



CULTURAL GROUNDING, UNBUDGING BLACKNESS AND STEADFASTNESS IN STRUGGLE

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS SEPTEMBER 7th marks the 51st Anniversary of the organization Us, born in the struggle, nurtured in the storm and sustained through unyielding dedication, discipline, sacrifice and service. At this time of remembrance, reflection and recommitment, I recovered an article I wrote a decade ago which speaks to our work, service, struggle and institution-building over this half-century. It follows below, with minor additions, and represents a continuing commitment and consistency that speaks for itself. It also points a way forward for those who seek, as we do, to know our past and honor it; to engage the present and improve it; and to imagine a whole new future and forge it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

It is no easy and everyday achievement to endure, develop and remain productive for 51 years, especially as an organization which continues to put African interests first in spite of changing times and constantly shifting attitudes and allegiances. We, as a people, are given so many easily assembled “reasons” to reject our Blackness and to turn to others for answers, models and meaning. There is, then, something to be said about and to be learned from the Organization Us which has endured and developed for 51 years, overcome government suppression and disinformation, relentless political opposition, continued character assassination, and other obstacles, and yet has not been defeated, dispirited or diverted from its original commitment to Black liberation, cultural revolution, constant struggle and excellence on every level.

In spite of these challenges and White preference and promotion of only one Black radical organization in the 60’s and attempts to discredit or dismiss all others, Us has created its own space in the Movement and among the people, and played a unique and vanguard role in Black intellectual, creative and political culture since the 60’s. Emerging September 7, 1965, Us put forth a project of cultural revolution to recover the best of African culture—ancient and modern, to emulate its models of human excellence and

achievement, and put in practice its liberating and life-enhancing values. In this context *Kawaida* philosophy, *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba* were created and Us initiated its program of work, service, struggle and institutional building, which included its co-founding the Brotherhood Crusade, the Black Congress, Mafundi Institute, the Community Alert Patrol, and the Operational Unity Committee, and co-planning Kedren Community Health Center, the Watts Health Foundation, and the Ujima Housing project.

On the national level, Us played a vanguard role in virtually every national African-centered movement: Black Arts, Black Power, Black Studies, Black student unions, independent schools, rites of passage, Afrocentricity, ancient Egyptian studies, Black United Fronts, the Million Person Marches, reparations and the post-Ferguson resistance to police violence. Currently, Us continues to maintain several ongoing programs and institutions: the African American Cultural Center, Limbiko Tembo School of African American Culture, Rites of Passage programs, Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies, Mateka (Captive) support program, Senu Brotherhood and Senut Sisterhood Societies, Timbuktu Book Circle, International Coalition for Peace and Justice, Coalition in Solidarity with Haiti, and the Coalition for Equitable and Sustainable Development in Africa. In addition, Us participates in various organizations on the local and national level in progressive work and struggle and is a founding organization of the Black united front, the Black Community, Clergy and Labor Alliance (BCCLA).

Us’ uniqueness begins with its commitment to African culture, to the ongoing task of recovery and reconstruction from this culture the best of what it means to be African and human and using it to inform, enrich and expand our lives. We dared to dialog constantly with African culture, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental concerns facing African people and humankind. It has been the ac-

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cepted custom to turn to other cultures for such critical answers, but Us dared to ask Africa and discovered valuable and enduring answers.

A central part of Us' uniqueness and importance clearly lies in its role as the founding organization of Kwanzaa, celebrated by over 28 million persons throughout the world African community and which reaffirms us in our Africanness and binds us together in ways like no other institution or celebration. Moreover, at the heart of *Kwanzaa* is the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles, which are not only central to its practice, but also serve as philosophical grounding, a cultural anchor and a guide to daily living for millions of people and thousands of organizations representing a wide range of educational, political, social, economic, and cultural formations. And both *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba* are developed from and deeply rooted in the philosophy of *Kwaidia*, an ongoing synthesis of the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world. No other group or philosophy from the 60's has had such widespread programmatic and philosophical impact on African organizational, family and personal life.

Us also has had a unique and tremendous impact on spiritual and ethical discourse since the 60's beginning with its contribution to conversations in the development of Black Liberation Theology. Here Us insisted on a God in our own image and interests, the sacredness of our own history, the chosenness of our own people, the presence and priority of our own prophets and the anteriority, originality, richness and ongoing relevance of our own sacred texts. In this regard, Us translated and published the *Husia*, the sacred text of ancient Egypt and the *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings*, the sacred text of ancient Yorubaland and created an international discourse around ancient African ethics, reaffirm-

ing their value as a rich resource in addressing critical moral and social issues of our times.

Us' uniqueness lies also in its ability and determination to endure in spite of challenges that destroyed other less durable contemporary groups. Of all the challenges mentioned above, none was more difficult to deal with than the decline of the Movement and with it, the decline of the deep, defiant and unapologetic commitment to things Black which was so evident and essential in the 60's. Nevertheless, in the midst of those who turned their back on their Blackness, Us reaffirmed Marcus Garvey's call to put our people first and to work tirelessly to free and empower them.

In the Sixties, we had stood up seeing ourselves as descendants of Min. Malcolm X with an awesome obligation to wage the revolution he had conceived and called for. We thus saw ourselves as servants and soldiers of the people always on post and on point wherever called and needed. Indeed, our motto was/is "Anywhere we are Us is." We declared revolution the answer and ourselves the agents of this radical change. As *Simba Wachanga*—the Young Lions, we self-confidently declared, "we are the last revolutionaries in America. If we fail to leave a legacy of revolution for our children, we have failed our mission and should be dismissed as unimportant." Even older, the message retains its original meaning and urgency, and we remain ever grounded in our culture, unbudging in our Blackness and steadfast in our struggle to create a just, good and sustainable world and help rebuild the Movement to achieve this. For, as we say, if not this then what and if we don't do it who will?

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www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.