



**REMEMBERING THE WATTS REVOLT:  
LIVING THE LEGACY OF RESISTANCE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

We are a long ways from those first solemn and joyous commemorations of the Watts Revolt in which we paid rightful homage to the martyrs, gave due deference to the injured, celebrated the soldiers still standing, extracted appropriate lessons of struggle, and defiantly called for honoring and living the legacy of the Revolt thru continuing and increased resistance. It was the hour and era of Black Power in which our demands literally lit up the sky, burned brightly in the middle of the streets as well as in our minds and were raised up, repeated and explained at formal and informal venues and in casual conversations.

And this distance from the Revolt and historical moment is for too many of us, not just a matter of time, but also of temperament, consciousness and commitment, and the way we understand and assert ourselves in the world. There was then no immobilizing post-racial confusion or fantasies about who we are as a people or the essential systemic identity of our oppressor in Malcolmian or Fanonian terms. The focal points of our rejection and resistance were crystal clear: police brutality, merchant exploitation, cultural brain-washing and imposition of established-order views and values negative to freedom and the liberation struggle as well as any other conditions of disadvantage, deprivation and general oppression.

Certainly, this is not to say there were no disagreements and differing views in those upward-thrusting days of post-revolt decisiveness and determination. But there was in those beginning pre-Cointelpro years, none to undermine the common ground consensus around the broad commitments to freedom, justice, equality and power over our destiny and daily lives. Indeed, it was a unity forged in the furnace of urgent and earnest struggle, a unity we of Us defined as *operational unity*, unity

without uniformity, unity in diversity and in the cause of common good for our people.

It is this active commitment to operational unity rooted in the spirit of the Watts Revolt, 8/11-17/1965, and forged in the immediacy and urgency of struggle that, for a brief but critical moment in history, informed our ideas, our work and the way we related to each other. And it is this spirit of operational unity that brought us together at a Uhuru Day (Freedom Day) rally called by the organization Us and held at its headquarters (8/13/1967), a rich diversity of persons, organizations and leaders to commemorate the Revolt and recommit ourselves to the liberation struggle. These leaders and organizations included: Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown), SNCC; Maulana Karenga, Us; Huey Newton, BPP; Tommy Jacqueline-Halifu, SLANT; Herbert Carter, County Human Relations Commission and many others.

And it is this operational unity which would lead to the coming together in common cause, 32 movement organizations in the Black united front organization, the Black Congress, in whose conceptualization, founding and leadership Us played a major role. They came together in the spirit of struggle as Fanon says, having made the decision to fight for the liberation of the people and thus to “hold to one doctrine only: to act in such a way that the nation may exist,” i.e., that the people come into existence as a self-conscious, self-determining solidarity committed to freedom, justice and various other species of good in society and the world. They knew they must engage the oppressor in struggle and as Malcolm taught, dare to achieve “freedom by any means necessary.”

In spite of revisionist interpretations of the Watts Summer Festival, it has remained for years a central marker and reminder of the Revolt and this fundamental time of turning.

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Certainly, from the beginning it had a celebratory and entertainment aspect to it, but the early years always put the Revolt as a central feature of the Festival, and Tommy Jacquette-Halifu, its long-time executive director and a founding member of Us, consistently held on to and foregrounded the Revolt with educational forums and activities for adults and children, socially conscious performative acts, and rituals of remembrance and honor for those whose sacrifices we must not forget, dismiss or diminish.

However, the established order and their conscious and unconscious allies began to reinterpret the purpose, origin and identity of the Festival and the Revolt itself. Although resisted relentlessly by Halifu, these forces have continuously sought to deny the Festival public space and support for this communal and public event, asking for restrictions and restraints no serious advocate for the people could accept. And with Halifu's transition in 2009, the level of capacity for resistance and continuation of the Festival has been severely diminished. They have also sought to remove the Festival from its roots in the Revolt, to reduce it to official forms of detached and deficient remembrance and essentially just another consumer site of fun and games and only paltry and pro forma reference to struggle and revolt.

Also, there have been increased efforts to deAfricanize the Watts Summer Festival, to deny its roots in the Black community and its cultural and political relevance to the community as a major event in the history of the liberation struggle. Instead, it is proposed

that in deference to changing demographics, it become a multicultural event void of its particular history and meaning to the Black community. This not only does not apply to other events and holidays of other ethnics of color and White ethnics, but it also seems to suggest that others cannot participate in a Black culturally specific and culturally grounded event, although from its inception other peoples of color and Whites have participated in the Festival. It is, of course, a trend of attempts to delegitimize, marginalize and problematize people and things Black and insistence on Blacks pursuing projects of dilution or erasure or lose funding and favor. But our culture of struggle does not condone or allow this.

Indeed, the wider significance of the Watts Revolt extends beyond Watts and the 1960s and became a central link in the long chain of revolt and resistance since the Holocaust of enslavement that has marked and moved our history forward, as well as the history of this country and the world. Thus, we hold it up, not just as an event, but as reflective of a *culture of struggle* central to life and liberation. And we cannot in good faith or with required dignity, place our history and culture in a handbag of racist restrictions and hawk them before hostile or even favorable funders. The need, then, is to continue to cherish and raise up the Revolt, to learn and practice its lessons of unity, struggle and sacrifice and always live its legacy thru continuous and increased resistance and radical transformation.

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