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**Media, Revolution, and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party
An interview with Kiilu Nyasha
By Hans Bennett
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This is an edited interview, featuring excerpts from Nyasha's article: "Ruchell Cinque Magee and the August 7th Courthouse Slave Rebellion."

Hans Bennett: How did you join the BPP?

Kiilu Nyasha: I started running into Panthers when I worked for President Johnson's so-called "War on Poverty," at The Community Action Institute (CAI) in New Haven, CT. We were supposed to organize the community, and of course they didn't really mean it; but I was politically naive. So I took them literally at their word and plunged into organizing, going to various community meetings.

A young Panther named Belva, just a teenager and known as "sisterlove," was sent to New Haven from Oakland to organize a free breakfast program. A town hall meeting was organized to decide whether or not they could institute the breakfast program. I was employed at the teen center where they wanted to house the breakfast program. I wound up being the Breakfast Program Coordinator after being eliminated by CPI when they closed the auxiliary Community Action Institute, absorbing those they wanted to stay into the main body, CPI. Later on, I was recruited from the Chapter to work as office manager and secretary to the attorneys for Lonnie McLucas, Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale, including the late Charles Garry, Esq.

When I found myself jobless, I applied for welfare because having worked for Yale and the government, I didn't qualify for unemployment insurance. I had a 9 year-old son and rent for my apartment was \$80/month, but they would only give me \$25 a week. What was I supposed to do with that? So I joined the second chapter of the BPP in late 1969, created after the first chapter got locked up for murder charges, along with the Chairman, Bobby Seale -- basically recruited to organize around the Panther trials by Robert Webb [martyred] and Doug Miranda. At this time, I was still "Pat Gallyot", because I changed my name later in the 1970's.

HB: Tell us about the BPP.

KN: The BPP was initiated by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who were students at Merritt College in Oakland. They saw the needs of their community and began to address them with the Ten-Point Platform and community programs. They confronted police brutality by following the police around with law books and guns, because at the time, it was legal to carry arms openly. They witnessed arrests to make sure the police didn't go into their brutality mode. Eventually, there was a shoot-out between the police and the BPP when Huey's car was stopped, and an officer was shot and killed in self-defense. Huey himself was shot in the abdomen and the picture of him handcuffed in the hospital went around the world.

An incredible movement swept this country like wild-fire, because police abuses were a national epidemic. The BPP developed a 10-point platform demanding self-determination for our Black community, including land, bread, housing, clothing, education, justice and peace. We started free medical clinics, and in New Haven, the clinic was staffed by doctors and nurses from Yale. In Oakland, Dr. Tolbert Small initiated the sickle cell anemia awakening with education and free tests.

We propagated revolution and formed the original "rainbow coalition." We worked with many groups, including the Young Lords, the Young Patriot Party from Appalachia, the Peace and Freedom Party, SDS, the Red Guard, the Brown Berets, I Wor Kuen, and the American Indian Movement. History books have omitted the fact that Blacks were leading the revolutionary movement in this country. Other communities adapted our programs for themselves. We organized within our own separate communities, but we all came to the same rallies. So then you'd have this huge multicultural rally led by the BPP. It was also intergenerational. I was practically an elder at 30 because most Panthers were teenagers.

HB: What is the BPP's legacy?

KN: Once instituted, our free breakfast program was in high demand because kids were hungry. Subsequently, a free school lunch program was started in New Haven, and similar free food programs were instituted across the country.

The "Black is Beautiful" campaign elevated the mentality of Black people in terms of what we thought about ourselves. Don't forget, James Brown's song "I'm Black and I'm Proud" came on the heels of the BPP. Music and culture reflected the Movement. That legacy has endured.

The BPP ushered in a whole crew of Black politicians, but what did that do for Black people, especially poor Black people? For example, President Obama is a friend of capitalism, imperialism, and fascism. Fascism needs a new brown face to deal with the so-called Third World. Obama cannot and will not produce real change, like moving from capitalism to socialism, redistributing the wealth, abolishing the prison system per se, and changing domestic and foreign policies.

HB: How did the BPP fare against US government repression?

KN: We were defeated. They pulled every dirty trick in the book to wipe us out and succeeded. They organized fratricide and had us killing each other. They jailed and assassinated us. By 1969, 28 Panthers had already been murdered by the police. There was the blatant murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago in 1969.

President Richard Nixon and FBI Director J Edgar Hoover orchestrated COINTELPRO

and another program that was behind the walls called "NEWKILL." We were targeted and declared the most dangerous threat to the internal security of the US. This came out when the secret programs were revealed after files were stolen from the FBI office in Media, PA. Later, Senator Frank Church conducted hearings further documenting the repression.

HB: What impact did the BPP have on police brutality and prisons?

KN: We may have caused a temporary calm, but it actually got worse. For example, Panthers Harold Taylor and John Bowman (currently of the SF8) were chased down in Los Angeles by plain-clothes police and shot at. They shot back, were eventually arrested, had a capital trial, but were acquitted on grounds of self defense. However, today we're getting shot left and right. The incarceration rate is the highest in the world. President Clinton ushered in a prison boom that has our prison population up to 2.4 million today. Here in California there are 180,000 prisoners, with many more on probation and parole. We're living in a police state and have a cradle-to-prison policy for our youth. We have to regroup and develop new tactics and strategies that address today's conditions.

HB: What can we learn from the successes and failures of the BPP, so that we can be more effective today?

KN: Organizing worked! As in, door-to-door street organizing, on the ground, rolling up our sleeves and going right to the people, and helping them meet their own needs. People have gotten far away from that. Stop knocking on city hall's door! Why are we asking our enemies for help? Working within the system only works if you consider yourself an infiltrator. We have to draw the line and stop supporting it. Today, we should organize gardens to grow our own food.

Propaganda is a necessary tool and our job right now is to raise consciousness to educate to liberate. The BPP had regular political education classes. That needs to happen again. People need to get into small study groups and discuss politics.

Also, students aren't organizing on the campuses like they used to. I think it's partly because the lower class isn't on the campuses these days because nobody can afford it.

HB: What do you think of recent events in Latin America, where people are fighting US domination and local ruling class power?

KN: I'm inspired! I highly recommend the recent documentary film about Venezuela titled "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." The people's reversal of the attempted coup is such a wonderful demonstration of people's power and what an impact it can have. Watching it recharged my batteries. I was like "Oh my goodness!" It's very exciting, promising, and I hope we have sense enough to be in solidarity and support the struggles there and everywhere else oppressed people are fighting. How else is the US empire going to be defeated? The global economy is here to stay.

HB: This issue of global solidarity reminds me of Huey Newton's idea of "revolutionary intercommunalism," emphasizing that in today's age of transnational corporate power, the US working class' liberation is inherently tied to that of workers everywhere. Globalization is a popular topic today, but do you think Huey gets credit for talking about it back then?

KN: Huey's theory was brilliant, prophetic, and is a perfect solution in today's world.

Of course Huey has not been given proper credit and it's the same thing with Malcolm X. Now more than ever, oppressed people around the world need to unite against the common enemy that is transnational corporations. We can't let them divide us. We're in the throes of a death spiral right now, and if we don't hurry up and deal with climate change, for example, things will get horribly worse for ordinary people and we can kiss this planet good-bye, probably within this century.

HB: When did you start working in media?

KN: Because of my years of secretarial work, I had typing skills. At the time of Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins' trial in New Haven, on behalf of the Panther Defense Committee, we printed a tabloid and I co-wrote and typeset an article covering the story. I also wrote articles for the national BPP paper, and eventually learned how to put a newspaper together. After moving to San Francisco, I was working for a local Black newspaper called *The Sun Reporter*, but left in anger after they chopped up an article that I wrote about the uprising at NY State Prison in Attica that resulted in the massacre of some 39 prisoners and guards. Afterwards, in late 1971, a bunch of us had political education classes that met at my pad in the Fillmore, and we put together a tabloid called "By Any Means Necessary." In '72, I wrote and published another tabloid titled, "Niggahs of the World Unite."

Later, I lived in the Hunters Point neighborhood, and while practicing a very strenuous form of martial arts, my muscles started deteriorating. I wound up in the medical system for many years--a long, hairy story. Suffice it to say, I walked into the system in 1975 and rolled out in 1980, and have been in Chinatown ever since, living in a 12 story Housing Authority building that they said was the only place they could find that was wheelchair accessible.

HB: How does the mainstream media today compare to 40 years ago?

KN: It's much worse! I used to see BPP leaders Kathleen Cleaver and David Hilliard on TV. The movement used to get media attention. Now you can't get any media attention on prisoners. We can have a demonstration with 10,000 people, and they still don't cover it. You don't even have good journalists anymore.

HB: Why do you think that is?

KN: Look at all the journalists who've been fired for telling the truth. Not to mention all the journalists who have been murdered these past few years, particularly by the US in Iraq. It intimidates people and they need real courage to tell the truth today.

HB: How has the alternative media changed?

KN: It's not anywhere as bold. We had the BPP newspaper and all kinds of badass tabloids. Today they censor you. To me, with a few exceptions, the Black press and other alternative media have fallen down on the job.

HB: Your recent *Black Commentator* article titled "Black August 2008" focused on the legacy of the late prison author and BPP leader, George Jackson, who was assassinated by guards at San Quentin Prison on August 21, 1971.

KN: I initiated a correspondence with George in early 1971, and months later, got a one-hour visit in the holding cell of San Quentin. I've met no one before or since more dedicated to revolutionary change. George's book of prison letters, *Soledad Brother*, was a best seller, and his second book, *Blood In My Eye*, had just been finished at the time of his death, and was published posthumously.

George was one of the three "Soledad Brothers," whose story began on January 13, 1970 when a tower guard at Soledad State Prison shot and killed three Black captives on the yard, leaving them unattended to bleed to death: Cleveland Edwards, "Sweet Jugs" Miller, and W. L. Nolen, all active resisters in the Black Movement behind the walls. Others included George Jackson, Jeffrey Gaudin, Hugo L.A. Pinell, Steve Simmons, Howard Tole, and the late Warren Wells.

After the common verdict of "justifiable homicide" was returned and the killer guard exonerated at Soledad, another white-racist guard was beaten and thrown from a tier to his death in retaliation. Fleeta Drumgo, John Clutchette, and Jackson were charged with his murder, and became known as The Soledad Brothers. A campaign to free them was led by college professor Angela Davis, and George's brother Jonathan. The three were awaiting trial, with a mandatory death sentence if convicted, at the time of George's death.

HB: You wrote that we should honor Jackson's legacy by working to free two California prisoners: Hugo "Yogi Bear" Pinell and Ruchell "Cinque" Magee. Currently housed in Pelican Bay State Prison's notorious "Security Housing Unit," Pinell has been in continuous solitary confinement since at least 1971. On January 14, 2009, Pinell was denied parole for 15 years, a virtual re-sentencing.

KN: The book titled "The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison," by Min Yee, documents how Hugo Pinell was one of the original members of the Black Movement, led by George Jackson and others in Soledad Prison. At that time, it wasn't safe for Blacks to walk the yard. The collusion between the racist, KKK-type guards and white racist prison gangs was horrendous. These conditions were horrible.

Yogi was eventually transferred to San Quentin, and was there on August 21, 1971, when George was assassinated. That day, in what was described by prison officials as an escape attempt, George allegedly smuggled a gun into San Quentin in a wig. That feat was proven impossible, and evidence subsequently suggested a setup designed by prison officials to eliminate Jackson once and for all as they had tried numerous times. On that fateful day, three notoriously racist prison guards and two inmate turnkeys were also killed. According to an eye witness, when Jackson was shot while running on the yard, he got up instantly and dived in the direction of some bushes. He was subsequently murdered while lying on the ground wounded.

Six Black prisoners were charged with murder and assault. Hugo Pinell, Fleeta Drumgo, David Johnson, Luis Talamantez, Johnny Spain, and Willie Sundiata Tate became known as the "San Quentin Six." Johnny Spain was the only one convicted of murder. The others were either acquitted or convicted of assault. Hugo is the only one remaining in prison, and badly needs our support.

HB: Tell us about Ruchell Magee.

KN: I first met Ruchell in the holding cell of the Marin County courthouse in the Summer of 1971. I found him to be soft-spoken, warm and a gentleman in typically Southern tradition. We've been in correspondence pretty much ever since. I was then working for *The Sun Reporter*, and covering the pretrial hearings of Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee. By 1971, Ruchell was an astute jailhouse lawyer. He was responsible for the release and protection of a myriad of prisoners benefiting from his extensive knowledge of law, which he used to prepare writs, appeals and lawsuits for himself and many others behind the walls.

Ruchell was fighting charges of murder, conspiracy to murder, kidnap, and conspiracy to aid the escape of state prisoners. Although critically wounded on August 7, 1970, he was the sole survivor among the four brave Black men who conducted the courthouse slave rebellion, leaving him to be charged with everything they could throw at him. On August 7, 17-year old Jonathan Jackson raided the Marin Courtroom and tossed guns to prisoners William Christmas and James McClain, who in turn invited Ruchell to join them. Rue seized the hour spontaneously as they attempted to escape by taking a judge, assistant district attorney and three jurors as hostages in that audacious move to expose to the public the brutally racist prison conditions and free the Soledad Brothers.

McClain was on trial for assaulting a guard in the wake of Black prisoner Fred Billingsley's murder by prison officials in San Quentin in February, 1970. With only four months before a parole hearing, Magee had appeared in the courtroom to testify for McClain.

The four revolutionaries successfully commandeered the group to the waiting van and were about to pull out of the parking lot when Marin County Police and San Quentin guards opened fire. When the shooting stopped, Judge Harold Haley, Jackson, Christmas, and McClain lay dead; Magee was unconscious and seriously wounded as was the prosecutor. A juror suffered a minor injury.

Magee had already spent at least seven years studying law and deluging the courts with petitions and lawsuits to contest his own illegal conviction in two fraudulent trials. As he put it, the judicial system "used fraud to hide fraud" in his second case after the first conviction was overturned on an appeal based on a falsified transcript. His strategy, therefore, centered on proving that he was a slave, denied his constitutional rights and held involuntarily. Therefore, he had the legal right to escape slavery as established in the case of the African slave, Cinque, who had escaped the slave ship, *Amistad*, and won freedom in a Connecticut trial. Thus, Magee had to first prove he'd been illegally and unjustly incarcerated for over seven years. He also wanted the case moved to the Federal Courts and the right to represent himself.

Moreover, Magee wanted to conduct a trial that would bring to light the racist and brutal oppression of Black prisoners throughout the State. "My fight is to expose the entire system, judicial and prison system, a system of slavery. This will cause benefit not just to myself but to all those who at this time are being criminally oppressed or enslaved by this system."

On the other hand, Angela Davis, his co-defendant, charged with buying the guns used in the raid, conspiracy, etc., was innocent of any wrongdoing because the gun purchases were perfectly legal and she was not part of the original plan. Davis' lawyers wanted an expedient trial to prove her innocence on trumped up charges. This conflict in strategy resulted in the trials being separated. Davis was acquitted of all charges and released in June of 1972.

Ruchell fought on alone, losing much of the support attending the Davis trial. After dismissing five attorneys and five judges, he won the right to defend himself. The murder charges had been dropped, and Magee faced two kidnap charges. He was ultimately convicted of PC 207, simple kidnap, but the more serious charge of PC 209, kidnap for purposes of extortion, resulted in a disputed verdict. According to one of the juror's sworn affidavit, the jury voted for acquittal on the PC 209 and Magee continues to this day to challenge the denial and cover-up of that acquittal.

Ruchell is currently on the mainline of Corcoran State Prison doing his 46th year locked up in California gulags - many of those years spent in solitary confinement under tortuous conditions! In spite of having committed no physical assaults or murders. Is that not political?

HB: Let's conclude with a quote from George Jackson.

KN: He wrote in *Blood In My Eye*: "Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are dying who could be saved, that generations more will live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution."

(Note: Special thanks to Ed Mertex for help transcribing the interview.)


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Hans Bennett is an independent multi-media journalist (www.insubordination.blogspot.com) and co-founder of Journalists for Mumia Abu-Jamal (www.abu-jamal-news.com). Special thanks to Ed Mertex for help transcribing the interview. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Bennett.

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