



**AGAIN, RECLAIMING THE WATTS REVOLT:  
REAFFIRMING OUR RIGHT TO REBEL AND RESIST**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**N THIS MONTH CALLED BLACK AUGUST AND dedicated to commemoration and celebration of our history and ongoing practice of resistance, we raise up in reflective remembrance the Watts Revolt, August 11-17, 1965, in this the year of its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And at the heart of this and every commemoration of a milestone and transformative marker in our sacred struggle, is a reaffirmation of the moral imperative to struggle for good in the world and against the evil that seeks to limit, deny, deform, end and erase it. The moral imperative of struggle for the good is not only central in the ethical teachings of our honored ancestors, but also a fundamental feature of who we are and how we came into being, prevailed and continue to progress. Indeed, we are a people whose formation and future are rooted and realized in this sacred struggle for a shared and inclusive good in the world.

Kawaida philosophy, the philosophy that undergirds and informs the *Nguzo Saba* and *Kwanzaa*, defines and understands this as a liberating and uplifting struggle, a struggle to be ourselves, free ourselves, sustain ourselves, develop ourselves and come into the fullness of ourselves. Moreover, it is a struggle of constant revolt and resistance against unfreedom, injustice and oppression in its many vicious, seductive and suppressive forms. And it is to constantly expand the realm of freedom and other dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving goods in the interest of African and human good and the well-being of the world.

As we remember and reclaim the Watts Revolt as a major historical moment and marker in the Black Freedom Struggle, our remembrance is of necessity a reflective remembrance, a thoughtful effort to understand and reclaim our history of resistance in the most insightful, instructive and expansive

ways. Our reclaiming of this moment and milestone is part of the ongoing practice of regaining control of our own sacred narrative, Black history, speak its special cultural truth and use its best views, values and practices to inform and undergird the way we live our lives, do our work and wage our struggles. And we must also reaffirm our natural and inalienable right to rebel and resist evil, injustice and oppression on every level of life.

Indeed, as Haji Malcolm and our other righteous leaders and teachers taught and teach, that natural law and international law supports the position that it is not only legally right but also morally imperative to resist slavocratic, colonial, racist, apartheid, occupying and other oppressive regimes which deny and violate our human rights. And the Watts Revolt and all our other revolts and forms of resistance remind us of this right and responsibility to defend our human rights and humanity and to radically alter or abolish such anti-human and oppressive regimes. Here, I want to reaffirm the Kawaida definition of resistance which is opposition to the oppressor and oppression, affirmation of ourselves and the good and active aspiration for a new world of shared and inclusive good, conceived and achieved in the fire and furnace of struggle.

The Watts Revolt was a defining moment and struggle for us as a people and for Us as an organization. It provided Us with conditions supportive of our organizational formation and the proposal and pursuit of our organizational initiatives. It was in the context of its afterlife, conducive to radical and revolutionary conversations and activism, supportive, as we say in Us, of initiatives of education, mobilization, organization and confrontation, critical to transformation. Moreover, several of our founding and early members participated directly in the revolt,

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others supported the rebels and all of us became deeply involved in this transformative moment and the emerging Black Power phase of the Black Freedom Struggle that would usher in a new chapter in our liberation struggle. So, we are deeply involved and invested in honoring its legacy by continuing the struggle, keeping the faith and holding the line while pushing ever forward.

If we are to rightfully and usefully appreciate and honor the Watts Revolt and our history of revolt on the way to this country, upon arrival in it and ever since, we must define it correctly as an act of rebellion, not a riot which is a mob action of momentary or even extended emotional outburst without political motive. For the Revolt was an act of rebellion against the evil and injustice of police violence, merchant exploitation and ongoing racist oppression, undergirded by the overarching ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense, which became the defining aims of the emerging Black Power Movement in the overall Black Freedom Struggle.

Also, we must always place the Revolt squarely in the context of our history, not pose it as an isolated and unconnected event. Rather it must be understood and engaged as another ever-unfolding example of the presence and persistence of rebellion and resistance against oppression by our people from our first contact with the colonialists, imperialists and enslavers. Here, Nana Haji Malcolm's teaching that "Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research" is clearly relevant. And it links to the Kawaida teaching that "This is our duty: to know our past and honor it; to engage our present and improve it; and to imagine a whole new future and forge it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways".

Moreover, to rightfully understand and appreciate the Watts Revolt, it must be seen as an opener of critical paths and important

space for several interrelated demands and gains. These included: altered police practices; our increased on-the-street monitoring of police through the Community Alert Patrol; *pro bono* lawyers in the community and courts against police violence and in the defense of our people; development of expanded employment and economic initiatives; increased youth programs; and an extensive thrust of organizing and institution-building, yielding new organizations and institutions such as the African American Cultural Center (Us), the Black Congress, the Brotherhood Crusade, Kedren Community Mental Health Center, Kwanzaa and the Nguzo Saba, Mafundi Institute, SLANT, Ujima Village, Watts Happening Coffee House, the Watts Summer Festival, the Watts Health Foundation, and King/Drew Hospital and Medical School,

But as Nana Frantz Fanon, Nana Malcolm X and Nana Martin Luther King noted, the struggle for freedom and justice is a benefit and good in itself. For it is liberating and uplifting in a way that Nana Fanon says can only come from self-conscious struggle to end conditions of oppression. Dr. King asserts that "the greatest victory of this period" was Black peoples internal transformation. For "we armed ourselves with dignity and self-respect" and "we straightened our backs up", and refused to let others ride us. And Haji Malcolm taught that the assertion of agency in struggle and coming into consciousness by Black people created a new sense of self which would indeed "turn them around. . . change their minds, put a board in their back, . . . (and) make them throw their shoulders back and stand upright like men (and women)..." in the world.

Finally, a critical and continuing lesson and legacy from the Watts Revolt and our long history of revolt and resistance is the understanding of the vital need and centrality of righteous and relentless struggle and the

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unbreakable will to wage that struggle until victory is won. It is an understanding that reminds us that there is no easy walk or way to freedom, that as Nana Harriet Tubman taught us, “freedom ain’t bought with dust”, that it doesn’t come cheap or free, and is only achieved with costs and casualties, and through suffering and sacrifice. And in this long, difficult, dangerous and demanding struggle, Nana Amilcar Cabral teaches us, we

must “mask no difficulties, tell no lies, and claim no easy victories.”

AND THIS TOO, NANA MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE teaches us we must see ourselves in expansive ways concerned with the well-being of the world and all in it and we must actively embrace the moral imperative that “Our task is to remake the world. It is nothing more than this”.▲

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