



**MALCOLM X, HISTORY AND STRUGGLE:
GROUNDING, INSIGHT AND ACTION**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

It is Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, freedom fighter, warrior-priest and prophet, opener of a new way to understand ourselves and the world, who taught the indispensability of an effective knowledge of history which in turn becomes both an invaluable resource and worthy reward. Indeed, he said “of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research.” History, he taught, is not only a resource necessary to understand the past, i.e., “the origins and causes of things” and their development thru time. It also enables us to “understand the present and be prepared for the future.” Malcolm also understood history as a necessary corrective for the diminished and distorted conception of our identity cultivated by the oppressor thru the creation of an artificial entity called “negro”, a non-historical being “who has no history, and by having no history . . . has no culture,” and thus extracted from their roots, understand themselves as a derivative and dependent part of their oppressor.

Within this understanding, Malcolm argues that a right reading of and grounding in history will lead to both critical insight and transformative action—insight into our real identity, the nature of our oppression and the possibilities of overcoming it and to radical action to transform ourselves, society and the world. In the founding document of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, he says “A race of people is like an individual . . .; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself.” He is concerned with our loss of historical memory of our life and achievement in Africa and our history of achievement and resistance in this country and hemisphere. He discusses our being uprooted from our history and culture and

made to think that “Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, Georgia and some of those other prison states” are the beginning and end of all we are. He speaks of Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman as well as Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Toussaint L’Overture of Haiti to widen the arc of our historical interest and sense of self in this hemisphere, stressing memory of resistance as a core component of our historical grounding. But he also focuses on ancient Africa and the high level of learning and achievement in Egypt, Ghana, Mali and Songhai and elsewhere. And he stresses the joint role of Black men and women in the development of humanity and human civilization saying to us, “It was your grandfather’s hands (that) forged civilization and it was your grandmother’s hands (that) rocked the cradle of civilization.” Indeed, he says “our culture and our history are as old as man himself.” Moreover, he states it’s our combined achievements which contributed greatly “to the growth and development of this country” in moral, intellectual and material terms. His argument is that we must understand ourselves in world historical ways involving not just this country, but also Africa and the world.

Key to the oppressor’s enslavement of us, Malcolm teaches, was his efforts to erase our memories of what we did and thus undermine our conception of what we could do. But in recovering the memories of our past and evidence that once we “had attained a higher level, had made great achievements, contributions to society, civilization, science and so forth; (then) you know if you once did it, you can do it again.” Thus, a correct reading of history, ancient and modern, Malcolm tells us, helps us cultivate “a balanced mind”, i.e., a balanced approach to the self-assessment and self-understanding of our identity, achievements, power and pos-

sibilities as persons and a people. It is in this context that we acquire “the incentive, the inspiration and energy necessary to duplicate what our (ancestors) formerly did” and develop even and ever farther.

But without history and culture a people withers away for lack of grounding or rootedness. For “just as a tree without roots is dead, a people without history or cultural roots also becomes a dead people.” The slow death as a people began with what Malcolm calls the “slave maker”, who was dedicated not only to enslaving the body but also emptying the mind, replacing memory and giving Africans a false, bleached and unBlack conception of themselves. His intention was to take our names and self-knowledge, our history, culture and all that enabled us to identify and distinguish ourselves in dignity-affirming ways from our oppressor. His devilish design was to make us totally derivative beings, hopelessly and pathetically dependent on him for affirmation, understanding and even existence. Thus, Malcolm says this great crime, the Holocaust of African enslavement, was not simply the mass physical murder of tens of millions of African men, women and children, i.e., physical genocide, but also cultural genocide, conscious attempts which continue in modified forms today, to break the will and alter the memory and minds of our people and make them little more than receptacles for self-hate, oppressor worship, and the servile search for oppressor approval in every area of life.

For Malcolm, a Muslim minister and moral teacher, our Holocaust is “human history’s greatest crime”, a morally monstrous destruction of human life and culture which must be atoned for as demanded by “the unchanging law of divine justice”. And he wonders aloud “what atonement would the God of justice demand for the robbery of Black people’s labor, their lives, their true identities, their culture, their history and even their human dignity?” Concerning this demand of justice, Malcolm, contends that part of understanding the will of God is to understand his will for humans to be free, to live lives of dignity and decency and humans’ unshirkable responsibility to struggle to free themselves. In Malcolm’s liberation theology, we are living in a time of great transition which marks “the end of White supremacy”. And our liberation struggle and those of the masses of the peoples of the world are “all part of God’s plan” and will for us and others “to establish a world based on freedom, justice, equality” and peace. We are for Malcolm, then, morally obligated not only to be serious students of history, but also a moral vanguard and midwives of history, engaged in the awesome and ongoing labor and struggle of liberation in its most dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-encompassing form. Here Malcolm would argue we must turn our preaching and prayers into practice, our anger at injustice into corrective action, and our rightful longing for a new world into the hard work and struggle to bring it into being.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Black Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, [www.Us-Organization.org and www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org].