



**FOR IMARI OBADELE:
FREE THE LAND, LIBERATE THE PEOPLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Imari Abubakari Obadele I (May 2, 1930—January 18, 2010) made his transition still on the battlefield to free the land, liberate the people and to unite the masses into a self-conscious social force to achieve these and other related goals. May we learn the lessons of his life and work; be informed and uplifted by the spirit of possibility he demonstrated even in older age and illness, embrace the model of excellence and achievement that endeared him to us; and continuously practice the morality of remembrance that honors him and makes all these other practices possible and compelling. Surely, as the *Husia* says of the good, the great and the rightfully respected, “He shall be counted among the ancestors. His name shall endure as a monument and what he has done on earth shall never perish or pass away.”

Dr. Imari Obadele played a major role in many of the movements of our times: Civil Rights, Black Power, Pan-Africanism, Reparations and the Million Man March/Day of Absence, and our paths and projects intersected often. He was one by whose name you could really know him; for, in an African sense, his whole name reflected who he was, aspired to and strove to be each day. He had a special patience and an admirable inner strength and resoluteness, as his name Imari (Imara) in Swahili informs us. He was a visionary who looked beyond the now and imagined a new way and world, like his namesake, Abubakari II of Mali, who reached for the unrealized and set sail for a new and yet-to-be-encountered world. And he was “a royal one who returned home,” as his Yoruba last name, Obadele, indicates. It was a defiant return home to his Africanness, and an expansive sense of self this cultivates.

He was a soldier-in-the-making, even at an early age, bringing himself into being in the nurturing shadow and shared activities of his

older brothers, Attorney Milton Henry (Gaidi Abiodun Obadele) and Laurence Harvey in Philadelphia. As early as 1948, the FBI began monitoring their activities for encouraging draft resistance, resisting our fighting in an army that segregated and treated Blacks unequally and unjustly. An avid student and advocate of the teachings of Min. Malcolm, Imari recounts that Min. Malcolm’s “Message to the Grassroots” lecture had a profound effect on him; especially Malcolm’s linking revolution, independence, freedom, justice and equality to the struggle for land.

Taking Malcolm seriously, Imari and Gaidi seized the initiative and called the founding conference of the Republic of New Africa (RNA) in 1968. The 500 plus delegates reaffirmed the right of self-determination, issued a Declaration of Independence, and made a commitment “to build a new society better than what we now know and as perfect as man (and woman) can make it.” They also raised the battle-cry of “free the land,” calling for the U.S. government to cede Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina as the ground on which to build the RNA and for Africans to be prepared to fight to win and keep it.

“Free the land” became Imari’s core commitment and battle cry, the centerpiece of his conversations and concerns and the way he greeted coming and going. In addition, the RNA demanded billions in reparations as just compensation for the gross and grievous injury to Black people from enslavement and oppression and for their development and repair and the building of the Nation. And this became Imari’s second signature focus and concern in the struggle to liberate the people.

Working to build a base for the RNA in a liberated zone in the South, Imari moved to Mississippi where an armed confrontation between the RNA and the FBI and local police

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led to the political imprisonment of eleven members of the RNA, including Imari. He and the RNA were on the long list of those hunted and harassed, driven in exile and underground, killed or captured and unjustly imprisoned on trumped-up charges in the FBI's massive suppression thru its COINTELPRO. Released after five years, he left captivity unbroken and undeterred, defiantly still committed to the demands and discipline of the struggle. Moreover, he earned his doctorate, wrote books and articles, taught international and constitutional law and politics at various universities, filed law suits for reparations, and lectured extensively.

In 1987, Imari called for a movement for reparations at a National Conference of Black Lawyers at Harvard and began to build the basis for the National Conference of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) in order to expand the appeal of the idea, enlarge its base of support and educate the people to its justice and possibility. His work and the work of N'COBRA led to reparations discourse moving from the margin to a center place in the conversations and initiatives in the Black struggle for liberation and justice and to an expanded base of interest and support among the masses and the middle class. Indeed, he is considered "the father of reparations" in the current phase of the Movement.

But Imari was not prone to overestimate what was achieved or underestimate what was still to be done. He recognized the difficulties

and long-term demands of struggle and embraced Amilcar Cabral's counsel to "mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories." Thus, he asked us to think critically and always resist and reject the established-order version of reality and "the stampeding power of the White media" which is so often negative to "our dignity as a people and our right to the benefit of common sense, reasoned debate and . . . international law" and exchange.

Moreover, in one of his last articles, he raised and reaffirmed a traditional call for steadfastness in struggle, urging us to "walk together . . . and don't get weary" in the struggle. And like Frederick Douglass, he reminded us there is no substitute for the transformative power of the masses in motion and struggle. He said of reparations and all we struggle for, "Law suits and petitions are necessary and will help. But only our mass demand grown palpable in the streets will bring the results or near-approximation of what we seek and deserve."

Ever optimistic concerning the progressive motion and march of history thru radical and relentless struggle, Imari predicted the eventual victory of the struggle for reparations and freedom. And, then, he said, we can and "will begin to use the proceeds in the best manner to repair ourselves as a people and once more provide Black genius to the world" in freer and even more expansive ways.

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