



**AFRICA, OUR MORAL IDEAL:
RADICAL REASONING ABOUT OURSELVES AND OUR CULTURE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ON THIS THE 54TH ANNIVERSARY OF OUR coming into being, September 7, 1965, as the organization Us, we look back on the long, difficult, dangerous and demanding road we've travelled. It is a journey of liberation in thought and practice that began with radical reasoning about ourselves and our culture. It involved rightfully raising *Africa as our moral ideal*, setting ourselves at the center of our own history and deciding that there was no people or history more sacred or holy than our own and no culture more ancient or meaningful and instructive to us. And we pay reverent and rightful honor to those who walked, worked and struggled before us, the way-openers and way-makers, the lifters up of the light that lasts, our revered and honored ancestors on whose tall shoulders we stand and in whose long and sheltering shadows we walk.

For it is on their tall shoulders we stand and look back into our past and forward into our future, extracting and applying the instructive lessons of their legacy. And it is in their long and sheltering shadows that we continue the legacy they left in the life-affirming and liberating ways we live our lives, do our work, and wage our struggle for liberation and good in the world. Indeed, as Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune taught us, our obligation is and must be a "ceaseless striving" and struggle for the Good for ourselves, others and the world.

From the beginning, our self-understanding and self-assertion in the world, as advocates of the organization Us, have been directed toward two over-arching and interrelated goals in our liberation struggle as a people. And these goals are *to be ourselves* and *to free ourselves*, as Black people, African people. At the outset we knew then, as we know now, that being ourselves and freeing ourselves are logically, practically and inseparably linked. For we can't free ourselves as Black people, unless we be ourselves as Black people. And we can't *fully be ourselves* until we free ourselves. For unfree, we can only be partly ourselves and can only come into the fullness of

ourselves when we are *fully free*. To be ourselves means first of all to be self-consciously rooted in our own culture, our unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world, i.e., African.

We defined ourselves as cultural nationalists, a much misunderstood and misrepresented term, a still standing target of the vicious propaganda wars waged by not only our opponents, but also the enemies of the idea and practice of Black self-determination. But what exactly is this idea and practice which provokes opponents and enemies to speak and publish the litany of lies about it or try to deny its existence and achievement by omitting, denying and distorting it?

As revolutionaries, we determined that Black liberation is coming from Black people or it won't come at all. This requires that Black people self-consciously see themselves as a people, as Malcolm said, as "a nation within a nation," a nation within a multicultural nation called America. We defined a nation also as a *national community*, a community with a common history, a common culture, common life conditions, and a common self-conception rooted in that history and culture and in those life conditions. And clearly the defining factors of those life conditions were and are that we are a people in both *oppression* and *resistance*, striving and struggling for the good.

We defined ourselves as nationalists, those who love their people, their nation, and are committed to their liberation and an expanded life of freedom and flourishing. Thus, our nationalism is distinct from the nationalism of our oppressor, and the White nationalism of the White supremacist. Theirs is a nationalism of hate and hegemony, of the will to dominate, deprive and degrade others who are different. Therefore, their White nationalism is a White racist *oppressor nationalism*, in a word, *White supremacy* with another name. However, our Black, African American or African nationalism is a *liberational nationalism*, one focused, not on hate, hegemony

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or racial supremacy over others, but on the love and liberation of our people, an oppressed people, struggling mightily to free themselves and be themselves in liberating and life-enhancing ways. Thus, in talking about *nationalisms*, these distinctions are intellectually and morally mandatory.

Secondly, we define ourselves as cultural nationalists to stress the indispensability of cultural struggle in the liberation struggle. As revolutionaries, we were and are convinced that without a *culture of resistance*, we cannot win or wage a revolutionary struggle for liberation. Again, Malcolm said it: “*culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle*” and we must wage a cultural revolution to decisively “break the bonds of white supremacy,” both psychologically and politically. Culture, he and we taught, following him, was key to our liberation, both in terms of how we saw ourselves and how we saw and met the demands and dimensions of our struggle.

For we could not free ourselves if we could not culturally be ourselves, could not imagine being Black beyond our indicted color and degraded condition in an oppressive White racist context. We had to develop the will to resist, to be beautiful in our own terms and to break the bonds of White supremacy. And we had to boldly criticize and reject our oppression, not only with words, but also by the self-consciously culturally grounded, liberated and liberating ways we lived our lives, did our work and waged our struggle.

But since ideas don't drop from the sky, grow from the ground or float in from the sea, where would we get those ideas? We answered that we would get them from our own culture, from the views, values and practices that represent and reflect the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. We would draw from and build on continental and diasporan culture, ancient and modern. And in the midst of

struggle, Frantz Fanon told us, we would gain new insights and our culture would develop along varied liberational lines.

It is in this context of thought and practice, waging ideological and practical struggle that we embraced and advanced the idea of Africa as our moral ideal. By *moral ideal*, we mean a composite of the highest standards of African peoples, including concepts of the Transcendent, right and wrong, good and evil, relational obligations, and of the good society and good world. We started with the ancient and worked our way to the modern best ideas and practices, measuring each according to our best social and moral reasoning. We call this, basing everything we do on *tradition* and *reason*.

This idea of Africa as our moral ideal was then and remains now a radical, even revolutionary idea. For it goes against the fundamental assumptions of a racistly defined reality in which whiteness in every area of life is the highest standard. Moreover, it rejects all White or any other myths of racial, religious or cultural claims of superiority, exclusive chosenness or election, “manifest destiny,” etc. And it argues defiantly and decisively that there is no people more sacred or chosen, no history more holy and worthy of being told or taught, and no culture more ancient or insightful and instructive for us than our own.

In our philosophy of *Kawaida*, we are the fundamental source and center of our own history, our own culture and struggle. And we affirm every day in countless ways the sacredness, sociality, agency and capacity of our people here and everywhere to be themselves, free themselves and to build the good and caring community, and to contribute meaningfully, with similarly situated and similarly committed people, to building a just society and life-respecting world.

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