



**RIGHTFULLY REMEMBERING OUR ENSLAVEMENT AND FREEDOM:
JUNE LATE NEWS VS. RELENTLESS STRUGGLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS A SANKOFA REVISITING AND REFLECTION on our rightful remembering.

The celebration of Juneteenth nationally took a new turn in its bid to become a nationally recognized Black holiday in 2021 in the context of the intensified struggle against police violence and systemic racism. Indeed, ever since the decisive moment of struggle in Ferguson, which was the spark that reignited a forest fire of resurgent resistance, the country has been compelled to confront its racist character and to make at least symbolic gestures of contrition, confession and cosmetic and other behavioral changes of various kinds. Among the things done were to recognize Juneteenth as a holiday many Black people celebrate and to begin to declare and offer support for it as penance, good PR and an easily acceptable alternative to sharing wealth, power and status.

But clearly, this embrace does not come without problems in terms of its being used as a substitute for serious social change, the adulterating effect a systemic embrace has on the holiday itself, and how the system thru its embrace gains power over the holiday's essential message and meaning. And thus, as I noted in a prior article in these pages, (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 6/18/20), one of the greatest challenges is to stay focused on freedom and the righteous and relentless struggle of our people that brought and brings it into being.

It is common currency for the system to describe it in academic, internet and popular sources as a "day of parties, picnics and prayers" and with only perfunctory, reshaped and non-offending references to the Holocaust of enslavement itself and our resistance to it.

Thus, it is our moral and intellectual obligation to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place in such a critical context of struggle, i.e., the battleground of history. In a word, we must define, interpret and celebrate in dignity-affirming, expansive and rightful ways the meaning and message of Juneteenth for us ourselves.

To do this, we must begin by giving a more accurate, broad and depthful interpretation to the origins of the holiday. This means moving beyond the popular and official systemic version of it, as a celebration growing out of receiving late news on June 19, 1865, from a Union general that the enslaved Africans of Texas, especially in Galveston, had been freed earlier by President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1865. This centers the claim that Africans knew nothing about what was going on in the country, i.e., the Civil War, the South's losing or Lincoln's Proclamation.

It also does not note that Gen. Gordon, who brought the news, advised the enslaved Africans "to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages" and that they would not be accepted at the military posts and "will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere." It is a curious "freedom" which prefigures the so-called Black Codes and their vagrancy and imprisonment laws for non-working Black people.

Clearly, such an interpretation brings with it a host of interrelated ethical, intellectual and social problems. First, it denies both agency and awareness of the enslaved Africans. Also, it plays into the pathological portrait of Black people as those who don't know anything, even about themselves, but only what White people tell them. It thus refocuses

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our sacred narrative from commemoration of our oppression and resistance to one of receiving late news. Moreover, such a tweet-minded version hides a whole history of savage oppression, awesome suffering and heroic resistance. Furthermore, such an inadequate depiction and interpretation offers a limited and oppressor-focused conception of freedom, one gained from the oppressor as savior and an announcement as an actuality rather than an unfinished still-to-be-fought-for human right and human good.

No one serious, honest and free from conceptual imprisonment in racist stereotypes can believe Black people did not know about the Civil War, the South losing the war or Lincoln's limited Emancipation Proclamation. Historical evidence shows Black people knew about national and international events, including the Haitian Revolution which the enslavers tried to keep from them. Certainly, as the South continued to lose the Civil War and enslavers began to run to Texas as the last holdout, taking 150,000 enslaved Africans with them to hold onto their human "property," Black people understood this and discussed it. Indeed, one of the last major battles of the Civil War was fought in Texas on May 13, 1865 and battles had been fought earlier in Galveston itself. Thus, as both a port town and battlefield, Galveston provided a source of ongoing news about the war and politics of a crumbling South and coming freedom.

Surely, Black people talked and exchanged ideas about freedom and seized opportunities to free themselves, in spite of efforts of the enslavers to isolate, hide and move them to areas where they could continue to enslave them. So, it is not that Black people did not know that they were to be free; it was that the White enslavers continued to enslave them, not only after Lincoln's Proclamation, but also after Gen. Gordon's announcement.

So, again, it is not the news or the announcement of freedom or the troops who were supposed to enforce the law that brought us freedom. It was/is our own efforts, then and now, that have shaped our daily and constant quest and struggle for freedom. It is we, ourselves, who have carved out of the hard and resistant rock of a racist reality, places and spaces to stand in, build our lives and pursue and practice freedom and other human goods in varied ways.

As I have often said, if we are to rightfully remember and celebrate Juneteenth as a day of freedom, we must understand it and tell the narrative in ways that honor and praise our people, not dishonor or diminish their agency, humanity and history of righteous and relentless struggle. Nor should we find ourselves focusing on Whites making an announcement of a freedom not really granted or achieved. We need not deny the Granger Order No. 3 or the Lincoln Proclamation which offered a legal ground for our freedom preceding the 13th Amendment. But we must also note that it was not a full freedom, that it was not enforced, that violence against us increased, and that we, ourselves, had to continue the struggle to liberate ourselves.

FINALLY, IF WE ARE TO RIGHTFULLY CELEBRATE Juneteenth, we must not see it as a substitute for a larger commemoration of our enslavement and our liberation struggle to end it. Such a holiday, *Siku ya Maangamizi* or *Maafa* (The Day of Commemoration of the Great Destruction), is still to be conceived and constructed. And it will not be only about events in a single city or state, but about the whole of our history of enslavement and resistance. It will extend from our first resistance in Africa and on the ships to when we landed on these shores, refused to forget or be defeated, and continued to wage the dual liberation struggle to be ourselves and

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free ourselves. And it will speak to the African and human quest for freedom, the sustained savagery of the Holocaust of enslavement (*Maangamizi*), the undeserved and diabolically imposed suffering of our people and their heroic and historic struggles which have contributed to redrawing the map of human history. Here I think, not only of the world changing Haitian Revolution, but also of liberation struggles in this country, South Amer-

ica and throughout the world wherever Africans dared to think and will freedom, and struggled to achieve it and leave it as a legacy worthy of the name and history African. And I am again reminded of the long, difficult, demanding and unfinished fight for freedom, the awesome sacrifices demanded and made, and the rough road to radical social change leading to a new history and hope for Africans and humanity as a whole.▲

DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of *Kwanzaa*; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.MaulanaKarenga.org; www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.Us-Organization.org.