

Kawaida, Cultural Nationalism and Struggle: Setting the Revolutionary Record Straight

by

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Dr. Maulana Karenga holds two Ph.D.'s, the first in political science with a focus on the theory and practice of nationalism from United States International University, a second in social ethics with a focus on the classical African ethics of ancient Egypt from the University of Southern California, and a honorary doctorate of Humanities for intellectual and practical work in the interest of African peoples from the University of Durban, Westville in South Africa. He is the foremost exponent of Maatian ethical thought, having developed over the last three decades via a creative and scholarly Kawaida interpretation of ancient Egyptian ethical thought as a living tradition and as a useful philosophical option for critical

reflection on the urgent issues of our time. His second dissertation, a major work of 803 pages titled *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (submitted in 1996) was the most requested work from UMI out of 45,000 dissertations and theses worldwide in 1996, and thus, published as a book in 2002 to receive praise from the Africana Studies and Egyptological communities as a seminal and defining work which has opened up a valuable new dialog with ancient Egyptian thought and culture. As an activist-scholar of national and international recognition, Dr. Karenga has had a far-reaching effect on Black intellectual and political culture since the 1960s. Through his organizational and intellectual work, and his philosophy of *Kawaida*, he has played a vanguard role in shaping the Black Arts Movement, Black Studies, the Black Power Movement, the Black Student Union Movement, Afrocentricity, ancient Egyptian studies and the study of ancient Egyptian culture as an essential part of Black Studies, Ifa ethical studies, rites of passage programs, the independent Black school movement, African life-cycle ceremonies, the Simba Wachanga youth movement, Black theological and ethical discourse, and the reparations movement.

Moreover, he is the executive director of the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies in Los Angeles, a board member of National Council for Black Studies, a member of the African Heritage Studies Association, the California Black Faculty and Staff Association, the California Faculty Association, TransAfrica Forum, executive director of the African American Cultural Center (Us) in Los Angeles, an editorial board member of the *Journal of Black Studies*, the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, and the *Black Scholar*, and national chairman of The Organization Us, a cultural and social change organization, so named to stress the communitarian focus of the organization; he has also played a key role in national Black united front efforts, serving on the founding and executive committee of the Black Power Conferences of the 60's, the National Black United Front, the National African American Leadership Summit, the Black Leadership Retreat, the National Association of Kawaida Organizations, and on the executive council of the national organizing committee of the historic Million Man March/Day of Absence, and subsequently, the author of the Million Man March/Day of Absence mission statement.

As September, the month of celebrating Us' 49th anniversary draws to an end and there is much talk about developing a national strategy of struggle, it is of no small importance to address and expose one of the most pervasive and pernicious myths to emerge from the Black Power Movement of the 1960's. And this is the artificial, uninformed and divisive distinction routinely made between revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism. Like the old myths of the flatness of the earth and the witchery of women, this mythic distinction depends more on a disabling unawareness and general acquiescence and agreement than on evidence and analysis of any serious and supportable kind. It is simply something one repeats without sensing the need to explain the distinction or explore the reasons and origin of its contrived construction.

Moreover, those who claim to be revolutionary nationalists as distinct from and opposed to cultural nationalists never define the terms or talk seriously about revolution, nationalism or culture. Indeed, even the self-named and reciprocally-referenced Black Power scholars offer nothing but constantly re-treaded and condemnatory catch phrases about cultural nationalism, without the slightest intellectual effort to explore the rich and varied complexity of the term and especially, how it expresses itself in Kawaida philosophy and practice. Even a book that pretends to be a major study of Us and me in its title is little more than a longer form of the clichéd conceptions and character assassination found in smaller spaces. Only Molefi Asante's book, *Maulana Karenga: An Intellectual Portrait*, lays a foundation and framework for an accurate, honest, open-textured depiction of and discourse on me, my intellectual and practical work and that of our organization Us. The rest reflect an ideological preference for a selected group, a poverty of theory and vision, and shameless catering to publication preferences of members of the dominant society who are used to determining who shall be the Black group to be preferred, praised and promoted or indicted, condemned and omitted.

Here below are some essential ideas and information to set the revolutionary record straight about Us, its commitment to revolution and cultural nationalism without separating the two or sacrificing one for the other intellectually or in struggle. We understood revolution as a process and practice of struggle for radical transformation of ourselves, society and the world, altering relations of power, wealth and cultural dominance, expanding the realm of freedom and following Malcolm and Fanon, joining other oppressed and struggling people in the world-encompassing task of opening the horizon for a new history of humankind. And we understood nationalism as thought and practice rooted in the conception that we are a distinct historical and cultural personality, and that we have the right and responsibility to exist and to define, defend and promote our political, economic and cultural interests as a people, to free ourselves and be ourselves, and to make our own unique contribution to the forward flow of human history. And we saw and see this as a process and practice of liberation.

From its inception, we of Us saw ourselves as revolutionary *and* cultural nationalists, in a word, as *revolutionary cultural nationalists*. In our earliest public presentations and publications, we understood ourselves and our generation as revolutionaries, dedicated to the far-reaching, deep and radical transformation of ourselves, society, and the world only revolution could achieve. It was our response to the revolutionary challenge of the age to our generation posed by a worldwide revolutionary rising in which Malcolm rightly situated our liberation struggle. Our position and practice also evolved out of Fanon's call for us to determine our generational mission and then "fulfill it or betray it". And the mission could only be a revolutionary one, given the transformative reality of revolution engulfing the world.

Thus, in the *The Quotable Karenga*, our earliest formal publication, we dared to declare with the shared boundless energy and utopian vision and sense of revolutionary mission of youth in struggle all over the world, "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". This legacy, of course, is one of righteous, relentless and radical struggle, and this call and commitment remains one of our central motivations for continuing the struggle, not, like so many others, reconsidering or resigning, not taking a back seat or even worse, sitting on the sidelines blaming everyone but themselves for losing faith, turning faddish, flipping over and walking away from the battlefield before the struggle is won.

Like Malcolm, we saw and see revolution and culture as interrelated and interdependent, and thus, we made and make no artificial distinction between cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism. Rather, we saw culture and cultural revolution as part and parcel of the liberation struggle. As Malcolm said, "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle". Moreover, Malcolm taught that "We must recapture our heritage and our identity, if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire population". And we took this seriously.

Also, following Malcolm, we linked the love of nationalism with the love of revolution and argued his position that “if you love revolution, you love Black nationalism”. Thus, by definition, “A revolutionary is a Black nationalist” and real Black nationalists are those who love and struggle to liberate their nation, i.e., their people, are a revolutionaries. Thus, as revolutionaries and cultural nationalists responding to the demands of history and the liberation struggle, we said in the Sixties, “Nationalism today by its very nature has to be revolutionary, if it is for liberation”. Moreover, we of Us maintained that cultural grounding and cultural revolution are indispensable for “Culture provides the bases for revolution and recovery”. Here we define culture in its most inclusive sense, i.e., as the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself, and introduces itself to history and humanity. Given this, we advanced the proposition that “culture is the basis for all ideas, images and action, (and thus) to move is to move culturally, i.e., by a set of values given to you by your culture”. And therefore, we agreed with Sekou Toure and Amilcar Cabral who contended that “the national liberation struggle is an expression and ‘act of culture’ ”. For the process and practice of revolution or liberation presupposes and requires a *culture of struggle* which demands it, prepares, aids and sustains it, and brings it to successful conclusion.

Clearly, Us saw and defined itself as a revolutionary vanguard organization and second to none in its ideology, intention and practice directed toward radical transformation of self, society and ultimately the world in the interest of African and human liberation and flourishing. Culture was its area of focus and emphasis, an inclusive emphasis as distinct from a singular area emphasis of those who were political, religious and economic nationalists. For to be a *cultural* nationalist is to deal with every area of a people’s life, not just one, and to seek to lay a philosophical foundation and inspire a given practice of liberation for each.

Us was also early defined as a radical and revolutionary organization by the U.S. government and its police and “intelligence” forces and put on every surveillance and suppression list that any other group so considered was placed. We were also victims of the Cointelpro, as was the NOI, RNA, SCLC and others, not simply one group. And we suffered police suppression, political imprisonment and were forced underground and into exile also. The record is there; the historians have read it; they simply refuse to report it for various intellectually dishonest and ideologically motivated reasons.

Moreover, to set the revolutionary record straight, it is also important to note that the category “revolutionary” was claimed by all groups, including Us, who were engaged in serious and sustained resistance to the established order during the liberation struggle of the Sixties. Indeed, as Malcolm taught, and Us maintained, our very condition of oppression and the character of the times called us into struggle and demanded a revolutionary response. That is to say, a response that was the radical rejection of and resistance to White supremacy in all its oppressive forms, i.e., racist, capitalist, imperialist, colonialist, etc. Thus, no one group can truthfully claim exclusive ownership of the term or the times and pretend only they merit recognition and respect for radical thought and practice.

In addition, no one thinking critically can seriously believe that any one Black group by itself was a threat to the internal security of the U.S., let alone “the greatest threat”. Here we must make a distinction between Hoover’s manipulative propaganda to heighten public fear and racist loathing and to suppress *our whole Movement*, using its most media visible group, and his real fear which was of *our unity and coordinated struggle as a self-conscious, revolutionary and transformative social force*. Also, we, like the African and other Third world revolutionaries of the time, i.e., Malcolm X, Fanon, Cabral, Robert and Mabel Williams, et al, affirmed the right and responsibility of a people to struggle for “freedom by any means necessary” including armed defense and resistance to systemic and vigilante violence. And no one can seriously deny the quality of our struggle commitment, training and discipline.

We were anti-capitalist, advocating African socialism, defined in great part by Mwalimu Nyerere’s concept of *Ujamaa*. We taught and practiced draft resistance, cooperatively organized and held anti-war rallies and teach-ins against imperialist wars in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and supported the right of self-determination for all peoples. We advocated reparations and prisoners’ rights, trained Kasisi (chaplains) to counsel and advise prisoners and provided literature and lawyers where possible. We supported African liberation movements and pan-Africanist projects and built alliances with various Third World organizations engaging in the struggles that gave rise to and defined the times.

Realizing with other liberation movements that we have to build and sustain the people as we fight, we committed ourselves to work, service, struggle and institution-building. Thus, we established numerous organizing initiatives and worked in cooperative projects to build institutions to provide affordable housing, accessible health care and quality education; end police abuse, establish economic cooperatives; increase political participation and expand space for cultural grounding, creativity and performances.

Regardless of the misrepresentation of Kawaida cultural nationalism, it is thought and practice rooted in three fundamental propositions directed toward cultural and political transformation. First, the defining feature of any people or nation is its culture. Secondly, for a people to be itself and free itself, it must be self-conscious, self-determining and rooted in its own culture. And thirdly, the quality of life of a people and the success of its liberation struggle depend upon its waging cultural revolution within and political revolution without, resulting in the radical transformation of self, society and ultimately the world.

Now the essential aim here is to build the cultural basis to initiate, wage and sustain the liberation struggle which aims, as Fanon reminds us, not only to free the land, but also the people inhabiting it; not only the country, but our consciousness. As he said, “After the struggle there is not only the disappearance of colonialism, but also the disappearance of the colonized person”. The patient and persistent cultural and political education of the masses, before and in the midst of struggle, “brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men and women and with it, a new language and a new humanity”.

Thus, we joined Malcolm in calling for and waging a cultural revolution, still in process, not only as Malcolm said to “unbrainwash an entire people”, but equally important to facilitate our people’s self-conscious return to their own history and to the upward paths of the best of our culture in order to wage the ongoing liberation struggle to free ourselves and be ourselves in the most dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-respecting ways. Thus, we define cultural revolution as the ideological and practical struggle to retrieve and reconstruct our culture, extract from it and create ideas, institutions and practices which break the cultural hegemony of the oppressor and transforms the people, engaging them in the liberation struggle, and enabling them to become self-conscious agents of their own lives and liberation.

It is this understanding and engagement with our people and the liberation struggle that has enabled us to continue struggling these 49 years, even after the Movement, and when so many others have surrendered or turned around and been reduced to bitter and faulty memories, disfiguring grudges, petty recriminations and pathetic character assassination. Indeed, it is our continuing commitment to our people and Kawaiida philosophy and to its grounding principles and mandatory liberational practice that has sustained us and reaffirms our reasoned faith in the righteousness and eventual victory of our struggle. Indeed, we refuse to be defeated, dispirited or diverted from our original commitment to Black liberation, cultural revolution, radical social change, and the ancient African ethical imperative to constantly struggle to bring and sustain good in the world.