



**UJAMAA AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT:
SHARED WORK, WEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

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In a world in which corporate dominance is so deep and wide-ranging, conversations and insistence on the ethical principle and practice of shared work, shared wealth and shared well-being in the world seem subversive in some quarters and quaint and quixotic in others. And so does the concept of progress in society without oppression and exploitation of people, or plunder, pollution and depletion of the environment. But if we as a people are to weather the hurricanes and hardships which history and the current economic crisis have imposed on us, we must imagine and move beyond the catechism of impossibilities and the limited conception of the possible posed by the established order. Thus, the theme selected by ASALH for Black History Month I this year, “The History of Black Economic Empowerment,” offers us another excellent opportunity to critically review the historical record and reap the evidence of excellence and insight that Malcolm taught history is “most qualified” to provide.

When the history and continuing challenge of Black economic empowerment are raised, my mind reaches back to the late 19th and early 20th century and 1960’s. In these earlier times, there were self-conscious initiatives directed toward unity, solidarity and the cooperative building of structures for mutual aid and benefit, and of institutions that housed and advanced our interests and aspirations as a people. Cooperative economics was discussed and practiced also in the 1960’s, not only in the South in rural areas, but also in the North, and they continue today.

In the 60’s, building on the concept of *Ujamaa* developed by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, founding president of Tanzania, I introduced the Kawaida concept of *Ujamaa* and established it as the Fourth Principle of

the *Nguzo Saba*, The Seven Principles of Kawaida philosophy and Kwanzaa. The Kawaida concept *Ujamaa* has its origins, then, in our self-conscious quest and commitment as an organization, Us, to understand and assert ourselves in the world in the most African and liberational ways. That is to say, in ways that are culturally-grounded, ethically-anchored and in the interest of freedom and flourishing.

Indeed, Mwalimu Nyerere had said he chose the Swahili word, *Ujamaa*, to describe his democratic socialist economics for two reasons: to stress its Africanness and emphasize the value of its literal meaning of “familyhood” in teaching us to practice economics with family relations in mind. Thus, to talk about *Ujamaa* as a principle and practice of cooperative sharing is not simply to talk about economic activities, but also about a communitarian way of thinking and living that undergirds and informs those practices.

Ujamaa, in its most essential meaning is shared work and wealth directed toward the shared well-being of human beings and the world. It, as Mwalimu says, is a shared-work-and-wealth system self-consciously “in the service of man, the furtherance of his human development,” i.e., of “all human beings.” This, in turn, requires open and active acceptance of the equality of human beings and their right to the shared good and goods of society and the world.

Moreover, *Ujamaa* reaffirms that ancient African ethical principle of the dignity of the human person and understands the right to a life of dignity as inclusive of the right to a decent life. And a decent life, at a minimum, means having food, clothing, housing, healthcare, education, and physical and economic security. Here Mwalimu reaffirms the indispensable need for society to “promote the dignity and growth to excellence of all

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human beings.” This “growth to excellence” points toward an expansive well-being which Kawaïda calls human flourishing.

Furthermore, as Mwalimu notes, this also calls for the right and responsibility of a person to engage in purposeful and productive work, as far as they are able. For such work is essential to the dignity and self-respect of persons. Indeed, it is not enough that persons are given or provided with the necessities of life by others, but where they are able, they must for themselves and society’s sake, secure these in cooperation with others in mutually-beneficial relations and activities. This, in turn, requires respect for the right of workers to just wages and treatment on the job and in separation, safe working conditions, adequate benefits, unionization and meaningful participation in decisions which reflects a commitment to democracy in the workplace and larger society.

Clearly of equal importance in ethical consideration and involvement are the poor, vulnerable and less powerful among us and in the world. It is an ancient African teaching found in all our sacred texts that respect and care for the vulnerable are at the heart of any serious claim we make to being moral or just as a person, people or society. However, we must also aid in the process and practice of their self-empowerment. This is especially true of the poor where it is not enough to give them things; we must also help them build their capacity to provide for themselves and to construct a good life as they conceive it.

Ultimately, *Ujamaa* is a world-encompassing ethical concept and practice,

profoundly concerned with the environment, seeing it as part of the network of kinship we must embrace and toward which we must act responsibly and rightfully. Indeed, our most ancient African ethical traditions, as expressed in the *Husia* and *Odu Ifa*, teach us to embrace the whole world as sacred space and to treat it with reverential respect as a divine creation and the foundation of our life as humans in and of the world. Moreover, especially for us and other peoples of color, it means struggling to remove the highly disproportionate amount of toxic waste dumped in our communities and to keep our communities free of it.

Finally, if we are to explore the possibilities of pooling resources, sharing work and wealth and directing our efforts towards the well-being of all and the world, we must prepare for and engage in struggle to create conditions conducive to this. Indeed, such a commitment to cooperative solutions calls on us as a people to self-consciously resume our role and intensify our struggle as a social and moral vanguard in this country and create conditions in which such a cooperative sharing can take root and rise. Furthermore, it requires rebuilding the Movement, making appropriate alliances and daring to address successfully, not only the current economic crisis of this country, but also its structural deficiency, its self-destructive exploitative and oppressive practices that have led to this current crisis and recurrent crises which its corporate and congressional rulers cannot really admit and will not engage in a revolutionary or radical way.

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