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“Our Nation Becoming”: Uhuru Sasa Shule and the Dual Power function of  
“Black Independent Institutions” in the Black Power Era

Alongside the Provisional Government, the government of bourgeoisie, another government has arisen,  
so far weak and incipient, but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing.  
— V. I. Lenin<sup>1</sup>

A ghetto can be a cocoon as well as a cage.  
— Kenneth B. Clark<sup>2</sup>

Much has been written about the urban community control movements of the late 1960s, particularly with respect to the struggle for local governance of schools in African-American and Puerto Rican communities that reached its apogee in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York in 1968.<sup>3</sup> Far fewer studies have examined the proliferation of contemporary black independent schools, a phenomenon inspired in part by community control campaigns in New York and elsewhere during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Efforts to establish full-time Pan African nationalist private schools at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels represented a theoretically rich and symbolically meaningful sub-movement that flourished during the heyday and decline of the Black Power era, giving rise to ideologically-oriented institutions in San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Newark, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and other cities. Some of these establishments proved relatively ephemeral; others survived into the 1980s and beyond, helping to connect the Afrocentric educational models that arose at the close of the century with Black Power era visions of cultural and revolutionary nationalism and Pan Africanism.<sup>4</sup>

This paper focuses on one of the most significant institutions to emerge from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school clashes of the late 1960s—Uhuru Sasa Shule (“Freedom Now School” in Kiswahili), a junior and senior high founded in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn in 1970. Uhuru Sasa and The East, the cultural center of which it was part, are usually remembered—by contemporary black activists and by African-American residents of Central Brooklyn who participated in programs sponsored by the establishments—for their cultural contributions, including developing an African-themed curriculum, helping to popularize the holiday of Kwanzaa, and initiating the borough’s African cultural festival. Today, however, I will consider some of the political accomplishments of institutions like Uhuru Sasa, especially those aspects that transcend the racial claims of identity politics and that instead address some of the material and political challenges faced by African-American inhabitants of rapidly-deteriorating central cities at the start of the 1970s. Part of the political significance of Pan African nationalist schools and certain other “independent black institutions,” as the new, indigenous establishments were called, is that, however modestly and unevenly, they supplemented and occasionally replaced dwindling social services in the city core. The self-help approach to serving inner-city populations had serious practical shortcomings, particularly when conceived as a substitute for other strategies of social advancement. Yet as manifestations of radical *theory*, black nationalist private

schools achieved a degree of success, providing prototypes of the independent, alternative institutions with which contemporary nationalists wished to develop the inchoate nation-within-a-nation that they believed postwar black migration had brought into being.

Uhuru Sasa and the East were founded by Brooklyn social studies teacher Les Campbell in the aftermath of the 1969 dismantling of New York's community control movement. Campbell, who took the name Jitu Weusi, or "Big Black," was an original member of the city's Afro-American Teachers Association, an organization that strove to cultivate black nationalist impulses within local educational struggles. Weusi and the ATA had gained activist experience during New York's school desegregation campaigns of 1964 and 1965. The failure of those efforts to garner for African Americans real political power or decent educational conditions helped inspire ATA's adoption of a more militant political approach. Weusi and the ATA played a visible role in the community control struggle that began in 1967 after experimental local school districts were established in three of New York's minority neighborhoods and permitted to operate with some autonomy from the city's central Board of Education.<sup>5</sup>

The dissolution of this popular model of neighborhood autonomy followed a series of stormy battles between black residents and New York's local teacher's union. Weusi gained considerable notoriety during these conflicts for his confrontational activism and for his reading on a local radio station of a crudely anti-Semitic poem. Those exploits contributed to the school district's dismissal of the outspoken teacher in 1969. However, Weusi and the ATA learned at least two lessons from the confrontations at Ocean Hill-Brownsville: First, they began to recognize the structural constraints to genuine reform of ghetto schools within the racist political economies of postindustrial cities; and second, they discovered that the subjects of such "colonial" domains could achieve a measure of power and self-determination by seizing control of the apparatuses of municipal governance and using them to meet local needs. During their brief existence, Ocean Hill-Brownsville's community-controlled school district and governing board provided residents of the neighborhood with new mechanisms of self-rule, replacing some of the functions of the historically unresponsive central Board of Education. "Disregard the New York City Board of Education and assume whatever powers you can in running your schools," ATA president Albert Vann advised the city's embattled community control forces in 1968. "While you are legally fighting for other powers assume those that you can legitimately assume."<sup>6</sup>

The idea of restructuring public institutions within inner cities and reimagining or reallocating their functions and decision-making powers galvanized scores of activists during this period. By the mid- to late-1960s, many veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's southern campaigns as well as other young antipoverty and civil rights workers enthusiastically embraced the call to "return to the ghetto" to organize inhabitants of restive central cities, particularly in the North. The themes of self-determination, black nationalism and Pan Africanist internationalism that resonated powerfully after 1966 were inextricable from contemporary theories of cities that posited urban enclaves not as barren reservations but as essential sites for the practice of independent African-American politics. "The city," theorist James Boggs famously declared, "is the black man's land." Awareness of the limitations of civil rights and antipoverty reform combined with the radicalizing influence of Malcolm X, urban rebellions, the Vietnam War and anticolonial movements, helping to popularize the view of black ghettos as colonial territories in need of "national liberation." Establishing political "power bases" in urban centers emerged as a central priority for a wide array of Black Power ideologues.<sup>7</sup>

The strategic and ideological shift to pursuing local self-determination as a means of empowering African-American urbanites helped generate community control struggles in several major cities. However, the failure to establish meaningful black authority over inner-city schools, police forces and

other civic institutions, either through grassroots agitation, community action programs or the election of African-American officials, led some to conclude that the formation of *truly* independent institutions—those that existed entirely apart from formal municipal bureaucracies—was essential to the practice of political autonomy and to the emancipation of black ghettos. Black nationalist organizers and cultural figures turned with renewed fervor to the construction of “parallel institutions,” including community schools, neighborhood health clinics and cultural centers. This strategy, perhaps most extensively implemented in the Black Panther Party’s Survival Programs, also had shaped earlier phases of struggle. Civil rights workers in the late 1950s and early 1960s had organized Citizenship Schools and freedom schools, in part to offer alternatives to white supremacist institutions within and beyond the segregated South. Of course, black churches and organizations like the Nation of Islam had long served as parallel institutions, providing members with mutual aid benefits and other services that African Americans were routinely denied in the larger society.<sup>8</sup>

The ascent of revolutionary black nationalism in the mid- to late 1960s and the influence on African-American struggle of anticolonial theory lent to the task of creating new black institutions in the city core a sense of urgency and a profound political symbolism. During this period, historian Robert Self notes, “A variety of black nationalist groups adopted an emancipatory politics rooted in the belief that vast segments of the American landscape were ‘internal colonies’ the ‘liberation’ of which required both new ideologies...and new tactics.”<sup>9</sup> The writings of figures like Frantz Fanon, Harold Cruse, Grace and James Boggs, Jack O’Dell, Robert Allen, Robert S. Browne and others, as well as the example of Third World liberation struggles, deepened the conviction that the formation of second ghettos reflected a process of colonial and neocolonial underdevelopment roughly analogous to that which prevailed in the Third World.<sup>10</sup> The eruption of major urban riots after 1964, and especially the unfolding of the most destructive rebellions in 1967-1968, further dramatized the colonial status of ghetto territories. Radical theorists concluded that, “a sense of nationhood is groping for expression,” viewing the uprisings not only as responses to poverty and inequality, but also as mass repudiations of the state’s claims to legitimacy and as mass rejections of its paltry offers of citizenship within black urban colonies. They saw the archipelago of northern black ghettos as a potentially “sovereign league of black-controlled cities” whose independent, internal development could lead to the consolidation of a subjugated nation. “Look down!” LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) commanded in 1966. “Pick up the earth, or jab your fingernails into the concrete. It is real and it is yours, if you want it.”<sup>11</sup>

Independent black institutions had a special role to play in cultivating the incipient black nation extant in central cities. “The most crucial work for this particular era of African existence is the building of revolutionary nationalist institutions,” the editors of *Rhythm Magazine* asserted in 1970. “By ‘institutions’ we mean schools, political parties, cultural centers, military units, presses—all those programmatic structures that enable a people to see beyond survival; in short, the elemental ingredients of a viable nation.”<sup>12</sup> Indigenous and autonomous black establishments could recreate some of the vital civic services that were vanishing from urban centers as outmigration and shrinking investment, industry and tax bases reduced these zones to economic shells. More significantly from a standpoint of radical theory, such institutions seemed capable of offering an alternative structure of authority, a kind of embryonic or provisional state power that could harness popular resentment toward official governing apparatuses, from the welfare office to the housing authority. By presenting credible alternatives that more ably fulfilled human needs, these establishments could win the trust and loyalty of the people while actively engaging in political education, thus transforming African-American alienation into Pan-African solidarity and black consciousness. The metaphor of black nationhood, some theorists believed, could gradually become material reality, crystallizing in an emerging, urban infrastructure of independent, grassroots formations.

The Leninist concept of “dual power,” or the formation of alternative institutions as a means of supplanting the corrupt apparatuses of dominant state power, amply describes the social functions of institutions like Uhuru Sasa, though few contemporary black theorists used the phrase.<sup>13</sup> During the 1970s and early 80s, Uhuru Sasa provided scores of Brooklyn youngsters and adults with the kind of creative, culturally and politically “relevant” education that was largely unavailable to the borough’s poor and working-class African Americans. At Uhuru Sasa, children could study the three R’s along with geography, African history, Swahili, first aid and self-defense. Their parents could attend evening classes or earn a G.E.D. at the campus, a converted, industrial-era warehouse. Uhuru Sasa’s parent organization, the East, performed civil services like African-style marriages, served as a community center and arts venue, dispensed news and wholesale food products through its publications and cooperatives, and even adjudicated conflicts and coordinated street patrols through its internal system of governance and its network of members and volunteers.<sup>14</sup> Given the array of social tasks that they regularly carried out, Uhuru Sasa and the East constituted, on a modest basis, quasi-governmental establishments.

This was no accident. Jitu Weusi and his fellow organizers embraced a philosophy that interpreted African-American nationhood as a process of incremental independence from mainstream American society. Weusi’s most salient political inspiration came from Tanzanian statesmen and intellectual Julius Nyerere, especially his 1968 treatise *Uhuru Na Ujamaa* (“Freedom and Socialism”).<sup>15</sup> The essay “Education and Self-Reliance” proved especially influential. Weusi wished to arm black youth with the desire and wherewithal to seek intellectual, political and cultural independence from a civilization and dominant culture seen as corrupt and decaying. Uhuru Sasa teachers sought to “inculcate our people with the nation-building concepts of land, tools and labor.” The principle of self-determination led the school to pursue private rather than public funds, and to evade state oversight as long as possible. Such measures were seen as expressions of the institution’s devotion to “our nation becoming.” As Uhuru Sasa administrators declared in 1972, “We are a Pan-African Nationalist school, meaning that we support and participate in the struggles of Africans worldwide, and, secondly, we are in preparation for Nationhood—ultimate control of our lives.”<sup>16</sup>

As I close, I need to acknowledge some of the contradictions and constraints within the political theory and practice of contemporary black independent institutions, and to confess my own ambivalence about the social and political value of such formations. Scholars like Adolph Reed and Robin Kelley have identified the profound theoretical flaws and conservative nature of black nationalist self-help ideology in the 1960s, an approach that often meant abandoning efforts to force the state to redistribute the capital and resources that remain essential to the practical salvation of inner cities.<sup>17</sup> (Let us not forget that the state played a substantial role in diverting such resources from these areas in the first place.) Ultimately, black independent schools and other nationalistic formations that eschewed political engagement with the state merely facilitated the civic abandonment of urban black communities and reinforced the conservative agenda of privatization and free markets. Private institutions, no matter how disciplined, can never fully replace public services, especially those, like education, that constitute human rights. Nor is institution-building a viable alternative to democratic struggle.

Contemporary theorists who behaved as though constructing the new society were simply a matter of replacing morally bankrupt schools or welfare offices indulged in a reckless and arcane utopianism. Furthermore, institutions like Uhuru Sasa often proved insular and clannish. The internal governance of such establishments could be authoritarian and elitist, and their agendas for national struggle, while often imaginative and even ingenious, at times substituted abstract symbolism for political substance. Ultimately, Uhuru Sasa’s operators had little interest in seizing state power and even less capacity to do

so. They spent at least as much time and energy pursuing the enculturation of children and young adults than they did providing social services or constructing a new urban infrastructure.

That said, examining independent black institutions of the 1960s and 70s can help to enrich the historiography of Black Power. By studying schools like Uhuru Sasa, we gain new insight into the varieties of black cultural self-activity that shaped the organizing tradition during this period, and we discern new political strategies for the reappropriation and reimagining of contemporary urban spaces. We discover that Pan African nationalist figures engaged in both material and theoretical efforts to elaborate and concretize concepts of alternative citizenship and social belonging. We learn that creative attempts to meet the everyday needs of black people continued to distinguish nationalist formations long after the disintegration of SNCC and the Black Panthers. We grasp the dynamic intellectualism and audacious optimism of the period, and we face the challenge of applying rigorous political critiques of its myriad movements while avoiding constricting judgments about the failures or fantastical nature of the black nationalist imaginary. Finally, we recognize that radical theorists did not merely succumb to sectarianism, organizational chauvinism, political hubris and dismay, or sheer irrelevance during the 1970s, but continued to pursue imaginative strategies for building the new society. As inequality and violence increase in our present society, and the prevailing apparatuses of government grow ever more corrupt, this marvelous commitment to radical imagination and praxis we would do well to revive.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "Dual Power," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 154.

<sup>3</sup> This literature is voluminous. For two outstanding examples, see Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and Daniel Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Russell Rickford, "A Struggle in the Arena of Ideas": Black Independent Schools and the Quest for Nationhood, 1966-1986," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York* and Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*.

<sup>6</sup> April 15, 1968 African-American Teacher's Association Press Release, Box 1, Folder 6, Annie Stein Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University.

<sup>7</sup> Grace and James Boggs, "The City is the Black Man's Land," *Monthly Review*, April 1966, 35-46. Also see Robert L. Allen, "Black Power Today—Where It's At, Where It's Going," *Guardian*, May 25, 1968, 86; and Eldridge Cleaver, "Revolution in the White Mother Country & National Liberation in the Black Colony," *North American Review*, July-August 1968, 14. See also Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For more on freedom schools, Citizenship Schools and black parallel institutions, See Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984). For the Black Panther's survival programs, see David Hiliard and the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, *The Black Panther Party Service to the People Programs* (Vallejo, CA: Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Self, "'TO PLAN OUR LIBERATION': Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000): 762.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Harold L. Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1968); and Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*

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(Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1970). For more on contemporary black theorists and the colonial thesis, see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Browne, "The Case for black Separatism," *Ramparts*, December 1967, 51; "The Black and the Red," *Monthly Review*, September 1967, 8; LeRoi Jones, *Home* (New York: Morrow, 1966), 244.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd in "Around Our Way—By Big Black," *Black News*, September 26, 1970, 10.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Lenin's "dual power" concept, see Eckard Bolsinger, *Carl Schmitt's and Lenin's Political Realism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 71-74.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the internal life and functions of the East, see Kwasi Konadu, *A View from the East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism (Uhuru na Ujamaa): A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1965-1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> Jitu K. Weusi, "The East Legacy," *Journal of Community Advocacy and Activism* 1 (1996): 18; "Uhuru Sasa School: Plans & Programs, 1970-1971," pamphlet, Box 48, Folder 1, Ewart Guinier Papers, Schomburg Center; Kasisi Jitu Weusi, "From Relevance To Excellence," *Black Books Bulletin*, Winter 1974, 20-22; "The East Mental Ministry Report," pamphlet, 1972, Box 18, Preston Wilcox Papers, Schomburg Center; Kasisi Jitu Weusi, "Pan Africa," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1977, B4.

<sup>17</sup> Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Robin Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).