



**ESSENTIAL TEACHINGS OF MESSENGER MUHAMMAD:
A CAREFUL KAWAIDA READING**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN RE-REMEMBRANCE AND REFLECTION ON THE Hon. Elijah Muhammad's contribution to our self-consciousness and self-assertion as a people in that critical time of turning and overturning we call the Sixties. This is a careful Kawaida reading of some of the essential teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in rightful remembrance and respect of his life and work in the wilderness of oppression and illusion in this country, in this the month of his birth, (October 7, 1897—February 25, 1975).

After thirty years of teaching and institution-building, the Nation of Islam, under the leadership of Mr. Muhammad, emerges in the 1960s as a major factor and force in the Black Freedom Movement. And although many, if not most of us, heard many of these teachings and derivative ones from Min. Malcolm X, it is Mr. Muhammad who is the source of them, and the Nation of Islam (NOI) was the framework in which they first took root and spread. The influence and impact of Mr. Muhammad and the NOI evolve not from their activist involvement in the Movement itself, but from both their message and model of severe criticism of and social distancing from the dominant society; a thick conception of self-determination; a commitment to institutional-building; a disciplined, dedicated and defiant congregation; and above all, a recovered and rethought religion, Islam, which required and reaffirmed the centrality and sacredness of Blackness and at the same time offered a merciless demystification and decentering of Whiteness and White supremacist claims.

This focus on Blackness, as both central and sacred for us as a people, is the hub and hinge on which Messenger Muhammad's teachings turn. Indeed, his teachings concerning the essential duties of a Black person is rooted in this fundamental principle. For this understanding defines our nature, sacred status and the practice this requires from us. Mr. Muhammad stresses the divine dimension of our nature and, as a Muslim, sees our sacred identity and duty as determined by Allah

(God), who, he states, created us to be "by nature righteous," and to act accordingly.

But the question immediately arises that if we are "righteous by nature," how is it we do unrighteous things—from youth shooting or beating each other to death and adult domestic and communal violence, to robbery, rape, elder abuse and physical and mental self-mutilation in racial or peoplehood-deforming ways? Here Mr. Muhammad teaches that the essential source of our moral failure and social problems is our lack of self-knowledge and thus, a failure to act according to the righteous nature with which we are divinely endowed. He asserts that it is thru lack of self-knowledge that we are often unjust and injurious to ourselves. Indeed, he says, "being without knowledge (of self) we (often) disgrace ourselves subjecting ourselves to suffering and shame" and do evil and injustice to each other.

Thus, Messenger Muhammad states that the first duty of a Black person is to *know ourselves* and act accordingly. "It is, he says, "time for us to learn who we really are, and it is time for us to understand ourselves." To know ourselves, as I read it, refers to Black people's duty to *recognize and actively respect* their divine nature, their historical origin and high-level achievement, and their anteriority and centrality in human history.

We are, he teaches, as in Maatian ethics, first of all, possessors of dignity and divinity, "members of the family of God." Moreover, we are, he states, the "original ones," the most ancient elders, the fathers and mothers of humanity and human civilization. This takes us way beyond being major sports and entertainment figures to being those credited with introducing and developing some of the basic disciplines of human knowledge and teaching the world things of great vision and value. For Mr. Muhammad, this is evidence, inspiration and a model for what we can do again. For as the Hon. Marcus Garvey taught, what humans have done humans can do.

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Intimately linked with the ethical imperative to know oneself is the moral obligation *to educate ourselves*. To know oneself is an initial, indispensable grounding of oneself and education is the expanded practice of knowledge acquisition in the service of human good and for cultivating what Mr. Muhammad calls “the virtue and love of learning.” Also, he taught that “we must educate ourselves and our children into the rich power of knowledge which has elevated every people who have sought and used it.” And especially, “we must give the benefit of our knowledge to the elevation of our own people.” But he is concerned that the education be emancipatory and elevating, one that “removes us from the shackles of slavery and servitude,” enables us to “exercise the right of freedom” and empowers us “to protect, preserve and advance ourselves.” He asks that we avoid an education which, instead of being liberating and uplifting, “leaves us in an inferior position and without a future;” and poses for us “the danger of losing respect for self or seeking to lose (our) identity.”

Thirdly, Messenger Muhammad lists as the duty of Black persons the interrelated obligation *to “accept your own and be yourself.”* To accept our own is to accept our people, our community and their essentiality to our grounding and growth, our self-affirmation and cultural rootedness and for being ourselves. For Mr. Muhammad there is no positive or rightful conception of self or self-interest outside the community which brings us into being and gives us the cultural basis for our identity, our obligations and our larger purposes in life. And this is why the context and conditions of our community must be life-enhancing and dignity-affirming, rather than the opposite. Also, this is why he constantly stressed building community and serving our people.

Thus, Messenger Muhammad, while obviously relying heavily on divine intervention and salvation from oppression as a religious leader, nevertheless calls on us *to do for self and kind*, i.e., to seek justice, resist oppression and do that which points the way to a new world. He tells us, “The old world must be removed to make way for the new world.” And “there is a universal struggle being waged by the old world against the beginning of the new world.” Black people who assert themselves righteously in the world in the struggle for justice contribute to this transformation. And he calls on all Muslims and other peoples of good will in religious and ethical terms “to help further the cause of truth and the upliftment of the grieving hearts of our people” and “help make them a nation of righteousness and justice” which serves as a model for human progress and possibility.

FINALLY, MESSENGER MUHAMMAD assigns us as a central duty, the need *to think constantly and deeply* about what we are doing, want and must achieve. This requires “creating a new way of thinking” about ourselves, others and the world, and making “an agonizing reappraisal of our way of life, if we care anything for ourselves, our lives, our people, . . . our children” and indeed, our families, communities and the world. Again, Mr. Muhammad says, “let us examine our thoughts to see what we are actually thinking about and just what we would like to be.” And then, “let us present ourselves as we really are;” duly respectful of the sacredness of our identity and duty, mutually respectful of others and actively committed to the new world of justice, caring and peace which our sacred identity and duty demand.▲

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