



**THE MORAL VOCATION OF LEADERSHIP:
DEDICATION, DISCIPLINE, SACRIFICE AND SERVICE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

This last weekend found Tiamoyo and me in St. Louis giving a pre-Kwanzaa lecture, sponsored by the New African Paradigm Study Group; meeting with deeply-involved young activists of the Organization for Black Struggle and also committed older activists of the New African Paradigm Study Group and of the Better Family Life Cultural and Educational Center; and of necessity, going to Ferguson and standing and paying homage at the site of sacrifice, memory and honor of Michael Brown, another son of Africa, savagely sacrificed on the altar of police violence. Like other Black men and women previously killed by police violence, his killing was officially camouflaged as justifiable homicide under the cover and color of law, and socially sanctioned by a society unable to condemn, criticize or even question itself in any seriously moral or meaningful way. And this is especially true in terms of its White supremacist and racist treatment of peoples of color: Africans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asians. We are told that even to talk about systemic and racist oppression is divisive; to demand reparations for genocide and our Holocaust is unrealistic; and to seek simple justice is a matter requiring our patience, their sympathy and a general realistic recognition that things must work their way through the flawed system and we must accept the verdicts and results regardless.

Our morally compelling response is, of necessity, righteous and relentless resistance, an inclusive ongoing struggle in the streets, board rooms, schools, universities, workplaces, prisons, police departments, religious institutions, courts, legislative bodies, and every other site of racial oppression in its various forms. For as Paul Robeson reminded us “the battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear”. Such a comprehensive and committed struggle requires an aware,

organized and consciously engaged people and a capable leadership worthy of the people who choose and make them.

Thus, as we consider how to sustain and expand our righteous and relentless struggle against police violence and general systemic violence and oppression and rebuild the Movement, the issue of leadership is of paramount importance. Now, the problem of leadership, like the loss of love and faith, is complex and ongoing and has produced various distorted forms and failures in every community. Its various unworthy forms include leadership as domination, mystification, manipulation, drafted celebrity posturing, soft-shoe proxy performances for outside sources and image management thru public relations. The rightful criticism of these forms have not always been precise or insightful and most fit within general declarations of pathology concerning everything Black.

However, real African American leaders come to the ground of struggle and the table of negotiation not with lack of credentials or self-effacing hat-grabbing, groveling and grins. Rather they come as self-conscious carriers of a venerable tradition of a people honored the world over as a moral and social vanguard and a model to lift up and emulate in the righteous and relentless struggle for freedom, justice and good in the world. The need, then, is to reject the distorted forms of leadership often literally laid at our door from outside sources or internally generated thru flaws which originate in oppression. Our task is to dialog with African culture—continental and diasporan—and recover and reconstruct our best ideas and practices and apply them in developing the discipline of leadership, and in rebuilding the Movement.

If we’ve learned anything from the leaders we admire and praise, we know that leadership in an African sense is, above all, a

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moral vocation of dedication, discipline, sacrifice and service. This can be seen in sacred texts like the *Husia* and *Odu Ifa* and in the cultural conceptions of leadership contained in African languages themselves. For example, in the language of Swahili, the word to lead, *kuongoza*, provides an idea of the expansive conception of leadership developed by our ancestors. The word *kuongoza*, to lead, means in its various senses, to guide in the right way, cause to improve character and conduct, instruct well and rightly, make successful, and cause to prosper. At the heart of leadership is a commitment to cultivation and transformation in the interest of the right, the beneficial and the good. Thus, another meaning of this word, in its form *wongofu*, is uprightness and righteousness, suggesting a moral commitment and character of the producer, process and the product, in a word, of the leader, the vocation of leading and those led.

In this context, leadership is conceived as a moral vocation in which persons, rightly guided and grounded in the best of social-ethical views and values and skilled practices, share these with others and aid them in enhancing their capacity to satisfy needs, expand aspirations and pursue the good and goods of life. Vocation here means life work or mission, self-consciously chosen as a rightful path to pursue in life. Within this ancient African understanding of leadership as a moral vocation, Kwaaida develops its working definition of this critical practice in the context of our time and our righteous and relentless struggle for justice and good in the world. Kwaaida defines leadership as *the self-conscious capacity and commitment to provide a philosophy, a set of principles, and a*

program which inform and inspire a personal and social practice that not only satisfies human needs, but transforms people in the process, making them self-conscious agents of their own lives and liberation. Such a transformative process will, of necessity, also lead to the building of moral community and to the constant becoming of the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

Although leadership roles may be thrust on persons in any given time or context, they must decide at the earliest possible moment the level of their capacity and commitment to leadership. This is the meaning of accepting the invitation of history, i.e., choosing to accept responsibility thrust on one by time and circumstance, especially a challenge of great historical importance. This is exemplified in Harriet Tubman at the crossroads of freedom and enslavement deciding whether to simply escape herself or give her life to the liberation of her people. It is reflected in Martin Luther King's choosing whether to live a life of restricted middle class comfort in the midst of racist oppression or responding to the call of his community to resistance. It is demonstrated in Malcolm X's deciding whether to remain lost in his lumpen life of self-orientation or discipline himself, ground himself in his faith and knowledge, and prepare himself to become a noble witness and world-historical servant of his people. And it is expressed in Fannie Lou Hamer's choosing whether to remain time-keeper and racial captive in the killing fields of Mississippi, or put down her pencil and paper, question the concept and practice of America and dedicate her life to service, sacrifice and struggle for her people.

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