

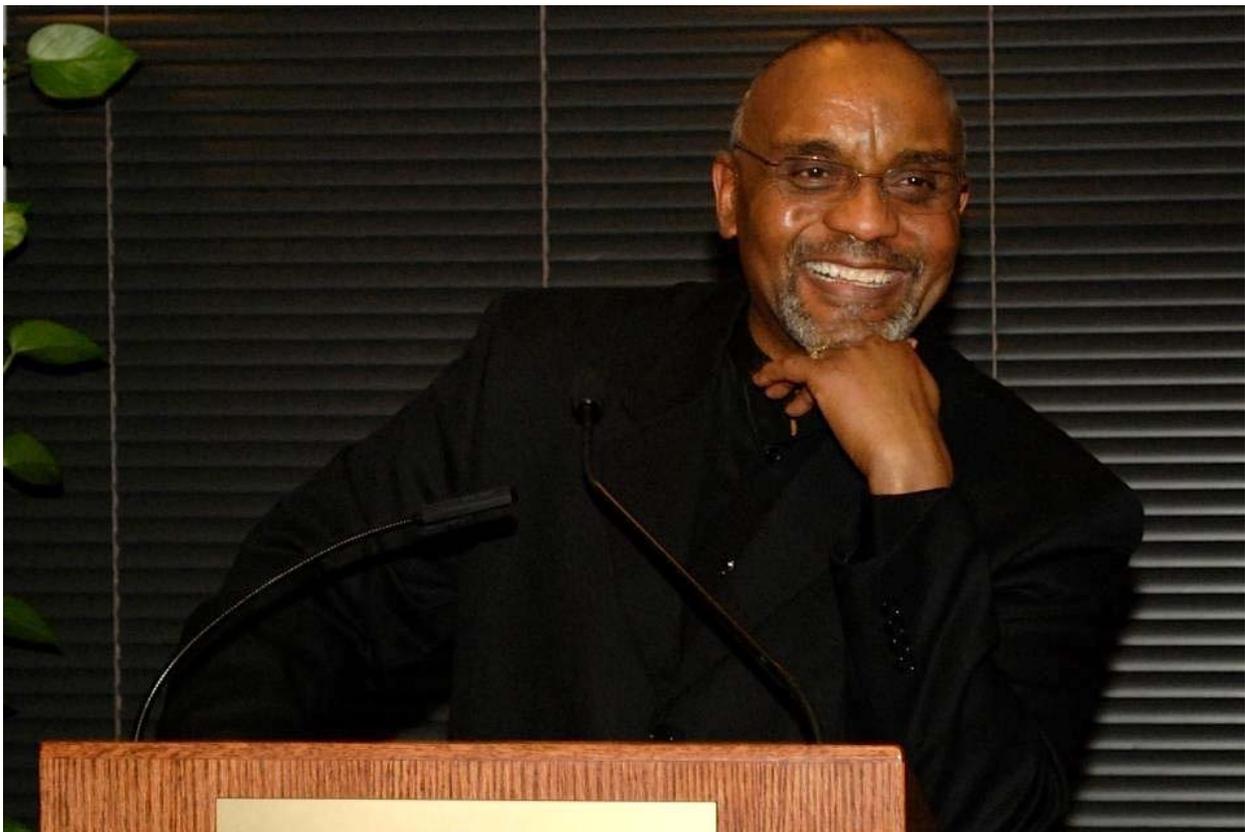
Ahmad A. Rahman's Making of Black 'Solutionaries'

by

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"Africa needs a new type of man. A dedicated, modest, honest and devoted man. A man who submerges self in the service of his nation and mankind. A man who abhors greed and deters vanity. A new type of man whose meekness is his strength and whose integrity is his greatness."

—Osageyefo Kwame Nkrumah

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The Journal of Pan African Studies, vol.8, no.9, December 2015

A few days before his death, the social media site (facebook) of Brother Ahmad Abdur Rahman (1951–September 21, 2015) featured the above quote along with a picture of Kwame Nkrumah. What is expressed, the call for a new kind of man, aptly serves as an epigraph to the story of Rahman’s own life. Niraj Warikoo, Metro and Politics editor for the *Detroit Free Press*, recalled Rahman as “committed to helping the community, organizing a program called Cyberdad aimed at children in metro Detroit without fathers in their lives” (“Professor and Black Panther Party leader dies at 64,” found online at <http://www.app.com/story/news/obituary/2015/09/23/professor-black-panther-sentence-commuted-dies-obituary/72699530/>).

Many expressions of admiration for Rahman’s work as a community activist and an educator speak to the cumulative impact of his legacy. This essay investigates his political and intellectual legacy as a step toward understanding the Malcolmite generation of Africana/Black Studies. Rahman was born Ronald Irwin and grew up on the south side of Chicago, Illinois. He attended Lindblom Technical High School where it is said that he was a good student who could go to a highly selective university if he chose. His path after high school, however, was into the Chicago Branch of the Black Panther Party which Bob Brown and Bobby Rush, who would decades later become a U.S. Congressman, organized in 1968. Brown and Rush recruited Fred Hampton and the young leader, only a couple of years older than Rahman, took over the leadership when Brown split from the party along with Stokely Carmichael. Chairman Fred, as it were, came to be targeted for assassination by the Chicago Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counter Intelligence Program known as COINTELPRO. At a mere 21 years of age, Hampton, along with Mark Clark, was shot to death at 4:30 in the morning of December 4, 1969.

In the context of violent repression against Panthers nationwide, Rahman transferred from Chicago to a branch of the Panthers in Detroit known as the National Committee to Combat Fascism in 1970. He quickly helped to build up the pre-party formation into an officially acknowledged branch of the BPP, but in doing so, he became a target of an FBI Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operation that sent him to prison for more than 21 years. Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, in *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013) discuss Rahman’s arrest in April of 1971, as one in a series of “embarrassments” in a year in which the Panther Party’s national leadership attempted to “distance itself from insurrectionary activities in order to hold onto allied support” (372). Such a view of Rahman and the other men involved in the action that sent him to prison as wannabee heroes and “martyrs without a movement” (374), distorts the reality of their case and speaks very little to what was happening in Detroit after the rebellion of 1967.

When Rahman moved to Detroit he was a nineteen year-old in extraordinarily complex and tension-filled times fully committed to being a revolutionary to radically change those times (“A Detroit Black Panther’s Soldiering Journey with Malcolm X: Extract Memoirs from an X Heir,” in *Malcolm X’s Michigan Worldview: An Exemplar for Contemporary Black Studies*). He lived in a country that was drafting men to fight in a war in Vietnam, while at the same time there was what Imari Obadele called a “War in America” between long oppressed nationalities and a U.S. empire. Internally within black Detroit there were significant political divisions along with governmental surveillance, infiltration, and manipulation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Detroit Red Squad systematically studied in *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africaby* Christian Davenport (Cambridge University Press: 2014). In this context, a young Rahman was a rising leader in an organization with a hierarchical structure with a command and control system of authority and decision-making at times very much like the U.S. military. Seeing a Detroit engulfed in narcotics abuse, especially the powerfully addictive heroin, the idea emerged of raiding known sites where the acquisition and consumption of heroin was taking place. Such an offensive action would establish the Black Panther Party as an active force protecting Detroit’s black community in a way that the police was not. It would highlight the contradiction and show that the Party was about action and not simply mouthing rhetoric and criticism.

For Rahman and his comrades in the Party, the U.S. Government was pumping heroin into black neighborhoods to exert a new social and political power to contend with and to annihilate the insurgent work of revolutionary organizers. Rahman, in reflecting on the period after his incarceration for more than two decades, observed, “drug-related crime began to wreak havoc in Black neighborhoods nationwide, diluting calls for community control as citizens turned to the police for relief. Many black people began to shift to the political ‘right’... Calls for community control of police, became calls for the police - and more prisons” (*Michigan Citizen*, July 12, 1997). Long before Michelle Alexander’s book about mass incarceration and the “New Jim Crow,” Rahman saw what was coming and attempted to counter it. Even before President Richard Nixon launched the so-called “War on Drugs” announced in his Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control (June 17, 1971), Rahman or “Comrade Ronnie” as he was then known, was trying to be a part of a solution to the drug problem that was devastating our communities.

The incident that put Rahman behind bars for 21 years, nine months, and seven days was neither an embarrassment nor an act of heroism. In the vernacular language of the time, it was just an effed up set up. As Rahman described it, the Panther Party had an anti-drug campaign and one of its “methods” was to go to a “dope house,” blow the door off its hinges with a shotgun, and bust in. With the “element of surprise” on their side, the Panther unit would overpower the people in the drug den and “we would flush the dope down the toilet and take the money to feed people.”

On Easter Sunday (April 11, 1971), around midnight, a superior in the Party ordered Rahman and three other Panthers to raid a dope house at Second and Virginia Park in Detroit. Rahman said, from the beginning, he felt something was wrong. The house was quiet when they entered it. As he searched for drugs on an upper floor, he heard a gunshot downstairs.

When Rahman got to the first floor he found that one of the Panthers had killed a man. The shooter claimed that the German Shepard charged at him and his gun accidentally went off, fatally wounding the victim, Franklin Abramson, and inflicting minor wounds on two others. The brothers fled the scene, but the police captured them two days later (“Four Gunmen Invade Detroit Commune, Kill Mesick Youth,” *Ludington Daily News*, April 12, 1971; James Ricci, “Free Ahmad Abdur-Rahman,” *The Black Panther, Black Community News Service*, February 1991; and *Michigan Citizen*, July 12, 1997).

When his case went to trial Rahman discovered that the Panther Party superior he and the other young comrades took orders from was an FBI informant and the dope house break-in was part of a COINTELPRO designed to capture “the four most active and productive Panthers in the area - Rahman and his three co-defendants.” Rahman, who was nowhere near the murder when it occurred, pled not guilty. The other three pled guilty were found guilty of felony murder. The shooter in the case served only 12 years and was set free, but for Rahman, who fought to prove his innocence, it would be more than two decades before Gov. John Engler commuted his sentence.

During his long imprisonment, Rahman was regarded as a model prisoner. He did not just do time he used the time to improve himself and to continue to struggle. He earned his first college degree at Wayne State University where his mentor was Aneb (Gloria House) Kgositsile. Dr. House, who as a student at UC-Berkeley worked in the Southern civil rights movement as field secretary in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in Lowndes County, Alabama, designed and implemented a humanities curriculum leading to the bachelor’s degree for students at Jackson Maximum Security Prison. For this and other civic engagement work, she received the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority’s Lilian Benbow Award in Education. A more valuable reward, however, was being able to help young men like Rahman have a pathway out of the mindset of the inmate. With Dr. House’s assistance, Rahman went on to become the first imprisoned student to earn the Ph.D. degree in History at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, which was also where Professor House had received her doctorate in American Culture/History.

Beyond helping Rahman educationally, Professor House was an active part of the protracted effort to free Rahman. Students at the University of Michigan rallied by history graduate student and former anti-apartheid activist at Columbia University, Barbara Ransby, demanded his release. A journalist with a Detroit daily paper also took up his cause and ongoing media attention was given to cases like Rahman’s and many others who had been convicted and imprisoned under a felony murder law where evidence of intent to murder was never submitted at trial.

Michigan's felony murder law at the time of Rahman's conviction mandated that anyone involved in a felony that resulted in the death of a victim, was guilty of felony murder and the punishment was to remain behind bars for the rest of his life. In 1980, a Michigan Supreme Court ruled in *People v. Aaron* that such a sentence was an injustice, but because of a technicality some felony murder prisoners like Rahman received no benefit from the ruling.

Nonetheless, the campaign to win Rahman's release from prison, after years of popular support including requests by the office of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, finally led Governor John Engler to release him from prison in 1992.

The campaign to win Brother Rahman's release is an interesting subject for future research among other facets of his remarkable life journey. The fact that Rahman had no criminal record other than a misdemeanor citation (also connected to his Panther activities), was not the shooter and was not a direct part of the shooting, was set up in an FBI COINTELPRO break-in, all this certainly legitimized the call for justice for Rahman, but what actually led ultra-right-wing Governor Engler to commute his sentence? A sister of the man who was shot to death had long called for Rahman's release, but what finally tipped the scales in his favor? One reason may have involved the influence of the Muslim community in Michigan and the interest key leaders in that community showed in regards to his unjust, prolonged incarceration.



Regardless of how the struggle to free Rahman finally succeeded in ending his long and wrongful imprisonment, he excelled as a scholar and teacher upon his release. His research interests focused on black globalist movements like Pan-Africanism and the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. He is best known for his book *The Regime Change of Kwame Nkrumah: Epic Heroism in Africa and the Diaspora*, published by Palgrave Macmillan (2007). This book offered a new and innovative approach to writing a political biography and intellectual history. Rahman's fresh perspective on Kwame Nkrumah, analyzed the Pan-African leader's behavior through three epic hero patterns: Call, Quest, and Return. The scholarship is unique in its attention to Nkrumah's experiences in the United States, using recently declassified U.S. and British government documents.

His study of Nkrumah drew attention from scholars around the world. Barbara Ransby, Professor of African American Studies, Gender and Women's Studies and History at the University of Illinois Chicago, wrote "Rahman is a brilliant political analyst and a longtime activist who brings enormous insight and skillful creativity to his study of Ghanaian leader and Pan-Africanist thinker, Kwame Nkrumah. This is a must-read for anyone interested in Africa, her past, her future, and the many complex personalities that she produced."

Charles E. Jones, head of the Department of Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati observed that the book "enriches our understanding of Kwame Nkrumah's significance in African insurgent politics. Rahman challenges Euro-centric interpretations, which provide superficial accounts of Nkrumah's legacy. His book offers a sophisticated and innovative treatment of multiple factors, such as indigenous African constructs, which gives us rich insights into Nkrumah's efforts to lead Ghana and Africa to independence and Pan-African solidarity." Pan-Africanist scholar-activist Ama Biney argued that Rahman's book tended to fall into "an uncritical examination of Nkrumah's ideology within a hagiographic tradition" (*The Political and Social Thought of Kwame Nkrumah*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011: 7).

Rahman also authored "Marching Blind: The Rise and Fall of the Black Panther Party in Detroit" in *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, published in 2009. The carefully argued and sourced chapter provides a much deeper elaboration of the historical context for the account of his activism given in this essay. He conducted original interviews with numerous black people in Detroit, including detailed investigation of some of the agents who infiltrated the Panthers and worked with the police and FBI to destroy black self-defense and self-determination. He reached the conclusion in his study that "distrust—along with the arrest and imprisonment of the leaders of the underground self-defense groups—was a key to the demise of armed Black Panther activism in Detroit" (214). The chapter was a brilliant start of a larger reexamination of the Panthers that Rahman could have written.



In the last years of his life, Rahman worked diligently in a wide array of educational areas to elevate people's lives. In the Detroit Public School system, he worked to enhance the content of African American history in the curriculum. The Michigan Council for the Social Studies took notice and named Rahman its 'College Professor of the Year'. In his position as an Associate Professor of African and African American history at the University of Michigan in Dearborn, he touched the lives of many students in and outside of the classroom. As a member of the National Board of Directors of the National Council for Black Studies, Brother Rahman contributed mightily to the development of our field beyond his own campus.

About his life focus Rahman would say: "I am motivated by a drive to make a difference for those persons I see in need. They are quite often 'the least of these.' Much of the energy of us academics goes toward achieving status within academia. Many of the best minds that could challenge and solve problems in the inner city are exclusively occupied writing academic books and articles that have no impact on the most important issues facing Black America. I have sought to avoid this ivory tower phenomenon.

I have always worked to balance academic achievement with what I regard as the more important goals for Detroit of achieving real solutions. At one time during my youth, I called myself a revolutionary. Now I see myself as more of a *solutionary*" (http://thewright.org/lfs/Rahman_bio.pdf). His name will be added to the roll call of our great ancestors.



Ahmad A. Rahman, Black Panther Party for Self-Defense co-founder Huey P. Newton (black leather coat), Norman "Mudada" McGee, Connie Matthews Tabor, and Big Man with his head turned, at the Metro Detroit Airport on November 16, 1970 (Source: Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit News Collection at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, accessed at: <http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/10008>)

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