



**IN HIGH HOMAGE TO HAJAH BETTY SHABAZZ:
WALKING, SPIRITUALLY HOLDING HAJI MALCOLM'S HAND**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IT IS ONLY RIGHT, GOOD AND REFLECTIVE OF the high homage we owe and offer her, that in this Black History Month II – Women Focus, we raise and praise the name, work and achievement of Nana Dr. Betty Shabazz. Moreover, this coming May will mark not only the 100th birthday of Haji Malcolm (May 19, 1925), but also the 89th birthday of Hajah Betty (May 28, 1934), his wife and widow, soul mate, life partner and legacy keeper, mother of their six daughters: Attallah, Qubilah, Ilyasah, Gamilah, Malikah and Malaak, and his deeply committed co-combatant in the ongoing Black Freedom struggle of our people. Indeed, to rightly remember and raise up the doers of good among us is to practice the morality of remembrance.

Here it is important to understand and appreciate Nana Betty not only in the context of her marriage to Nana Malcolm, one of the greatest leaders in our history, but also in the context of her striving, struggle, sacrifice and achievement after the martyrdom of Haji Malcolm. But it is her meeting and soul-mating with him that grounds her in a special way, and aided her in embracing and exemplifying the dedication, discipline, sacrifice and service she admired so much in him.

She had come to the Nation of Islam meeting to hear his lectures, but as she listened, she also began to hear her heart sing and say, this sounds like love and life for me. Nana Betty tells us that having been deeply impacted by racism of the South and New York, she could understand Nana Malcolm's fierce, unrelenting criticism of the oppressor and the oppression of our people. And yet in all his strength, dignity and discipline, she says, "He was a sensitive man and an understanding man" who loved, protected and provided for his family, played with his children, found things funny and beautiful with his

wife, and saw sacredness and soulfulness in his people.

Moreover, she tells us she was deeply impressed with his wealth of knowledge, the clarity of his teaching, his sincerity, his leadership and work ethic, and again his dedication and discipline. And she felt for him as she watched and interacted with him. For she said, he was "always helping others, but had no one close to help him", and she decided to nominate and elect herself. Thus, she joined the Nation and accepted his proposal on a call while he was on the road, as we say, "on the case for the race", for our people. And they were joined in the sacred ceremony of marriage for life, love and struggle.

She was there *with* and *for* him in the variousness and vicissitudes of life and love, strivings and struggles, holding to the good regardless. And she was there with her children, born and unborn, when his enemies and the enemies of our people and human freedom came to kill him for his defiant refusal to quit seeking and speaking truth, doing and demanding justice and fighting for the freedom of our people. In a word, as Nana Ossie Davis said in his eulogy to Haji Malcolm, he was a Black man, "A Black shining prince who didn't hesitate to die because he loved us so". And even in his death, his self-sacrifice of his life, he lay there "unconquered still", a martyr, immortal by and for the good he brought, created and shared in the world.

She was now left with four girls and two more on the way and even while grieving a most great and debilitating loss, she was compelled to rise up and continue the struggle, keep the faith, offer in practice a radical refusal to be defeated and undone and seek both material means and spiritual and social meaning in her life as she assumed single-mother responsibility for her children and herself. Gripped by a deep and enduring

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grief, she relates how she first thought to isolate herself, give up the struggle and turn inwards. But rethinking it all, she rightfully realized and decided that for her children, her martyred husband and herself, she could not stay isolated, idle or uninvolved, and must go forth and keep going regardless. Indeed, her healing, health and humanity required it, her sense of obligation to her children, husband and people demanded it, and her early childhood orientation towards a life of service reaffirmed it.

Lifting herself off the ground of her grief, she began to build an expanded life and way forward and an expansive network of communal, societal and global relations. Thus, it is in this context of striving and struggle, overcoming the great and grievous loss of her husband, and practicing recovery and reassertion in the midst of the continuing Movement that she comes into her own as Dr. Betty Shabazz, PhD in Educational Administration; professor of health sciences; resilient and resourceful mother of her children; self-conscious and committed keeper of the legacy of her husband; institution-builder; leader; and advocate and activist for racial and social justice, women's rights, human rights and shared human good.

Dr. Betty Shabazz following in the footsteps of Haji Malcolm decided to make the *hajj* to Mecca in 1965 to ground and recover herself spiritually and thus received the honorific title *hajah*, female form of *haji*. Haja Betty relates that it helped her to refocus and to "put (her) back on track" and make her focus on the positive rather than the negative, and on those who loved and were committed to helping her to heal, care for her family and develop, rather than on the haters and handmaidens and hirelings of the oppressor.

In her role as teacher and educator, Dr. Betty Shabazz continuously spoke of the need for views, values and practices which reflect Haji Malcolm's liberation ethics which call us to "wake up, clean up and stand

up". She tells us she wants us to dream, but she asked us "to teach our children to dream with their eyes open". Indeed, she says of Haji Malcolm, "his agenda was reality based" and she wanted us to know that if we wanted to honor Haji Malcolm and all our ancestors that "the only way to truly honor our ancestors is to continue the fight for justice and equality".

In the midst of the fad and fashion surge around the movie "Malcolm" and the presence of Malcolm name-dropping in music, she calls for and urges a deep understanding and embrace of Haji Malcolm. She does not discourage the symbolism but emphasizes substance over symbols and superficiality. When asked what she wants young people and by extension all our people to learn from Haji Malcolm, Hajah Betty tells us that the lessons are that "they need to be responsible for their own lives...They need to be strengthened and they need to walk spiritually holding Malcolm's hand". That is to say, they need to live his legacy and constantly consult his ethical and spiritual teachings in their going forward.

Moreover, she tells us that we must be not only spiritually and ethically grounded, but also that we must practice an operational unity. Recalling Haji Malcolm's similar teaching, she tells and teaches us that "religion and politics should not divide us; neither should politics and culture divide because we need both". Here she was responding to those who would make an unwanted and uninformed distinction between cultural nationalism and political nationalism without understanding cultural nationalism as containing a radical and revolutionary political dimension. Also, she said, we must realize that "there is diversity in unity and there is unity in the Black community without everyone doing the same thing at the same time". Indeed, this recalls Haji Malcolm's teaching that "wherever Black people are is a battle line", and we

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must fight fiercely on every battle front and field.

She wants us to remember that Haji Malcolm's message was a message of hope in and through struggle, "that you had a history before slavery and a present for which you are responsible". And "the goal is to ensure a future with love for yourself, your community and equitable shareable resources". Hajah Dr. Betty Shabazz stresses again that the youth, especially, but also all our people, "must accept the responsibility for their own lives and for the future generations. And they must be committed and

responsible to an agenda for themselves and their people, because their ancestors made a great number of sacrifices for them, including Malcolm". Finally, she says to us, aspiring for excellence, dreaming with eyes wide open and striving and struggling for the best, "I wish you the power that equals your intelligence and your strength. I wish you success that equals your talent and determination and I wish you faith", the best of the faith of our fathers and mothers as we "walk spiritually holding Haji Malcolm's hand".▲

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