



**“DISCERNING HAJI MALCOLM’S MORAL SELF-DEFINITION:
UPLIFTING ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES”**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE MOVE INTO MAY, THE MONTH OF Nana Haji Malcolm’s coming into being and the imminent completion of my extensive original work, *The Liberation Ethics of Haji Malcolm X: Critical Consciousness, Moral Grounding and Transformative Struggle*, I would like to share some thoughts from this text in commemoration and celebration of his radically instructive and uplifting life and legacy. In his press conference to announce his disengagement from the Nation of Islam and his intention to move forward in his life’s work and struggle in the interests of his people, Haji Malcolm offers a moral self-definition which is key to our understanding him and how he understood himself. He began by saying he had called the press conference “in order to clarify my own position in the struggle” and to let all know that “I, myself, intend to be very active in every phase of the (African American) struggle for human rights”. Thus, Haji Malcolm’s moral self-definition begins with his locating himself in the midst of community, the African American community. Here Molefi Asante’s ethical insistence on self-location as a requirement for a self-respecting and self-affirming identity is highly relevant.

For Haji Malcolm, himself, already poses, without philosophical elaboration or similar categories of concern, the ethical need for self-recognition and self-location in community, not only for psychological health, but also for an ethical conception of oneself and one’s responsibility in and for community. In this context, Haji Malcolm notes that he is not only an African American, but also identifies his community as a *community in struggle*.

Thus, his moral self-definition is not only grounded in culture and community, but also in an ethics of struggle, a liberation struggle to free his people and secure for them their human rights. And here, we are informed of his self-conception and commitment as a freedom fighter, a conception which is both ethical and socio-political.

It is important here to note that Haji Malcolm places his reaffirmation of his identity as a Muslim in the midst of the reaffirmation of his commitment to the struggle of his people and his self-conscious role as moral teacher, leader, co-worker and co-combatant. Religion for him is never an isolated personal practice of ritual and reflection, but always a holistic and integrated personal and collective practice and worship. And worship is not simply ritual, but also hard work and righteous struggle - internal and external, freeing the heart and mind, but also liberating the bodies, work and lives of the people so that there is neither religious persecution nor social oppression.

Haji Malcolm goes on to reaffirm his identity and commitment as a Muslim, saying: “I am and will always be a Muslim. My religion is Islam”. Here Malcolm wants us to know and respect the spiritual and ethical ground he stands on in matters of faith. This reaffirmation of faith is important to distinguish between his disassociation from the Nation and his continuing commitment to his religion. For as he repeatedly emphasizes, his religion is the ground of faith on which he stands and which provides him with an indispensable anchor of belief, hope and commitment to struggle and doing good in the world

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which defines and gives mission and meaning to his life. Malcolm’s conception of Islam is rooted in profound belief in the Divine joined with the moral obligation to know; a solid sense of agency directed toward righteous transformation of self, society and the world; and a moral consciousness that informs and guides that agency in doing and securing good in the world.

Haji Malcolm also expresses in his moral self-definition a humbleness central to his piety and as evidence of his credibility and worthiness to continue and expand his ministerial mission and sebaic (educational) vocation in the context of the Black Liberation Movement. He states, “I do not pretend to be a divine man, but I do believe in divine guidance, divine power, and in the fulfillment of divine prophecy. I am not educated, nor am I an expert in any particular field - but I am sincere, and my sincerity is my credentials”. It is this humbleness in strength, knowledge and leadership that informs his identification with the masses and his taking up their cause. And it is also one of the main characteristics which endeared him to the masses and his people as a whole.

Likewise, in his description of himself as not being educated, he is again self-effacing, in the practice of the virtue of humbleness. For clearly, Malcolm is “uneducated” only in the most formal and technical sense of “being educated” as completing a certain number of years in an educational institution. Certainly, he was an erudite autodidact, impressively self-educated, demonstrating a remarkable depth and breadth of knowledge gained from extensive and varied reading, lived experiences, teachings, study and reflection. His denial of being “an expert in

any particular field” also is a reaffirmation of his commitment to make no pretensions or arrogant claims, and to practice a humbleness as a virtue of both a religious requirement and an ethical understanding of oneself. But Haji Malcolm is indeed an expert in several areas, i.e., organizer, institution builder, lecturer, debater, but above all, a minister and teacher, and as we say in Us, “a master teacher of the good, the right and the possible” in the Islamic and Sebaic tradition.

Haji Malcolm’s affirmation of sincerity as a cardinal and defining virtue for him is at the same time a distinguishing of himself from the betrayer of trust and the hypocrite. Both in his pre-Islamic life and during his life as a Muslim, he was consistent and relentless in his criticism and condemnation of treachery and treacherousness, hypocrisy and the falsity and betrayal that accompany them. Indeed, Haji Malcolm argues that he and his people are victims of an Americanism and its racialized and racist democracy which as system and substance is “nothing but disguised hypocrisy”. Thus, he speaks to the false messages posted by the system pushing its self-congratulatory hypocritical claims of freedom, justice and equality for all while denying them to his people and others deemed unworthy and vulnerable to degradation, exploitation and oppression.

Clearly, one of Haji Malcolm’s most admired and praised character traits was his commitment to truth - to seeking it and speaking it with courage and conviction both in the audacious and frank assertion of facts and in the “courageous questioning”, *nedjnedj ken*, which Seba Rekhmira in the Kawaida Maatian tradition, cites as a defining feature of the Maatian activist-intellectual and thus,

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a valued and virtuous practice in learning, life and speaking truth. In this regard, Haji Malcolm may be counted among those Muslims who are *ṣiddiq*, which means in Arabic one who never lies and speaks nothing but truth. Certainly, these meanings of *ṣadiq* in its intensive form *ṣiddiq* speak to Malcolm’s moral self-conception and expansive moral commitment to his God, his faith, his people and his ministerial mission and sebaic vocation.

INDEED, HAJI MALCOLM’S INTERNAL AND external *jihad* was, as he defines, being a Muslim, i.e., “striving to live a life of

righteousness” and to make the liberating and uplifting “principles of the Qur’an a *living reality*”. For at the heart of Haji Malcolm’s understanding of Islam is its liberating and uplifting capacity; its representing and teaching Allah’s will for freedom, justice, equality and dignity-affirming good in the world; and its call for Muslims to show agency by striving greatly and righteously to achieve these goods for themselves and others, especially the oppressed, suffering and struggling peoples of the world.▲

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