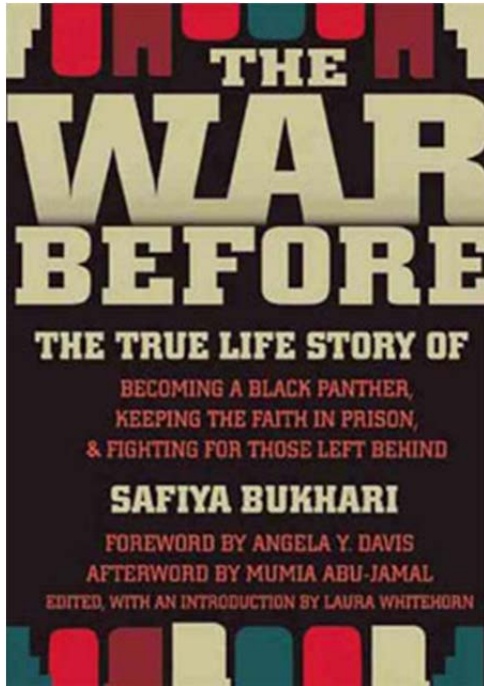


Black Panther's Posthumous Writings Cover Activism's Risks, Rewards

Wednesday 22 June 2011

by: Eleanor J. Bader, Truthout | Book Review

<http://www.truth-out.org/black-panthers-posthumous-writings-cover-activisms-risks-rewards/1308752269>



(Image: Feminist Press)

*"The War Before: The True Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind" - Safiya Bukhari
Feminist Press
New York, 2010*

Everyone wants to leave a legacy, whether through procreation or by creating a tangible testament to their existence. For some, it's art, music, storytelling or writing. For others it's the founding of an organization or the creation of a product.

For Black Panther Safiya Bukhari, who died in 2003, the bequest included an ongoing community organization, the Jericho Movement to free US political prisoners; a daughter and grandchild; and an astute collection of essays written to encourage the always-uphill battle to win freedom and equality for the world's disenfranchised and impoverished people.

In "The War Before," a collection of 22 edited commentaries, Bukhari gives readers a sense of what it was like to be a Panther and captures the exhilaration of establishing free breakfast

programs and health centers in low-income communities of color. She also explores Panther excesses, from rigid rules to over-the-top posturing and pontificating. At the same time, the anthology reminds would-be or burned-out activists of the sheer joy that comes from resisting civic wrongs.

It's an important, inspiring book.

That said, there are small lapses in which rhetoric dominates, and some topics - such as the split between East Coast and West Coast Panthers that was fomented by the US counterintelligence program, or Cointelpro - could have been more fully discussed.

Still, "The War Before" is a fascinating look at the making of an activist, and it captures the spirit of a tumultuous era in which thousands joined Bukhari in believing that a domestic insurrection was not just possible, but imminent.

Editor and former political prisoner Laura Whitehorn's introduction to the book gives readers a bit of the backstory. Among the tidbits presented are these: Bukhari - originally named Bernice Jones - was reared in the Bronx, one of ten children in a devoutly Christian, middle-class household. In college, she joined the Eta Alpha Mu sorority and, as part of her initiation, was required to travel to Harlem. There, she and several friends encountered a member of the Black Panther Party (BPP) selling newspapers, and learned of the feeding program that had been established. "The women went to the church where the breakfasts were offered, to see for themselves," Whitehorn reports. "Safiya liked what she saw and kept coming back. It was at that time that she began to notice how badly the community was treated by the police."

By early 1969, Jones/Bukhari was hooked. She dropped out of school and began working in the Harlem BPP office, immersing herself in the study of political theory and learning to do community organizing. She also got involved with comrade Robert Webb and gave birth to a daughter. "In those years," Whitehorn writes, "revolutionaries usually saw ourselves as too busy making revolution to engage in standard family life."

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As the year progressed, the demands on the cadre became more intense, and after BPP members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were murdered in December 1969 - killed by government agents hell-bent on destroying the BPP - many activists, including Bukhari, concluded that underground organizations were needed. Placing her daughter with her mother, Bukhari vanished. Whitehorn chronicles what happened next:

In December 1973, [Bukhari] was arrested and charged with plotting to break prisoners out of New York City jails.... The charges were soon dismissed. Then she was hit with a subpoena to testify before a grand jury that was preparing charges against other Black radicals. She couldn't bring herself to testify against her political associates. Safiya left her family and friends to continue her work underground. She stayed under for almost two years, until 1975, when she was arrested at the scene of a grocery store shooting in Norfolk, Virginia.

Bukhari was ultimately convicted and sentenced to 40 years. While imprisoned, her health began to deteriorate, but her requests for medical care were ignored. She somehow escaped from the prison in late 1976. Although she got the health care she needed while on the lam, she was eventually recaptured, and spent the next four years in solitary confinement. Finally, after eight years and eight months, she was granted parole and released in 1983.

Bukhari's attention subsequently turned to publicizing the existence of political prisoners here at home. She also worked to develop support networks for those locked inside. Her essays on this topic are searing.

So are her reflections on the BPP, written with the obvious benefit of hindsight. In "On The Question of Sexism Within the Black Panther Party," she places male chauvinism in a wider context. "The destruction of our culture, which started with the stealing of our language, religion, and children, was completed when we began to measure our own worth by how many women the Black man could pleasure at a time and how many children we could have," she writes. "Since Black men had been stripped of their manhood in every way but the ability to pleasure women and make babies, the sexual act soon became the standard by which the Black man measured his manhood. This is the root of the sexism that is plaguing our community."

This is not to say that Bukhari condoned sexist behavior. She didn't. Among the Party's Eight Points of Attention, she continues, was the injunction that men should not "take liberties with women." That this was part of the written mandate impressed Bukhari, and she notes that BPP women often worked "right alongside men, being assigned sections to organize just like the men, and receiving the same training as men." Nonetheless, she recognized that many male Panthers "brought their sexist attitudes into the organization." Worse, she was highly aware of the fact that they were rarely, if ever, ordered to change their ways.

While Bukhari did not consider herself a feminist, the presumption of male superiority rankled her, and she fought it at every turn. Then again, her standards for everyone - male and female - were extremely high, and when people failed to meet her expectations she sought to understand the psychological and material factors that made it difficult for them to do so.

In "We Too Are Veterans: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Black Panther Party," she lambastes the government repression that not only left many Panthers dead, but also led to psychic trauma in those who survived. "We had not just mouthed the words 'revolution in our lifetime,' but had believed them," she confesses. "We sincerely believed the Black Panther Party would lead us to victory." Instead, activists like Clark and Hampton, Timothy "Red" Adams, Fred Bennett, Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, John Huggins, Little Bobby Hutton, Twymon Myers, Sandra Pratt, Robert Webb, and Anthony "Kimu" White were murdered. This reality, in addition to "the constant shoot-outs, the infiltration and set-ups that left you leery of strangers or of anyone getting too close or acting too friendly," took a terrible toll on the BPP members left to bear witness, Bukhari concludes.

"As I looked over the list of PTSD symptoms, I recognized myself," she writes. "And the first step in resolving the problem is recognizing that it exists."

Indeed. To her credit, Bukhari refused to wallow in bitterness and chose to focus her energies on the self-help that comes from fighting back. As the founder of the Jericho Movement, a coalition of religious and secular groups working to win amnesty for US political prisoners, Bukhari worked tirelessly to plan rallies, protests and speaking tours before her untimely death.

Mumia Abu-Jamal's touching afterword posits Bukhari as someone who never lost sight of the big picture. She knew, he writes, that "it comes down to organizing. It comes down to the people."

The Bukhari that Abu-Jamal recalls knew that the movement was bigger than any one person, but still understood that one person could get the ball rolling and make an impact. Those who knew her, he adds, frequently commented that she was the hardest-working person they'd ever met.

"The War Before" will remind Bukhari's friends and family of what the planet lost when Safiya died eight years ago at age 53. Likewise, it is sure to stir those who are reading her words for the first time.

Safiya Bukhari, presente.

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