

Creativity and Purpose: The NIA Cultural Organization and Black Power in San Diego,
1967-1977

The National Involvement Association, also known as the Nia Cultural Organization, was formed in 1970 in San Diego, California. The longest lasting Black Power organization in San Diego, Nia succeeded the San Diego chapter of the Us Organization which was founded in early 1967. Those who have studied the history of the Black Power movement are familiar with the shooting between the Black Panther Party and the Us Organization at UCLA. On January 17, 1969, an argument between members of the Us Organization and the Black Panther Party led to the shooting deaths of John Huggins and Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter. Many theories exist, however, what remains certain is that the shooting was the culmination of a year of increased tensions between cultural nationalists and revolutionary nationalists in Southern California that was heavily influenced, and manipulated, by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies in direct or ancillary relationship with the FBI’s counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO). Despite the cooperative relationship many Us advocates and BPP members maintained in San Diego, by the spring of 1969, this violence had made it to San Diego where two Panthers lost their lives and there were multiple other shootings and altercations. Nia emerged in direct response to this tumultuous moment. As the former head of the San Diego Us chapter and Nia Vernon Sukumu remembered, the crisis of 1969 diverted all organizational resources to self-defensive measures and the cultural, educational, and political programming was brought to a screeching halt. What is more, hysteria and paranoia amongst many principal members formed wedges in the leadership. Newark, New Jersey became a refuge for many Us Organization members and former members where they assisted Amiri Baraka’s Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) in its campaign to get Ken Gibson elected the city’s first Black mayor. And it is in Newark where San Diego Us members helped to organize the 1970 Congress of African

People convention in Atlanta, Georgia—the largest of modern Black Power conferences. As the leadership of San Diego’s Us Chapter formed in closer alignment with Baraka’s Kawaida formation, Nia was created. The formation of Nia sustained San Diego’s unique Black Power project. Focusing on the promotion of African-centered education, cultural work, African liberation support, and equal employment opportunities, Nia continued built on the a decade of activism began by San Diego’s chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Afro-American Association (AAA). In the nation’s largest bordertown, the relational and *polycultural* practices of Nia understood the interdependence of the liberation of Black and Brown people.

Far too often, San Diego’s Us Organization chapter has been understood simply as the progeny of the Los Angeles-based Kawaida formation. In fact, the Black Power movement in San Diego began with two organizations, the Afro-American Association and the San Diego Black Conference. Influenced by the teachings of Malcolm X and African independence struggles, the AAA was formed at UC Berkeley’s Boalt Hall law school in 1961 but soon moved off-campus to throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and to San Diego, where one of its founders attorney Bob Ward lived. Never a large organization the AAA had an immense impact on consciousness raising in San Diego with their support for the campaign against employment discrimination led by the local CORE chapter and with their fierce promotion of Black history in public schools, the community and homes. Early members of the AAA were Harold Brown, also of CORE, the elder Joshua Von Wolfolk, and the young Walter Kimble, later known as Walter Kudumu. In 1966, San Diego’s first official Black Power organization, the Black Conference was formed. With links to the Black Congress of Los Angeles, the Black Conference served as an umbrella organization for the multiple Black groups in San Diego such as CORE, the Urban

League, and the NAACP. The Black Conference also attracted a new generation of activist, many who had been galvanized in the wake of the 1965 Watts Rebellion, which unbeknownst to many had reached San Diego.

Much like the Afro-American Association, the Black Conference focused on consciousness raising, holding public rallies at Mountain View Park in Southeast San Diego on Sunday afternoons and organized local Black Power conferences at Southcrest Park. The young members of the Black Conference eventually formed the organizations' militant wing, the Community Patrol Against Police Brutality. It was in 1967 that these young members joined forces with the Us Organization, as they had become very impressed by the intelligence of its leader Maulana Karenga and impressive discipline of its members, whom they referred to as advocates. The Black Conference and the Us Organization and members throughout the local Black Student Councils at the San Diego colleges. At UCSD, two members who were affiliated with the Black Conference and Us Organization at that time were Ed Spriggs, then known as Dadisi, and even Angela Davis, then known as Tamu. The San Diego Us Organization ran its own freedom school, the School of Afroamerican Culture, operated an antipoverty youth center, the Teen Post One, helped form the Black Studies program at SDSU, organized local Black Youth Conferences, promoted African and African American culture, literature, music, and dance, crafted the nation's largest Malcolm X birthday celebration, Kuzaliwa, and lobbied for the election of San Diego's first Black city councilman Leon Williams. With this rich history, San Diego Us members were well-equipped for their organizational transformation.

In alignment with Newark, the San Diego chapter, and other former advocates from Los Angeles, became affiliates of the newly formed Congress of African People (CAP) as they formed Nia and Vernon Sukumu, a national organizing member of CAP was its head. Drawing

much of its international influence from Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's political, economic, and cultural policy of *Ujamaa*, CAP and its local branches continued to spread an increasingly materialist practice of African-centered culture and worked towards gaining power in education, economics, and electoral politics. In San Diego, Nia continued the programming of the Us chapter and created the Kuumba Foundation in connection with the federal antipoverty Model Cities program. Archival evidence of Nia and the Kuumba Foundation is housed here in the Mandeville Special Collections library in the Thurgood Marshall provost records. The Kuumba Foundation operated two distinct programs, the Southeast Communications Complex and the Institute of Afroamerican Studies. In accordance with their belief in *programmatically influence*, the belief that the small organizations can effect change by forming united fronts and taking leadership of critical institutional roles—in this case antipoverty programming.

The Southeast Communications Complex employed 25 people: 10 employees and 15 interns who received training in television, radio, and print media. The interns were both Mexican American and African American. Already from the same neighborhood, the common working conditions became a necessary engine for the solidarity politics that emanated from Kuumba. The interns received an hourly wage of \$2.50 an hour which was well above the minimum wage of \$1.65. Kuumba interns produced a weekly newspaper *Kuumba Times* that had a circulation of 5,000 copies. In production of the interns learned all aspects of journalism including: photography, dark room production, printing and plate-making, reporting, composition, editing and layout. With access to the KPBS station, Kuumba interns operated a radio show that aired 22 hours of weekend programming on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. *Kuumba Times* broadcasted jazz music, conducted interviews of prominent African American and Chicano figures (including Cesar Chavez), and broadcasted historical segments which

highlighted the impact of African Americans such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to American history. Simulating the broadcasting of African stations on the continent, the radio station and the newspaper were good examples of the internationalist politics Kuumba members developed.¹

Only one copy of *Kuumba Times* has been archived, the 25 February 1972 edition, but many surely remain in private collections. The articles printed in *Kuumba Times* represent a wide array of advanced, and at times competing, Black and Chicano radical thought. The images of a Chicano male stenciled in brown ink and an African American male stenciled in black ink on the cover of *Kuumba Times* were an implication of Kuumba's emphasis on relational politics and polyculturalism. It was also symbolic of the paradoxes of the Third World Solidarity between Black and Brown radicals, the cover of *Kuumba Times* represented the liberation of people of color as a masculine struggle. Yet, women in the Kuumba Foundation such as the *Kuumba Times* editorial assistant Rocsan Clark challenged the hegemonic notions of gender that permeated American society in the early 1970s. The articles in this edition of *Kuumba Times* gave a window into the political vision of Nia and the Kuumba interns. A letter to the editor from a 19 year-old African American seaman on the USS Shasta, expressed his support for Nia and evinces the impact Black Power had on the growing Save Our Ships antiwar movement amongst Black sailors and marines. John Aminifu published an article on a Ku Klux Klan cross-burning in the front of a home in Logan Heights, signaling a shared issue between Black and Brown San Diegans. A Chicano student Michael Torres, published an article on a radical prison reform project in Washington State, and the weekly Awareness Message in this issue raised awareness on the Zimbabwean independence struggle in Southern Africa. The entries in

¹ Joe Stone, "Kuumba Calling—For Opportunity," *San Diego Union*, 2/28/72, B1 and B3.

Kuumba Times also reflected the limited view of male radicals as a poem “Black Woman” praised the beauty of African women but rendered them politically stagnant. As well, an African American medical journal article on the warnings of birth control was translated to Spanish by Kuumba intern Jesus Rodriguez and reprinted in *Kuumba Times*. Nonetheless, the cultural criticism of Clark in *Kuumba Times* and the labor, political, and educational organizing of women in Nia such as Fahari Jeffers, Tiamoya Sukumu, Maisha Kudumu, and Salimu Moore was central to the functioning of Nia and the Kuumba Foundation. Though far from perfect, the radical ideas on the role of African women in revolutionary struggles that came out of Guinea, Tanzania, and Southern Africa, influenced the progressive shifts in gender relations.

The Institute of Afroamerican Studies was established to “eliminate the ‘brain-drainage’ in the Southeast community” by involving “students in the everyday community affairs” and exposing them to a variety of happenings in Southeast San Diego, Walter Kudumu argued. Despite the growth in popular and expansion in middle class residential housing, no institutions of higher education served Southeast San Diego. The IAS developed and facilitated internship programs that placed college students from Southeast San Diego in an effort to give them the skills in business management, education leadership, and youth program management. Students received training in those fields by three different venues. First, they attended accredited courses in public administration, social welfare, and marketing and research design in collaboration with the extension programs at UCSD and SDSU; the IAS even organized a master’s degree program in Urban Studies through Pepperdine University. IAS students worked on an antidrug hotline, assisted in instruction at the School for Afroamerican Culture, operated a reading project at a local elementary school, and provided counseling for the Ujima Program, a college prep project. The most ambitious proposal of the IAS was their attempt to create an independent degree-

granting institution in Southeast San Diego. The school never fully manifested however, Maisha and Walter Kudumu dedicated their life's work to education reform. They established the Center for Parent Involvement in Education (CPIE) and played an important role in the creation of the Educational Cultural Complex, the San Diego Community College satellite in the old Model Cities are on Ocean View Boulevard.

Nineteen-seventy-two was arguably the apex of the Congress of African People. That year the Second biannual meeting was held in San Diego during Labor Day Weekend, the National Black Political Convention was held in Gary, Indiana, and CAP played a pivotal role in organizing the Africa Liberation Day celebration. Yet, locally and nationally, the relationship between CAP and the political establishment fractured and by 1973 many of the CAP programs from Newark to San Diego were in jeopardy. CFUN's relationship with Gibson eroded and their radical urban renewal plans collapsed. That year in San Diego, the Kuumba Foundation came under an onslaught of accusations of misappropriated funds that were eventually proven to be false. In San Diego and nationally, it was clear that the power structure had sought to distance itself from the Black radical organizations as the already conservative political economy took a sharp right turn. The final moment of crisis came in the spring of 1974 when the decision was made by select members of the CAP leadership to abandon the African socialist and Kwaiaida orientation and embrace Marxist Leninism. Despite the general praise for this move by a multitude of contemporary scholars and activists, this hasty decision left many in CAP's membership confused and others extremely upset with some of the harshest criticism coming from the famed Black nationalist historian John Henrik Clarke. Sukumu addressed much more bewilderment and uncertainty on how he would return to a sundry collective of activists, educators, and social workers and inform them that they were all Marxist-Leninists. Nia left the

Congress of African People and Sukumu took a well-needed vacation; returning to his home in Louisiana.

It was the cultural work of Nia that sustained its radical vision for political and economic change. Nia continued to promote Afroamerican dance, song, art, and literature. They introduced San Diego to the South African boot dance, the predecessor to African American stepping and continued to organize the Malcolm X Day celebrations which became conjoined with the African Liberation Day festivals. What is more, with Nia under the leadership of Ken Msemaji and Sukumu now the head of the San Diego Black Federation, a successor of the Black Conference, Black Nationalists formed increasing bonds with Chicano activists such as Herman Baca of the Committee for Chicano Rights (CCR) and Cesar Chavez. In 1977, Baca, Chavez, Dennis Banks of AIM and Tom Hayden were members of the steering committee for that year's Kuzaliwa Festival. In the wake of the Soweto Massacre and amidst concerns over Zimbabwean liberation, the 1977 Kuzaliwa and African Liberation Day march brought African American and Latino activists. Mexican-descended men and women walked the streets of San Diego carrying UFW flags and holding signs that called for African liberation in Spanish. Black and Latino leaders were engaged in an effort to get San Diego to divest from South Africa and also the Rhodesian premier Ian Smith visited San Diego and received a warm welcome by Tom Metzger and other local white supremacists, a move the CCR, Nia and the Black Federation confronted. The following year, this steering committee came reconvened. This time, the focus of the march was worker rights. Far from a local retreat from internationalism, this represented what I call *solidarity-plus* as international struggles heightened local demands for liberation. In 1978, Nia began its final

transformation from the a Black cultural nationalist formation to the United Domestic Workers of America, a labor union. What is more, San Diego became the first major city to divest from South Africa. Between 1970 and 1978, Nia became the conduit that linked the labor struggles and antiapartheid struggles of the 1980s to the activism of the 1960s, lending credence to the notion of the Long Black Power Movement.