capital of global markets involving the extraction and pricing of commodities, ownership of the means of production, the deliberate destruction of ecosystems impacting water supplies, agriculture, livestock and technological innovation, hampers the capacity of African states to achieve sustainable development. A crisis in European socialism beginning in the late 1980s and resulting in the collapse of the COMECON sector, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a civil war fueled by imperialist interventions in the former Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia and its dissolution, has had negative consequences for African Union (AU) member states from the perspective of having narrower access to alternative terms of trade different from those of the West and the political support provided to progressive governments on the continent.

Nonetheless, the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the last 40 years emerged as the second largest economy in the world. This has been done under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) which took power in this Asian state 70 years ago.

At present Beijing has greatly expanded its political and economic relations with Africa. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has been in existence for two decades holding periodic conferences where agreements are discussed and ratified.

State-run Chinese publications run articles on a regular basis dealing with African affairs in addition to various aspects of relations between the PRC and AU member-states. China on principle refrains from intervention in the internal affairs of African governments. All military and intelligence operations are conducted in partnership with the respective

administrations.

In contrast the U.S. has intensified its military and intelligence programs in Africa. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) was formerly launched in 2008 under President George W. Bush, Jr. This separate structure focusing exclusively on the continent, its islands and waterways, was strengthened and enhanced under the Democratic administration of former President Barack Obama. Since the assumption of office by President Donald Trump there has been almost no change in Washington's approach to Africa. AFRICOM remains on the continent building air strips, training national military forces in purported counter-terrorism preparedness, establishing drone stations for the purpose of surveillance and offensive strikes on targeted organizations, the monitoring of waterways under the guise of preventing piracy in order to allow the ostensible free flow of goods through strategic shipping lanes.

Algeria in 2019 has been characterized by large-scale demonstrations by students and professionals demanding reforms related to the electoral process and allegation of financial corruption. Former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, ailing and ageing, was forced from office due to political pressure from demonstrators.

There appears to be a predominant emphasis on ending corruption and FLN control of the state by the demonstrators without any definitive alternatives being proposed. Of course, North Africa and other regions have witnessed the mass demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria in 2010-11. However, these protests and general strikes have not changed the fundamental class relationships domestically and internationally within countries where they have occurred and beyond.

If the workers, farmers, youth, revolutionary intellectuals and artists are to learn anything from the so-called "Arab Spring" events of 2010-11, it is that there is a distinct demarcation related to rebellion and revolution. The term revolution is utilized in many cases to signify civil disorder, mass protests and the occupation of space critical to the maintenance of the status-quo. Understanding this profound distinction one could hardly argue that transformative revolutionary processes have taken place in Egypt and Tunisia.

If there is any confusion related to Cairo and Tunis, it would have to be crystal clear based upon an objective assessment of developments emanating from the rebel attacks, CIA interventions, Pentagon and NATO bombings and the imposition of western-backed pliant regimes in neighboring Libya. The actual counter-revolution against the Jamahiriya in Libya exemplified by the blanket bombing of the country for seven months from March to October 2011; the assassination of longtime leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi; several failed attempts to concoct United Nations mandated regimes; and the funding of militias allied with the CIA, makes an irrefutable case that imperialism is only capable of causing instability, massive carnage, population displacement and the fostering of further rightward political culture in the leading centers of the capitalist world.

African unity remains on the agenda of the AU through its regular summits and permanent commission in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. There is the 2063 Agenda which in theory is aimed at the complete integration of economies, cooperation on various political fronts along with the creation of an effective African Standby Force. During 2018-19, there was the launching of an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which furthers the AU agenda by committing in principle to eliminate tariffs and other barriers to economic exchange among African states.

Despite these laudable efforts, as this author wrote in another article earlier this year (2019):

“Nevertheless, the presence of western military forces within AU member states represents the antithesis of the progressive and revolutionary currents of Pan-Africanism emanating from the First All-African Peoples Conference of December 1958 in Ghana right through to the armed resistance phase to colonialism, the founding of the Organization of African Unity, the predecessor to the AU, and the burgeoning class struggle against a comprador elite propped up by international finance capital. Under the present circumstances, the imperialists are firmly positioned to stifle any economic development planning, which views the dominance of the world capitalist system as the major obstruction to Africa making a decisive turn in the direction of its rightful trajectory towards continental unification based upon the interests of the majority of its people.” (See [this](#))

As it relates to the plight of Africans in the U.S., there has been the expansion of representation within municipal, state and governmental legislative structures over the last 50 years directly stemming from the gains of the Civil Rights, Black Power and Pan-African movements. A person of African descent, former President Barack Obama, was elected to two terms of office in 2008 and again in 2012. Notwithstanding this symbolic victory over institutional racism which is still quite prevalent in the 21st century in the U.S., the fundamental conditions of African Americans, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, women and other oppressed and working class people has in fact worsened.

The foreign policy negative effectuation of the Obama presidency proved disastrous in regard to the prosperity and well-being of Africa. The destruction of Libya and a concomitant destabilization of the entire North Africa region have led to the human trafficking of millions. This African, Arab and Asian migration tide across the Mediterranean, compounded by the overall lethargy of the world capitalist system, has fueled the rise of neo-fascist parties and politicians in Europe as well as the U.S.

Obama took no specific policy initiatives to improve the social conditions of African Americans who as a result of the Great Recession beginning in 2007, lost more than half of their household wealth through foreclosures, job losses, the decline in real wages and the rapid gentrification of urban areas. Police and vigilante killings of African Americans under the Obama administration sparked several limited rebellions along with mass demonstrations against this genocidal violence, coined by the corporate media as the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

Absent the consolidation of anti-racist sentiment which arose during the period of 2013-2016, the character of the struggle remains largely spontaneous. In the U.S. today there is nothing remotely resembling the BPP or SNCC. The political imperatives of the African American people are rudimentary in relationship to the building of mass and vanguard organizations whose objectives are the revolutionary uprooting of national oppression, gender discrimination, capitalism and imperialism.

These subjective weaknesses among the nationally oppressed and proletariat by no means guarantees the stability of capitalism. The imposition of tariffs by Washington against the PRC and other states is a reflection of the uncertainty of the future of imperialism as an exploitative system. Bourgeois economists are predicting another recession originating on

Wall Street. The question becomes: what will the U.S. ruling class and capitalist state do in response to this inevitability?

The massive bailout of the capitalist system from 2008 to the present to the tune of \$10 trillion or more in resources has drained the capacity for much needed rebuilding of infrastructure and the lifting of social wages for the nationally oppressed, farmers and the working class as a whole. Rising annual federal deficits provide an ominous preview to the potential collapse of governmental agencies rendering them incapable of responding to environmental catastrophes and a potential for the rapid rise of unemployment and poverty.

Africans in the U.S. and around the world have virtual no alternatives to revolutionary organization and the seizure of political power on an international scale. The lessons of the PACF of 50 years ago portend much for this contemporary crisis.

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All images in this article are from the author; featured image: Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers during July 1969 showing the FRELIMO delegation at the opening parade.

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