



US AT 53: REAFFIRMING OUR REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT AND RADICAL IMAGINATION

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

PART 2. WITHIN THE ARC OF OUR REVOLUTIONARY spirit and radical imagination in Us was the emphasis we placed on groundedness in our own culture and tradition. Thus, we taught that “To go back to tradition is the first step forward.” This is the meaning of the Movement call of “Back to Black.” But we also argued, stressing critical reasoning, that we must always choose the best of our tradition. We who considered ourselves conscious, committed and engaged in the struggle stated that “Yesterday we thought we were negroes. Today we know we are Black (people) but we still have some negro habits.” For as we say in Kawaïda, *we are American by habit and African by choice* and we must choose to be African every day, choose to practice the dignity-affirming life-enhancing moral and social values that define and sustain us in the work we do, the struggle we wage and the life we live.

We embraced the spirit of liberation and revolution encompassing the world and declared ourselves and our program revolutionary. And our description as “armed and training and planning for revolution” by the FBI and our appearance on every government list any other group designated revolutionary was on, give evidence of the targeting, political imprisonment, forced exile, and systematic and continuing suppression inflicted on Us by the established order. Following Malcolm, Toure, Fanon, Nkrumah, Cabral and others, we stated “We are revolutionists. We believe in change. We believe in being realistic but as for reality, we have come to change it.” This revolutionary transformation, Us argued, must be of self as well as society, and that we require a radical reconception of ourselves and society. For “revolution to us is the creation of an alternative,” an *intellectually sound, morally worthy and socially relevant* radical alternative to the oppressive established order of things. We said, “You can’t have a revolution without culture, because culture is the value system that teaches Blacks an appreciation for revolution” and commitment to struggles on every level.

Indeed, we maintained “Culture is the basis of revolution and recovery,” the self-determined sense of ourselves and our mission of radical far-reaching transformation.

We also said we’re nationalists and that “we have come to undermine the myth of white supremacy” as well as overturn the institutions and practice that give expression to this myth. Here again is the link between culture and politics, between the cultural revolution and the political dimension of the overall revolution. There is thus a need for a *revolutionary cultural nationalism* and a *revolutionary political nationalism* and we embraced and practiced both. “Nationalism is a belief that Black people are a cultural nation,” striving to come into political existence, we argued. That is to say, they are striving to control the space they occupy, the institutions of their communities; to freely choose and hold accountable their own representatives and to participate meaningfully, effectively and equitably in every decision that affects their destiny and daily lives in this and the coming radically reconstructed society.

Our nationalism starts with this essential understanding which became a central point of departure for Kawaïda as well as Black liberation theology: “the fact that we are Black is our ultimate reality.” Thus, we said, “If you know you are Black then your purpose is to build Black” to define, defend and advance the interest of Black people in the most positive dignity-affirming, life-enhancing ways. Nationalism at its best, we argued, is not reactive, but reaffirming. And thus, “Nationalism is not merely a response to white oppression but a need for Black people to come together” come together to build community, define, defend and advance our interests and wage the liberation struggle, and with other progressive, oppressive and struggling peoples to imagine and bring into be a new and more ethical, caring, just and beautiful world.

Moreover, “A nationalist has love of his (her) people and the values of his (her) nation; and accepts the responsibility that “membership

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in the Black community requires more than physical presence” and that the people and the values must be recognized and respected in practice. And no practice in oppression is more important than that which resists the oppressor and honors, empowers, elevates and liberates the community in righteous and respectful ways. But here agency and the will to be ourselves and free ourselves are indispensable. For as we said, “If Black people want to build a Black nation, they have to want to do so. No nation can exist without the will to exist.” Thus, we were and are first of all nationalists, those who love our people, our nation, and commit ourselves to their liberation and a life of happiness, well-being and flourishing. And we were and are *cultural nationalists* committed to cultural revolution as indispensable to the political revolution; preceding it, making it possible and sustaining it. And we are and were *revolutionary nationalists*, indeed, *revolutionary cultural nationalists*.

We reasoned that revolutionary transformation of conditions of life required power; power required organization; and organization required a philosophy of life and struggle to educate and mobilize and organize the energies of the masses who are the ultimate power which must radically confront and defeat the enemy. Thus, we said, “We must have an organization that thinks, acts, breathes and sleeps the question of power.” It is, we said, a question of gaining, maintaining and using power in the interest of the liberation and an enhanced life of our people. We aimed and struggled for Black power; we organized on the local and national level and were a key theorist and main organizer of the Black Power Conferences in Newark (1967) and Philadelphia (1968) and helped lay the basis for the emergence of Black political power in Newark which culminated in the election of the first Black mayor and numerous council persons. We offered a definition of Black Power that remains constantly used, but seldom attributed to

us. We defined Black Power as “the means to obtain three things: self-determination, self-respect and self-defense.” This meant in brief: gaining control of our destiny and daily lives; creating and practicing a culture of struggle and reaffirmation of our people and the practice of the right and responsibility to defend and free ourselves.

In the midst of our youthful exuberance, a revolutionary sense of mission and life-and-death commitment, we declared for ourselves, our generation and our people, that “We are the last revolutionaries in America. And if we fail to leave a legacy of revolution for our children, we have failed our mission and should be dismissed as unimportant.” It is with this in mind, even after 53 years and through so many others have sat down, turned away and walked away, we still are equally and actively committed to our revolutionary mission of service, work, struggle and institutional-building in the process and practice of the radical transformation of ourselves, society and ultimately the world.

WE WERE ALIVE WITH THE IDEA AND practice of liberation and inspired with a revolutionary spirit and radical imagination that come especially from youthful and outrageous assumptions about what can and must be done, an unrestrained unwillingness to wait and a defiant courage and active commitment to confront the established order, wage righteous and relentless struggle, and make the sacrifices necessary to see it through *regardless*. And I say, “active commitment” to stress that even with our inexperience and our still evolving knowledge of the world and “how things work,” we knew then as now that it is in the fire and furnace of struggle, itself, that the deepest revolutionary spirit and radical imagination take root, are constantly renewed and ultimately flourish. And as it was then, so it is now.▲

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