

THE CALL OF THE CAT

In retrospect, I think my first spark of political awareness was ignited when working on a current events report in the fourth grade. My subject was the upheaval that was taking place in the Congo. At nine years of age, I learned that an American agency (CIA) worked in collusion with another government (Belgium) to overthrow the government of the newly liberated Congo. These shenanigans took the life of Patrice Lumumba and installed a traitorous Colonel Mubuto as dictator/president for life. These events transformed me. Current events and history became my favorite subjects and I learned the necessity of critical thinking at an early age. From that year on (1961) the news media fed me a steady diet of assassinations, (John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, etc...) and gave me hope first, through the civil rights movement and then the embryonic Black Liberation Movement.

I was fifteen when 1968 rolled in. In terms of the Black Liberation Movement it was a stellar year. The Black Panther Party was becoming a nationwide movement, SNCC broke away from its integrated civil rights roots under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, now Kwame Ture and H. Rap Brown now Jalil al Amin. It was also the year of hundreds of urban uprisings and the TET offensive in Vietnam. With this as a backdrop, my community, and my very being, along with other Black communities around the nation were transformed. My friends and I were very much aware of the upheaval of the times. While we were aware that there were many organizations for the advancement of our people they seemed abstract to the brothers on the streets except for the BPP. By this time I had read *Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon (with great difficulty), *Black Bourgeoisie* by Franklin Frazier, *Black Rage* by Grier and Cobbs, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, etc... I had a foundation and greatly admired the brothers and sisters in the movement. Somehow they did not appear real in the sense there was no one in the streets talking to brothers like myself.

The BPP was the lone exception. On the streets they were the evidence of this great movement.

On the other side of the coin the hustlers and players were out in force day and night recruiting, profiling and being visible in the community with their money, cars, women, jewelry and most important their "**perceived power**". To make a long story short, I chose the streets over the movement because the streets appeared more tangible and their visible impact was undeniable. As a teenager in N.Y.C. I always related to and admired the brothers and sisters in the BPP, read the paper and attended some rallies, but truth be told I had already fallen under the spell of the illusion of the street life.

In 1971 I moved to San Francisco, California to attend the S.F. Art Institute, majoring in photography. In mid-1972, while reading a copy of the Black Panther newspaper I saw an advertisement asking for volunteers. The following week quite by accident, I attended a Panther rally in San Pablo (?) Park where hundreds of bags of groceries were being given away. Living in S.F. and going to art school wasn't getting it. My mind was made up. I felt I had wasted enough time along the sidelines, reading about history instead of helping to shape it. Within months I moved to East Oakland, sought out the Black Panther Party and volunteered as a photographer and eventually became one of the campaign photographers for Bobby Seale's mayoral run in 1973. From 1972 to 1975 I became immersed in the work I performed for the Party. I worked as a campaign photographer throughout the election, taught photography at the Inter-communal Youth Institute (my former wife was an instructor also), became one of the photographers for the inter-communal News Service (BPP Newspaper) as well as training other Panthers in the art/science of photography.

It was through my involvement with this organization that I learned self-sacrificing discipline and responsibility. My average work day could be as long as twelve hours. I would spend hours trailing the energetic Bobby Seale

throughout his campaign day, which was no easy feat. In the evening I would spend hours in the darkroom either at home or at Central headquarters developing film or printing pictures. Early in its history the Party relied on outside photographers mainly white freelancers to document their survival programs and other activities, but now the Party was building a cadre of dedicated soldiers armed with cameras loading Tri-X (film) bullets. Since I was a photography major I shared the technical knowledge I gained in school with other members of the cadre. We were able to cover events at the Son of Man Temple, the Intercommunal Youth Institute (later known as the Oakland Community School), and Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown's electoral campaign's simultaneously. Some of the beautiful comrades that I had the honor of working beside were John "Bunchy" Crear, Glenn Lomax and later Donald "DC" Cox.

Although I was a college student at that time, what I learned about life, my people and the struggle from comrades like Chairman Bobby, Emory Douglas, Erica Huggins and countless others have stayed with me to this day. It was an education more profound than anything I learned or could have learned in the classroom.

Whereas the communal experience and camaraderie within the ranks had a positive effect on my overall development, by 1975 there were larger issues looming from within and without affecting the course some Party members were taking. I am not going to take the time here to discuss those issues, but some of them are inherent as to why so many organizations during this time period dissolved or were destroyed at the height of their effectiveness.

I left the Party in 1975 becoming involved with a variety of community projects in San Francisco before eventually returning to New York where I worked with "so called" juvenile delinquents, homeless population, active and recovering drug addicts, prostitutes, recovering alcoholics and HIV infected drug users. Although these jobs were not specifically revolutionary in nature, I made them

politically relevant in the methods I used to enlighten the population I worked with. I educated and trained these individuals to be more aware of the social justice aspects of their plight, helping them to understand how oppression can break an individual's spirit, cause him or her to destroy themselves and their respective communities.

My direction and outlook since those amazing times has the indelible mark of the Black Panther Party. I now live in Atlanta, Georgia with my wife and three teenage sons and have worked as a youth developer and community organizer in Atlanta for the past fifteen years.

All Power to the People!

Jahti Jackson Maasai

(Formally known as Tony Jackson)