
Reactionary Black Nationalism: Authoritarianism in the Name of Freedom

Norm R. Allen, Jr.

Many times cultural nationalists fall into line as reactionary nationalists. Papa Doc in Haiti was an excellent example of reactionary nationalism. He oppresses the people but he does promote the African culture. He's against anything other than black, which on the surface seems very good, but for him it is only to mislead the people. He merely kicked out the racists and replaced them with himself as the oppressor. Many of the nationalists in this country seem to desire the same ends.

—Huey P. Newton, Defense Minister of the Black Panther Party, from a pamphlet published by The Movement and republished in *The Black Panthers Speak*.

Black radicals, socialists, progressives, and conservatives have been among the many critics of Reactionary Black Nationalism (RBN). RBN is much like religion—it has good and bad aspects and numerous contradictions and inconsistencies. On the one hand, Reactionary Black Nationalists (RBNs) advocate self-love, self-respect, self-acceptance, self-help, pride, unity, and so forth—much like the right-wingers who promote “traditional family values.” But—also like the holier-than-thou right-wingers—RBNs promote bigotry, intolerance, hatred, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, pseudoscience, irrationality, dogmatic historical revisionism, violence, and so forth. Thus RBN is a strange mixture of profound thought and patent nonsense.

RBN reached its zenith during the 1920s under the Marcus Garvey-led

Norm R. Allen, Jr., is the executive director of African Americans for Humanism. He is currently working on a book about Reactionary Black Nationalism.

Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). Other influential RBNs throughout history include Noble Drew Ali, the founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America; Fard Muhammad (whom many contend was an Arab passing as a black man and who was believed to have been God incarnate), founder of the Nation of Islam (NOI); Elijah Muhammad, spiritual leader of the NOI; Ron Karenga (now Maulana Karenga), of the United Slaves (US) organization and the creator of the Kwanzaa celebration; H. Rap Brown (now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin); Stokely Carmichael (now known as Kwame Touré); LeRoi Jones (now known as Amiri Baraka); Malcolm X before his departure from the NOI; and current NOI leader Minister Louis Farrakhan.

Not surprisingly, the most influential and easily recognized RBNs have been males. This is probably due in large part to RBNs' reactionary views of women. Despite their popular cry of “Love, protect, and respect the black woman,” RBNs are blatantly sexist. Stokely Carmichael once said that the best position for women in the black liberation struggle is “prone.” Ron Karenga reportedly made “his” women walk at least three paces behind him. Female NOI members are taught to obey their men (which mirrors obedience to God), and black nationalist author Shahrazad Ali wrote in her popular book, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman*, that black men should hit their women in the mouth if they get out of line.

Any woman who advocates equality between the sexes is accused of being a feminist, or worse. A woman is expected to “get with the program” or risk being branded as a rabble rouser and traitor to the cause. Women are expected to submit

to men, who supposedly need such submission to restore their long-lost manhood. It should therefore not be surprising that not a single RBN has come out in opposition to female genital mutilation (FGM), euphemistically referred to as “female circumcision.” Thus “strong black manhood” comes with a price—a very large one that women are supposed to pay.

RBNs have a strong attraction for hardened prisoners and ex-cons. RBNs—perhaps more than any other organizations—have had some success in turning black criminals away from drugs, alcohol, and crime, and toward relatively moral lifestyles (Malcolm X being the best and brightest example).

But it is not the goal of RBNs to completely transform all of the ex-cons who embrace their ideology. The willingness of many former criminals to engage in violence for “the cause” is highly valued by RBNs. For while the RBNs are allegedly opposed to black-on-black violence, one clear exception is when black individuals or groups are branded as “Toms,” traitors, or “sellouts.” In such cases, violence is not only tolerated, but it is strongly encouraged. History is full of examples of intolerant and dogmatic RBNs inflicting often deadly violence on their black enemies, the most famous example being the assassination of Malcolm X by members of the NOI. Interestingly, the courageous black freedom fighter of today can quickly and easily be regarded as the worst kind of traitor tomorrow.

Many RBNs believe in the biblical/Qur'anic system of justice. NOI members speak glowingly of the idea of administering amputations to thieves and putting rapists to death under an Islamic government. They talk nonchalantly of “taking heads” and administering strong and swift “justice” whenever a crime against God has been committed. But as the philosopher Nietzsche wisely observed, one should “Distrust anyone in whom the impulse to punish is strong.”

The merging of church and state (or mosque and state) is advocated by many religious RBNs. Religious African nationalists contend that the concept of church/state separation is totally foreign

to the African way of life, and is therefore “un-African.” Black Muslim and Black Christian nationalists have advocated merging religion with the state. Some Christian nationalists have gone so far as to say that there is no such thing as church/state separation among blacks in America. And in an interview with Steven Barboza, author of *American Jihad*, a book on Muslims in America, Farrakhan stated that he advocates setting up a separate Black Muslim government based on the principles set forth by the Prophet Muhammad. (This would be challenging, indeed, as most blacks in America are not Muslims!)

Many RBNs routinely preach hate. Just as white supremacists have referred to blacks as “devils,” so have many RBNs referred to whites. White supremacists have verbally attacked gays, as have RBNs. White supremacists embrace paranoid conspiracy theories, as do their black counterparts. RBNs and white supremacists bash white Jews and sell anti-Jewish literature. (According to the distinguished Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, the NOI purchases its anti-Jewish literature such as *Henry Ford and the Jews* and *The Jews and Their Lies* from white supremacist organizations!)

While RBNs have spoken out fearlessly against white supremacist hate groups, even advocating that blacks defend themselves against racist violence, oddly, some RBNs have joined forces with white supremacist organizations. Though the Garvey-led U.N.I.A. once marched through Harlem with a sign that read “The New Negro is Ready for the Klan,” they later joined forces with the KKK, with Garvey even inviting a KKK spokesman to speak at one of his rallies (the speaker received cheers and applause from the black audience, but the U.N.I.A. lost many members as a result of this and other actions).

In the 1960s, though members of the NOI railed against the violence of white supremacists, their organization joined forces with George Lincoln Rockwell’s American Nazi Party. (Malcolm X later admitted that he was ashamed of having been a part of the alliance.)

On September 14, 1985, Louis Farrakhan invited Tom Metzger, the former Grand Dragon of the California KKK

and the head of the White Aryan Resistance, and six other white supremacists to attend an NOI rally. Metzger praised the NOI in an interview in the September 30, 1985, *Washington Times*, saying “They speak out against the Jews and the oppressors in Washington.” Metzger donated \$100 to the NOI and said, “We were treated quite well” at the rally. (One can only wonder how comfortable a group of blacks would be made to feel at a meeting of the White Aryan Resistance or the KKK!) Moreover, Metzger said of the NOI, “They are the black counterpart to us.”

Many white supremacists and RBNs consistently deny that they are preaching hate and blame the mainstream media for misrepresenting them. (A striking exception is the NOI’s Khallid Muhammad, who, according to Gates, admitted in a taped speech titled “No Love for the Other Side,” “Never will I say I am not anti-Semitic. I pray that God will kill my enemy and take him off the face of the planet.”) Rather, they claim they are teaching “truth” and advocating the love of their own people, as though love of self and hatred of others are mutually exclusive positions. On the contrary, RBNs preach love of self *and* hatred of their enemies. (Indeed, it often seems that these groups are motivated *more* by hatred of their enemies than love of their people.)

Farrakhan said in an interview in the February 28, 1994, issue of *Time*: “The truth of the matter is that white supremacists built a world on that ideology [developing a sense of pride by denigrating others]. . . .” He is correct. RBN was not created in a vacuum. It came about as a reaction to white supremacy, which is one reason the two ideologies are so similar. Furthermore, controversial rapper Sister Souljah says of RBN, “Two wrongs don’t make a right, but it damn sure makes it even.” This is the goal of RBN—to even up the score with whites. But Martin Luther King’s observation is more accurate: “That old law about an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind.” Sensible people do not want to live in a world in which they and their children are groping around in the darkness.

Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of RBN is its tendency to gravitate toward

influential authoritarian, neofascist, and even downright evil leaders and organizations. The NOI has—or has had—close ties or given verbal support to neofascist Lyndon LaRouche’s organization, the Ayatollah Khomeini, strongman Moammar Gaddafi of Libya, and the current regime of Sudan.

Numerous organizations have issued reports of chattel slavery in Sudan, including Human Rights Watch/Africa, the British Anti-Slavery Society, the International Labor Organization (ILO), the U.S. State Department, United Nations investigators, the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG), and the Coalition Against Slavery in Africa. Yet the NOI and other RBNs insist that slavery does not exist in Sudan and are blindly devoted to the defense of the Muslim Khartoum regime.

RBN has been attractive because it gives millions of blacks hope, pride, self-confidence, and a sense of community. It has taught blacks self-acceptance on their own terms, after being taught self-hate for centuries by the dominant white culture and media. Blacks have learned to take pride in their history and to defend themselves against white supremacist attacks from all directions.

But the ugly side of RBN must not go unopposed. The fight against white supremacy must be waged in a principled manner. While RBNs equate any strong criticism of them or their ideas with a threat to black unity, they often pose threats to the very unity they are seeking. For as Linda Harrison, writing in the February 2, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther*, related: “Cultural nationalists in their finery support many of the evils which have put them in the position of servitude.” And while not a few Black Panthers held reactionary views of their own, their critique of RBN should not be dismissed or minimized.

Finally, the idea of a chosen people must always be opposed. As writer Greg Erwin has noted, “If you and your group are the epitome of all that is good, some other group is likely the epitome of all that is evil.” And this simplistic dichotomy will ultimately produce more negative consequences than positive ones, as history clearly demonstrates. •