



**REMAKING HISTORY WITH MRS. HAMER:
RAISING QUESTIONS, EMPOWERING OUR PEOPLE**
Los Angeles Sentinel, 10-23-14, p.A6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS is the month of remembering and raising up Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), honored giant in a generation of great leaders. Let us raise and praise her sacred names, life-giving work and liberating struggle then in the tradition of our ancestors. We pour libation for her first in her sacred name of *memory keeper*. It is she who emphasized our ancestors' teaching on the morality of remembrance saying: "There are two things we all should care about: never forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over". It is a teaching on reciprocal caring, rightful remembering and deserved honoring. And it is about giving rightful attentiveness to the people, culture and history that made us possible and enabled us to come into the fullness of ourselves.

Thus, she tells us that in her visit to Africa, she experienced a deep joy, beauty and pride in being African. She admired those she met in how they were so "natural, just being their real selves and not having to pretend to be somebody else. And that was beautiful to me". It was this dignity, self-determination, and sense of commonality with continental Africans that led her to say, "then I could feel myself, never, ever being ashamed of my ancestors or my background" and thus of herself and her people. For she was grounding herself in her own culture and returning to her own history and dignity-affirming sense of self.

Moreover, we praise her in her name as *committed and courageous questioner of America*. Mrs. Hamer questions America's unpunished evil, unredressed injustice, unrepaired injuries, the mental and social health of the country, its self-illusions, and its imperialist wars against the people of

Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, "my people in Angola" and vulnerable peoples everywhere. "I question America", she declared in an audacious and unwavering voice, inviting us to look at America without the blinkers and ideological blindness born of a mind-disabling mixture of self-imposed ignorance and patriotic illusion. For "miles of paper and film cannot record the many injustices this nation has been guilty of". Thus, "when you take a very close look at this American society, its time to question these things", not only with a criticism of words, but also with the criticism of practical struggle on every battlefield and front.

We praise her also in her name, *long-standing and fearless freedom fighter*, who struggled to free us from the plantation of mental and physical enslavement and oppression and directed us to a safer, saner and dignity-affirming place and charged us to imagine more and advance further. Fellow freedom fighter, Malcolm X, introduced her at an OAAU meeting to which he invited her as "one of this country's foremost freedom fighters". Her fight was to liberate Blacks and all peoples and this country in a struggle for freedom and justice, and not equality. For she says, "I couldn't tell anybody in my right mind that I'm fighting for equal rights". Like Malcolm, whom she admired as he did her, she says, "I'm fighting for human rights because I don't want to be equal to people that raped my ancestors, killed out the Indians, destroyed my (sense of) dignity and took my name". She instead wants with Fanon a new history and a new mutually respecting humanity. In a word, she wants to

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remake history and with Dr. Mary M. Bethune to remake the world.

Let us praise Mrs. Hamer also as *uncompromising witness to truth and for her people*. She said in describing this role, “I’m just up here to rap and tell you what it is, and to tell it like it is”. And “If we want America to be a free society, we have to stop telling lies”. “We have to work to make this a better place and we have to deal with politics and the history of this country that’s not in the books”. Thus, she tells a guide pointing out the statue of liberty as a symbol of a free and freedom loving America, “I would like to see this statue turned around to face her own problems. And the torch out of her hand with her head bowed, because we have as many problems in this country as they are trying to point to in other countries”, and “You know as well as I do that America is sick and man is on the critical list”. And there is no remedy but resistance, and no curative or corrective strategy worth its name that does not privilege, promote and pursue struggle.

As a noble and greatly needed witness to truth, she honors the ancient African ethical imperative “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice”. And this means not only speaking truth to power, but also and most important, speaking truth to the people. Thus, she says, “We can no longer ignore the fact that we can’t wait for things to change, but have to stand up and be women and men” and struggle for the freedom and justice we deserve. And no need to say, “I’m not going to get in the mess, because if you

were born in America with a Black face, you were born in the mess”.

And finally, let us praise and raise her name as *righteous keeper of the faith*, who lifted up the light that lasts and who would not abandon the gospel of social justice and freedom of her Christian faith. She stated that her sacred text teaches us to empower the people, support the poor and free the captive and to struggle for social justice in every place as an act of faith. Therefore, she says, “trust in God and launch out into the deep. (For) You can pray until you faint, but if you don’t get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap”.

Mrs. Hamer leaves us with these words of advice against superficial satisfaction in the struggle and seeking simply a comfortable position in oppression. She says, “I have a special message to my Black brothers and sisters. As we move forward in our quest for progress and success, we must not be guilty of misleading the people. We must not allow our eagerness to participate to lead us to accept second-class citizenship and inferior positions in the name of integration. Too many have given their lives to end this evil”. So she tells us, “I call upon all men and women to stand up with pride and dignity, but especially Black men”. Here she also stresses the critical and vital role of youth in continuing and advancing the struggle, not in opposition to older persons who have paved the way, held their ground and have a wealth of knowledge and experience, but in self-conscious cooperative work and struggle for the common good of our people and in the interest of humanity as a whole.

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