



**PRACTICING SANKOFA:  
SEASONS OF STRUGGLE AND CHANGE**  
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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**W**E MOVE THROUGH FEBRUARY AND March to celebrate Black History Month I and II as naturally and necessarily as men and women meet and merge for joy and life, and seasons change and bring some new and needed good into the world. Our history is a self-conscious and sustained struggle for growth, transformation and transcendence to ever higher levels of human life in ever-expanding realms of human freedom and human flourishing. And it is important always to reaffirm the reasons and relevance of our celebrating it these months and engaging it as a life practice every day. For history, above all, is the struggle and record of a people in the process of shaping their world in their own image and interests. This means resisting all attempts and acts to deny them freedom, justice, security of person, peace, human flourishing, and rightful access to and enjoyment of the goods of the world. And it means directing their lives toward good and expansive ends which enable them to flourish and come into the fullness of themselves.

So, we take history seriously and engage it for good reasons, embracing it, not only as what we study and celebrate, but also as ways to understand and assert ourselves in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and uplifting ways. Here, *to engage* is best defined by the Swahili word, *kujitumbukiza*—to throw oneself deeply into. First, then, we study and celebrate, indeed engage history to learn its lessons, for as Malcolm X taught, "Of all our studies history is best qualified to reward our research." Secondly, we engage history to absorb its spirit of human possibility. For as Marcus Garvey taught, "What humans have done humans can do." Thirdly, we engage history to extract and emulate its models of human excellence and achievement, for as Mary McLeod Bethune taught "we are heirs and custodians of a great legacy" and must bear the burden and glory of that legacy with strength,

dignity and determination. And finally, we, as an African people, engage history in order to honor the moral obligation to remember those who opened the way and created place for us to walk and live in dignity in the world. For as Fannie Lou Hamer taught us, there are two things we all must care about: never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over.

It is out of this understanding of history that we must constantly ask ourselves, how can we use our past to inform and improve our present and lay the foundation for a more expansive future? The Akan word for the historical quest which is inspired and informed by these questions is *sankofa* which means "to return and retrieve it." In a word, we must reach into the past, recover its richest lessons, most instructive models and best practices, and put them in the service of the present and future.

For this is our duty: to know our past and honor it; to engage our present and improve it; and to imagine a whole new future and to forge in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways. In the midst of this sacred narrative we know as Black history, there are three *modal* or *defining periods* which offer us memories, lessons, models and a sense of human possibility which are most instructive, although there are other periods of similar instructiveness.

The first period is the classical period of African history in the Nile Valley Civilizations, c. 3900 BCE to 300 BCE. Here we become fathers and mothers of human civilization, introducing some of the basic disciplines of human knowledge, earning the name among surrounding nations as the navel and light of the world. We do wonders in and for the world, not just the awesome pyramids and exquisite temples, but also the science, math, geometry, physics and astronomy which made them possible. We teach the love of learning and its

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unbreakable link with life, calling humans “*rekhyt*,” wise and knowing beings, and calling our schools and libraries, *houses of life*, thus linking the quality of life with the quality of learning.

But equally important and impressive is our ancestors’ spiritual and ethical teachings which served as an original source for so many of our essential concepts in human moral development. Among these are: humans as bearers of dignity and the images of God; the concept of judgment and justification after death; the essentiality of service; the obligation to heal and repair the world (*serudj ta*); and the obligation to care for the vulnerable. The lessons here are clear: knowledge, creativity and social and moral excellence are indispensable to what it means to be African and human in the world.

The second period is the Holocaust of Enslavement. By holocaust is meant an act of genocide so morally monstrous it is not only against the targeted people themselves, but also a crime against humanity. Far from being a case of trade or business gone bad with collateral damage, it is a unique event of horrific and morally monstrous destruction of human life (tens of millions), human culture (cities, towns, villages, great works of art, music and literature), and human possibility (extraction from our own history and denial of our humanity). But as horrendous as our Holocaust was, it nevertheless seared into our consciousness lessons and challenges of continuing and compelling importance. They are: 1) to remember and bear constant and uncompromising witness to the horribleness of our Holocaust; 2) to raise up and honor the legacy of those

whose struggles and lives are our lessons; 3) to hold the oppressors and enslavers accountable thru the struggle for reparations in the fullest sense of the word; and 4) to continue the struggle against all forms of enslavement and oppression on the personal and collective levels—in our lives, society and the world.

The third modal period of Black History is the Reaffirmation of the 60’s. It is a time of reaffirming both our Africanness and our social justice tradition in speaking truth to the people and to power, seeking justice for the vulnerable and devalued, and struggling for the liberation of the oppressed everywhere. We also expanded the realm of freedom in this country and like our ancestors in ancient Egypt, we linked life with learning and demanded a relevant education which joined campus and community and aided the struggle for a just society and good world. In this overall process, we launched and won with our allies struggles that reshaped U.S. society and posed a paradigm of liberation for people in this country and the world. Indeed, in this country and around the world, people in struggle borrowed from and built on our moral vocabulary and moral vision and posed our struggle as a model to emulate.

**O**ur lessons and challenges here, then, are: to continue the struggles of the 60’s to end racism, classism, and sexism; to create a free and empowered community; a just and good society and a good and sustainable world; and to pose in practice a new paradigm of human life and human flourishing. Thus, in meeting these ancient and ongoing obligations of our history, we truly honor our past, improve our present and forge a future worthy of the life-affirming ways and teachings of our ancestors.

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).