



**RECLAIMING KING:
MATTERS OF RACE, REFLECTION AND PRACTICE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

If the celebration of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is to be more than a corporate and foundation-funded program of safe, de-Africanized and deculturalized remembrance; then, we, as a people, must reclaim him and reaffirm his rootedness in the *African* American community, its culture and history, and the ongoing tradition of struggle for racial and social justice which defines it. If it is to be more than government ceremonies which officially and fatally fossilize King thru monuments, proclamations, plaques and speeches which each year, alter and strip his legacy of its life and its vital stress on struggle; then, we, as a people, must reclaim him, define, defend and keep his legacy alive thru constant reflection on it and thru making it a part of our personal and collective practice.

And if the celebration and central meaning of King's life and legacy is to be more than routine religious rituals of raising his name and lowering his voice on racial justice and social struggle, and of calling for reconciliation without needed struggle, worthy goals, measurable gain or meaningful good; then we, as a people, must reclaim him, recover his vision of "the radical reconstruction of society" and reposition it back within the framework and forward thrust of our larger liberation struggle. It is on us, as a people, and it is an urgent and critical task and need, not only because of what it means to the recovery of the legacy of King, but also because of what it means for us as a people and our movement forward.

In spite of post-racial illusions and aspirations, there can be no accurate or honest account, no critical understanding or appro-

priate appreciation of the life and legacy of Dr. King outside of the history, culture and struggle of his people, African Americans, of whom he is an undeniable part and an honored and righteous representative. Indeed, it is his people thru whom and with whom he would come into social consciousness, ground and center himself, determine and map out his mission, conceive and carry out his transformative work and immerse himself in our world-historical struggle.

King is neither baffled nor bewildered about the identity, integrity or inherent greatness and possibilities within his people who possess a "bottomless vitality" that enabled them "to grow and develop" even in the hell, horror and Holocaust of enslavement. Thus, he embraces and grounds himself in the *social justice tradition of his people which poses witness to truth, service to the people, and sacrifice in righteous struggle as morally imperative*. And college and social struggle enhanced and expanded this understanding and commitment.

King's conception of Black people in the U.S. was an expansive one, which posed them as a moral and social vanguard in this country as well as in the world. Thus, King understood and engaged Black people, as we say in Kawaida, as a key people in a key country whose liberation would not only free us and the country from the grotesque grasp of racism and capitalism, but bring the whole world closer to full and final liberation. For it would transform the U.S., from being a global force of corporate greed, aggression and imperial predation, to a force for freedom, justice, peace, material well-being and cooperative development in the world. Therefore, King asserts that "the hard

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cold facts of racial life in the world today indicate that the hope of the people of color in the world may well rest in the (African American) and (their) ability to reform the structures of racist imperialism from within and thereby turn the technology and wealth of the West to the task of liberating the world from want.”

Also, King, like Malcolm X, Mary McLeod Bethune, W.E.B. DuBois and others, linked our longing and struggle for freedom and justice with those of other oppressed and struggling people of the world. Indeed, he says, “the determination of the (African American) to win freedom from every form of oppression springs from the same profound longing for freedom that motivates oppressed people all over the world.” Furthermore, he stated that “the dynamic beat of deep discontent in Africa and Asia is at the bottom a quest for freedom and human dignity on the part of a people who have been victims of colonialism.” And surely, if questioned further, he would have included Native America, Haiti and the Caribbean, Latin America, Native Australia, Palestine and the Middle East—in a word, as he said above, “oppressed people all over the world.”

To talk of King, then, is to talk of his people, their hopes, history and aspirations and their struggles for freedom, justice, mutual concern and caring, well-being, peace and shared good in the world. It is their cause and commitment to good in the world which he embraces, advocates and places before the country and the world. And it is both a particular and universal agenda, a Black agenda which speaks to the best of what it means to be both African and human

in the world. It is the message of Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Malcolm X, Ella Baker and others as well as Martin King, and a more current version of a millennia-old moral and spiritual tradition with origins at the dawn of human conscience and culture.

Yet, there is a tendency among us, unlike others, to qualify our achievements in life, literature or leadership, repeatedly reassuring others that our achievements are not Black, but universal, and not just for Black people, but for everyone. Many feel that if we seek funding or favor, we cannot even claim our holidays, hopes or special dreams without de-Africanizing and deculturalizing them, and can only claim our faults—those real or imagined and assigned by the established order. And so, too many of us allow King to be defined out of his ethnic, communal and cultural context thru the racist irrationality that one can't be great and Black or have an agenda that is particular and universal, Black and inclusively human at the same time. Thus, they collaborate, consciously or unconsciously, in shameful self-erasure.

King defines and condemns this societal practice as “cultural homicide” which denies and divests our people of peoplehood and personhood as men and women. And he calls on us to “boldly throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to (ourselves) and the world—‘I’m a man (or woman) with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history’,” and “Yes, I’m Black and I’m beautiful,” secure in our identity and determined to be free and flourish.

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