



US REMINISCING AT HALF CENTURY AND FOUR: THE ARCHITECTURE OF OUR WORK AND WILL

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ON THIS OUR 54TH ANNIVERSARY, I remember and raise up the momentous marking of our 50th anniversary. I said then and reaffirm now with four added years this. September 7th will mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of our organization Us, the introduction of the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles of *Kwanzaa* and *Kawaida* philosophy), and the establishment of the African American Cultural Center. These signature events and initiatives in our history as an organization also have a unique history in the intellectual and political culture and history of our people. In fact, we would argue, with due modesty, that no other organization of the Black Power period of similar size, with no real budget and no hidden or exposed European hand, influencing or directing it, has had more impact on the political and intellectual culture of our people since the 60s.

Even though it is not well-known and intellectually dishonest, Black Power historians fail to report it, our organization Us and our philosophy, *Kawaida*, have played a significant role in the major movements and initiatives of our times: Black Power; Black studies; Black art; Black independent schools; Black student unions; Black united fronts; Black rites of passage programs; Black youth; Afrocentricity; ancient Egyptian studies, especially Maatian ethics; Ifa ethical studies; and the Million Person Marches.

We had started out with the anger, impatience and will to confront which characterizes youth—righteous anger at oppression, impatient for change and willing to confront our oppressor in places more seasonal soldiers might advise otherwise and conservatives might counsel a “realism” that reeks of resignation and submissive adjustment. Following Frantz Fanon’s instruction that we, as each generation, must discover our mission and having discovered it, betray or fulfill it, we declared we had discovered it and would give our all to fulfill it. Thus, we summed up our mission in the *Quotable Karenga* saying, “We are the last revolutionaries in America. If we fail to

leave a legacy of revolution for our children, we have failed our mission and should be dismissed as unimportant”.

The architecture of our work and will, which began to take form (over) a half century ago, rests on and rises from the ancient, sacred and sustaining foundation of our own culture, Black culture, African culture. We began to craft a vision of the good community, society and the world we wanted and committed ourselves to work and struggle for with a close and respectful reading of our culture. Likewise, in our critical reading of the condition of our oppression, we did it from the context and consciousness of our own culture. And when we conceived and advocated a revolutionary solution to the problem confronting us, i.e., *cultural revolution within and political revolution without*, it was from a Black perspective, rooted deeply and defiantly in our own African culture. And that culture we understood as ancient and modern, continental and diasporan.

We began to build within the framework of several interrelated concepts. First, we argued that we are, above all, a cultural community, a cultural nation, and that the struggle for liberation requires that we free ourselves culturally so that we can imagine and aspire to freedom and act decisively and defiantly to achieve it. Indeed, we argued that the problem of oppression or unfreedom is first a problem of cultural dominance by the established order which not only often masks the various ways it oppresses, but also causes the oppressed to accept their oppression. Moreover, we said the key crisis and challenge in Black life is the cultural crisis and the challenge to overcome this crisis and the cultural dominance of the established order which causes it. Thus, we embraced Malcolm’s call for cultural revolution.

When we spoke and speak of culture, we meant and mean not simply music, art, literature, language or clothes as our rivals and opponents dishonestly misrepresented us. Rather, we defined and define culture as *the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself*,

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celebrates, sustains and develops itself, and introduces itself to history and humanity. And this occurs in seven basic areas: history, religion (spirituality and ethics), social organization, economic organization, political organization, creative production (art, music, literature, dance), and ethos, the collective psychology shaped by activities in the other six areas.

To talk of cultural revolution in this context is to talk of radical transformation in every area of life—how we think about and act on ideas, issues, events; how we understand and assert ourselves in the world. In a word, cultural revolution is the ideological and practical struggle to rescue and reconstruct our own culture and ourselves from the dominance of the existing order, to free our hearts and minds as a preparation and parallel process in the overall struggle *to free our whole lives* from White racist domination, deprivation and degradation. Without a cultural revolution to free us from psychological imprisonment by the oppressor, we argued, there can be no real liberation of the people. But without political or social revolution, the radical restructuring of society, a dynamic self-affirming and self-determining culture cannot be created and liberation in its fullest sense is compromised and incomplete.

To wage our liberation struggle, we did not go to Europe or its descendants to borrow ideas and concepts to design and construct our social vision and strategy for struggle. For it is a fundamental proposition of *Kawaida* philosophy that our oppressor cannot be our teacher. We turned to Africa as a continent and as a global community to identify, extract and emulate our highest values and best practices. We call this *dialoguing with African culture*, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental issues and challenges of our people and humankind.

We embraced Africa as a moral ideal and understood our people, our moral and spiritual

teachings and the narrative of our awesome march thru human history as sacred. And we understood our highest models of life and struggle as second to none in their richness and worthiness of respect, remembrance and emulation. Within this framework and on this foundation, we of Us have strived and continued to strive to be a righteous reflection of our people—to mirror their continuous resilience, creative resourcefulness and relentless resistance. We have struggled also to emulate our people's enduring strength in struggle, their adaptive vitality in life and their unyielding hopefulness in the midst of the holocausts and horrors of history. And this model we believe is worthy of remembrance, celebration and emulation.

And so, fifty years (plus four) after our first act of revolt and call for revolution, we have not turned our back on our Blackness or participated in the dignity-denying attempts to camouflage, erase or bleach away our identity or accept the indignity of pretending to be “blackish”. Furthermore, we still know and declare “Black is beautiful”; that “Back to Black” is not simply a slogan, but a liberating and dignity-demanding proposal and practice, and that “Liberation is coming from a Black thing” or it won't come at all.

For we are still convinced that we are our own liberators; that a people that cannot save itself is lost forever; and that no matter how numerous or sincere our allies are, it is we who seek liberation who must strike the first, the final and decisive blow in this our awesome and ongoing struggle. Indeed, it is we, ourselves, who must have and demonstrate the will, do the work and wage the struggle for real and full liberation and dare imagine and bring into being, with others similarly motivated and in motion, a new world and way of being human, paying constant and rightful attention to the well-being of the world.▲

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