



**CONCEIVING AND CREATING KWANZAA IN STRUGGLE:
REMEMBERING AND REAFFIRMING ITS LIBERATIONAL ORIGINS**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 12-09-21, p. C1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS DECEMBER OPENS UP EXPANDED CONVERSATIONS and questions about the origins and practice of Kwanzaa in anticipation of its 55th anniversary celebrations by millions of African peoples around the world, it is good to remember and reaffirm its liberational origins in struggle. For indeed, Kwanzaa was conceived and created in the midst of struggle, in the transformative fire and force of the Black Freedom Movement. In 1965, the Year of the Revolt in Watts and greater Los Angeles, I was a graduate student at UCLA working on my doctorate in political science with a specialization in African Studies. But my mind and heart were turned toward the liberation struggle of our people. And the August Revolt signaled a turning point for both me and the Black Freedom Movement.

For in the year 1965, the Revolt would mark a new phase of the Black Freedom Movement, from its Civil Rights phase (1955-1965) to its Black Power phase (1965-1975). It is in this context that I, and many of my colleagues, felt a compelling need to leave the academy to join the Movement and hopefully contribute meaningfully to it. It did not mean we would totally distance ourselves from the life of learning and our colleagues who stayed or fail to see the academy as a critical site of struggle. On the contrary, it is taking the struggle to campus that opened it up for Black Studies and other Ethnic Studies, ending the uninterrupted racist reign of the Eurocentric self-congratulatory cultural narrative masquerading as an academic curriculum.

The question for me and us who temporarily left the academy was one posed by our foremother Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. She said “knowledge is the prime need of the hour. But people will want to know what will

you do with your knowledge?” And her answer was that we who have knowledge and continue to learn must “discover the dawn and share it with our youth and the masses of our people who need it most.” And in a context of righteous and relentless struggle, this for me meant conceiving and creating something that would serve the interests of our people and our struggle and endure in meaning and relevance in our lives, our thought, and our practice. Also, Nana Haji Malcolm had called us to righteous and relentless struggle, pointing to the revolutionary youth around the world, and for us, offering the *Simba* liberation soldiers of the Congo as a special model.

So, I first founded the organization Us, a revolutionary, cultural and social change organization to join the Movement and make our contribution as a collective rather than simply as a person. Also, since the beginning of my graduate studies, I had begun to develop a philosophy of life, work and struggle which I named *Kawaida*, a Swahili word that means for us tradition and reason, a rationally derived morally sensitive and a culturally rooted way of understanding and engaging self, society and the world. I defined *Kawaida* philosophy as “an ongoing synthesis of the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world.” By African I meant and mean continental and diasporan African, ancient and modern. And from this, I sought and seek to extract, pursue, practice and put forth the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense of the words.

It is from this philosophy and the extensive research I engaged in in African languages and cultures that I created first the *Nguzo Saba* and then *Kwanzaa*. And it is important to note and stress, I created both in the

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context of my organization Us whose advocates (members) were critical, even indispensable, to what I imagined, created and achieved. It is in Us in the midst of our collective work, service, struggle and institution building that the Nguzo Saba and Kwanzaa are conceived, created, introduced, discussed, developed, practiced, and eventually presented to the world African community.

I created the Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles) as a Black value system, an African value system, a foundation and framework for being ourselves and freeing ourselves through striving and struggle. The practice of these principles was directed toward a constant striving and struggling for the good in the world, achieving and maintaining good and always becoming and being good. These values are communitarian, that is to say, they understand and engage the human person in community, related and relating in principled, purposeful and productive ways. Thus, they stress interrelatedness, togetherness, caring, cooperation, collaboration, other-directedness, and striving and struggle. We are to strive and struggle for the presence and practice of *Umoja* (unity); *Kujichagulia* (self-determination); *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility); *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics); *Nia* (purpose); *Kuumba* (creativity) and *Imani* (faith).

Moreover, these principles and practices were introduced to offer a culturally and morally grounded guidance for the way we live our lives, do our work and wage our struggle. They serve as fundamental sources for grounding ourselves, orienting ourselves and directing our lives toward good and expansive ends. They offer liberating alternatives to vulgar individualism, mindless consumerism, degrading imitation of others, disconcern for others and alienation from the earth and our responsibility towards it.

It is in imaging how I could best introduce and teach these Seven Principles, the *Nguzo Saba*, that I began to conceive and create Kwanzaa as a seven-day holiday. For each day of Kwanzaa is dedicated to each of the Seven Principles. Kwanzaa, then, becomes an act of freedom, an instrument of freedom, and a celebration of freedom. It is rooted in the fundamental Kawaida contention that freeing ourselves culturally is indispensable to freeing ourselves politically, that until we break the cultural hold that the oppressor has in so many of our minds, liberation is not only impossible, its unthinkable, unconceivable.

Therefore, we argued and argue that cultural revolution precedes, makes possible, supports and sustains the political revolution. We saw and continue to see ourselves as revolutionaries, revolutionary cultural nationalists. And in spite of the willful distortions of its meaning, this position interprets culture not as the arts or any one aspect of a people's life. On the contrary, Kawaida defines culture 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. Thus, as Nana Sekou Toure and Nana Amilcar Cabral taught, the national liberation struggle itself is an expression of culture. This is to say, it is an expression of a culture that calls it into being, supports it and sustains it.

And we define cultural nationalism, Kawaida cultural nationalism, revolutionary and liberation nationalism, as thought and practice rooted in three fundamental propositions. The first is that 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

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of life of a people and the success of their liberation struggle depends upon their waging cultural revolution within and political revolution without, resulting in the radical transformation of self, society and the world. It is as Nana Frantz Fanon proposed, bringing into being a new man and woman and starting a whole new history of humankind.

|SO, KWANZAA WAS AND REMAINS AN ACT of freedom, as an act of reaffirmation and resistance, reaffirmation of ourselves and our right to be ourselves and free ourselves and in resistance to European cultural and political domination. It was and

is an instrument of freedom, a means of creating critical free space for us to be our African selves, giving us grounding and guidance to be ourselves and free ourselves, return to our history and culture and build our community in good, meaningful and transformative ways. And Kwanzaa is and has always been also a celebration of freedom, a celebration of freedom from the negative conceptions of ourselves by a racist society, and freedom to see and sing ourselves in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and liberating ways, and raise high and focus on the beauty, goodness, sacredness and awesome responsibility of being African in the world.▲

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