



**HISTORY, MEMORY AND STRUGGLE:
THE MORALITY OF REMEMBRANCE**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 02-04-10, p. A7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

This month and the next, we walk again with Carter G. Woodson, honored and upraised ancestor, who set aside a special space and time for us to pause and think deep about the profound meanings and endless lessons of this *sacred narrative* we know and celebrate as Black History. Ours is a sacred narrative in the universal sense of its being the record and struggle of human beings, who are, the *Husia* teaches us, bearers of dignity and divinity and whose lives are sacred, i.e., worthy of the highest respect.

And our history is a sacred narrative for us in the particular sense in that it is our own narrative, our own special cultural truth, the narrative of a distinct group of humans who know themselves as possessors of dignity and divinity, and who know that there is no history more sacred than their own, no people more holy, and no narrative more worthy of being told and taught. Thus, in this period of special and depthful engagement with our history, we are to intensify and expand our efforts to: learn its lessons; absorb its spirit of human possibility; extract and emulate its models of human excellence and achievement, and practice the morality of remembrance as an obligation and honor.

Indeed, at the heart and center of our celebration of our history is the moral obligation to remember. Our foremother, Fannie Lou Hamer, summed up the obligation and honor of remembrance we owe those who opened and elevated the way before us saying: “There are two things we should all care about, never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over”. She speaks here of our necessary respect not only for our roots in

family, community and culture, but also for those great and small, ordinary and extraordinary persons who were the “bridges”, those elevated and upward ways over calm, troubled and treacherous waters.

Clearly, in her teaching us *reverent respect* for our ancestors, she included a stress on the virtue of reciprocity, acting for those who have acted and act for us; acting so we encourage others to act in good and mutually-beneficial ways. Therefore, in the best of our tradition, it is wrong to forget or fail to remember the good done or to raise up the names of those who opened for us upward ways to a good and meaningful life and are now passed, not only great ancestors, but also grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles or other relatives or acquaintances who gave us gifts of good in many forms.

The word for forgetful in ancient Egyptian is *mehy* and means also negligent, i.e., wrongfully unmindful and inattentive. Its negative connotation is clear when it is used in medical terminology with the word for heart and means the heart is “defective in action”. And since the Kemetic word for heart, *ib*, means both heart and mind, it suggests here an abnormal, impaired and deficient functioning of heart and mind, a woeful inadequacy of moral sensitivity and intellectual sense, indeed, the absence of Maat, i.e., rightness in the world.

The morality of remembrance is not only about rightful and reverent respect for those who gave their lives so that we could live fuller, freer and more meaningful ones, but also speaks to the ethical issue of self-respect. Minister Malcolm taught that “history is a people’s memory”. And as memory, it is the way we form our identity,

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understand ourselves and express, in an indispensable way, our humanity. Thus, Malcolm suggests that a memory-less people, that is a people unconscious of their history, is deprived of one of the defining features of what it means to be human. Moreover, he maintains that a people deprived of their historical memory are “demoted to the level of lower animals”. It is a recurrent criticism he makes of the dominant society for erasing our historical memory and replacing our memories with their own so that we would defer to them and doubt and deny ourselves.

This cultivated condition of historical amnesia meant not only the disintegration of the self, but also and often disappreciation of one’s self and history and the leeching on “for dear life” to the culture and history of the dominant society. There is, thus, a moral obligation to respect oneself and reject all relationships and accounts of history which make a people’s identity and dignity derivative from an oppressor or another people.

Here, the ancient Egyptian teaching that we are not just in history but are history ourselves is important. For it teaches us to see ourselves as the subject and source of history, its essence and energy, the very material out of which it is made and the motive force that drives and shapes it. This is why Seba Kheti reminds us to be rightfully attentive to the historical and social effects of our thought and practice, saying that “every day is a donation to eternity and even one hour is a contribution

to the future”. Therefore, for a people not to know its history, not to value its own narrative or to imagine it less sacred and worthy of recounting, reflecting on and keeping in mind is a self-degrading denial of the equality of all humans.

Within the morality of remembrance is also a call to remember tradition, traditions of moral excellence, social justice and righteous struggle, and to honor them by continuing them. Thus, Seba Kheti says in the *Husia* “emulate your ancestors, for (good) work is carried out thru knowledge. Behold, their words endure in books. Open and read them and emulate their wisdom”. Moreover, Amenemhet I tells his son, Sesostris, “If one fights on the battlefield forgetful of the past, success will elude him, for he is unaware of what he should know”.

It is important to note that in Maatian texts a rightful approach to tradition is to study and embrace the past, not only for grounding in the wisdom of the ancestors, but also in a constant quest to improve the present and forge a future worthy of the name and history African. Here, then, the past, present and future are linked, brought into conversation and creative companionship to develop new, better and more beneficial ways to understand and assert ourselves in the world. This is the meaning of the Kawaida affirmation that this is our fundamental and ongoing obligation: to know our past and honor it, to engage our present and improve it, and to imagine a new future and forge it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

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