



**THE COMPELLING NEED AND NOTION OF FREEDOM:
RETRIEVING OUR EXPANSIVE CONCEPT OF STRUGGLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE CELEBRATE EACH YEAR OUR STRIVINGS and struggles through history, the Black Freedom Movement is always a central focus. But we may not call it by its rightful name, because it has been renamed by the established order as the Civil Rights Movement and this has implications for us in terms of self-determination and how we define our goals, what we count as victory, and the lessons and spirit of life and struggle we learn and absorb from this world historical struggle. Our urgent and constant call was “Freedom Now!” and even now, it is no less necessary.

It seemed so clear to us in the midst of the historical struggle for Black freedom, that at the heart and center of all our efforts was the compelling need and notion of freedom. Even when we listed the key conceptual elements of the Black Freedom Movement, we placed freedom first. Yes, we wanted freedom, justice and equality and later added power, but freedom, everyone knew, was our most urgent and ultimate aim. And civil rights and the legislative initiatives to concede and protect them were only a part of the larger struggle for freedom.

It is Min. Malcolm who reminded us continually that what we were really fighting for was human rights, not rights to be given and taken by governments, but rights we have just by being human. And the rights to life and freedom are the first of these and the two are inseparably linked. As Min. Malcolm states, “Freedom is essential to life, itself. Freedom is essential to the development of the human being.” Indeed, he argued “If we don’t have freedom, we can never have justice and equality. Only after we have freedom do justice and equality become a reality.”

Moreover, the freedom we fought for was for our people, Black people, first and foremost. We could, if we wished to put our White allies and enemies at ease, tell them, as Rev. King did, that this freedom we seek was for them also, trapped and trussed up in the tragedy of their racial hatreds, fears and illusions of superiority,

of saving the world from itself, and of innocence of the awful and oppressive things they’ve done and do to others. But others of us wanted to give no aid and comfort to the enemy-oppressor, no sense of security to them in their evil and injustice, and no reassurance against recurring revolt, let alone ultimate revolution.

Surely, like other liberation struggles, our assumption was that our victory, as Frantz Fanon argued, would benefit not only us and U.S. society, but also the whole world, transforming the U.S. from a citadel of oppression and imperialist and colonial aggressions into a force for good and development in the world. And we assumed we would play a vanguard role in this radical transformation. Indeed, we said, “We are a key people in a key country, and our liberation will not only free us and this country from the grotesque grasp of racism and capitalism, but bring the whole of humanity closer to full and final liberation.”

But now, the established order, with media and academy, has taken it upon itself to redefine our history and our struggle and rename the Black Freedom Movement the Civil Rights Movement. In doing this, there are several results, all negative to our interests. First, to transform the Black Freedom Movement into the Civil Rights Movement is an arrogant attempt to appropriate our right to define ourselves and speak for ourselves, in a word, our right to self-determination. Moreover, to take away the Movement’s defining identity as a Black and freedom movement is to erase its essential goal and fail to give due recognition to the people that suffered the savagery of unfreedom and waged the essential struggle to end it. Indeed, the struggle or Movement was not an anonymous struggle nor a general struggle of various peoples equally oppressed. On the contrary, it was a life-and-death struggle of Black people to free themselves and be themselves without racist restraint, penalty, persecution and oppression.

Yes, we had allies, among whom were Whites. But it was White society we were strug-

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gling against to obtain our freedom. Indeed, the system of White supremacy and racism was supported by the majority of Whites. And even before Trump, no serious and truthful observer could claim White Americans' willingness to yield in any meaningful or radical way their monopoly on wealth, power and status in race and class terms. And it is therefore dishonest and disregarding of our history and struggle to pretend they were equally burdened by oppression, similarly killed, wounded or imprisoned or made similar sacrifices as a whole.

Also, such renaming redefines the focus and narrows the concept of our interests in our historical and current struggle, an unfinished and ongoing one. Our concept of struggle was an expansive one, freedom in its fullest form. We sought an inclusive freedom: freedom from domination, deprivation and degradation; and freedom to be ourselves; to realize our potential; to live good and meaningful lives; and come into the fullness of ourselves. And this required and continues to require a radical reconstruction of society in ways a simple civil rights agenda could not yield and in ways still open and urgent before us.

We understood ourselves as part of the rising tide of the liberation struggles enveloping the world then. And we reached out to make alliances and to stand in solidarity with other oppressed and struggling peoples of the world. Here again the name, Civil Rights Movement, does not speak to this important aspect of the Black Freedom Movement. For it focused on winning rights granted by the state and stressed the local and national, not international linkage and common ground global issues and initiatives which are and must remain a vital part of our struggle.

Also, in this renaming, the Civil Rights phase (1955-1965) and the Black Power phase (1965-1975) of the Black Freedom Movement are collapsed into one phase, i.e., the Civil

Rights phase. Given this, the Black Power Movement is erased and Malcolm X, the symbol and fundamental reference for Black Power, is called a civil rights leader, even though he criticized focus on civil rights and called for a focus on human rights and international consciousness, linkage and initiatives, especially pan-African, Islamic and Third World ones.

Even before the Black Power period, the Nation of Islam and Min. Malcolm X and other Black nationalists are a significant part of the discourse and initiatives of the Black Freedom Movement, advocating self-determination, political independence, cultural revolution, self-defense, independent institution-building, alternative religious projects, return to Africa, etc. These discourses and initiatives are embraced, continued, built on and expanded providing a rich variety of thought and practice concerning roads to Black freedom. Thus, collapsing the two phases into one, i.e., Civil Rights, hides the Black Power phase, a vital part of the Black Freedom Movement and the insights and lessons in life and struggle which it advocated, advanced and left as a legacy worthy of the most considered study.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE WHO WOULD erase whole periods from our history, try to rename Black History Month, Black Heritage Month, and disregard our engagement of our history as a living tradition of striving and struggle? For history, indeed, is a striving and struggle through time for human excellence and achievement, in a word, for us, an ongoing striving and struggle to free ourselves, be ourselves and flourish and make our own unique contribution to human good and the well-being of the world. And no amount of redefinitions of reality by the established order should be allowed to undermine this essential understanding and the unbreakable will to constantly strive and struggle that this understanding undergirds, informs and compels.▲

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, *The Message and Meaning of Kwanzaa: Bringing Good Into the World* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.