



## SWAHILI, PAN-AFRICANISM AND THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM: A LANGUAGE OF LIBERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**P**ART 2. MY INTEREST IN AND EMBRACE of Kiswahili as a pan-African language of choice raised questions of how best to communicate this choice and initiative to the African American community as well as the larger world African community. Important for me was, not only our learning of the language as a skill, but also and especially learning and embracing its communitarian views, values and practices. The task, then, was not only to provide language classes, but to create a cultural context and process by which there was an ongoing and expansive dialog with African culture, using Swahili as a central means and modality. Working within the context of my organizations, the emerging Kawaida Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, I began teaching, lecturing on, speaking and advocating Swahili.

Furthermore, I created three essential structural means to ground and engage in these practices: *Kawaida* philosophy, the *Nguzo Saba*, and the pan-African holiday *Kwanzaa*. As I deepened my study of Swahili and began to study Zulu, as well as expanding my studies of continental African cultures and social and liberational thought, I began to develop my philosophy, *Kawaida*, using a Swahili word to name it. Self-consciously a communitarian African philosophy, Kawaida is defined as an ongoing synthesis of the best of African sensitivities, thought and practice in constant exchange with the world. The term Kawaida has multiple meanings, although it is used now to indicate the ordinary and normal, its larger semantic range includes meanings of custom, system, regulative principle, regularity of practice and tradition. Investing new meaning in this range of definitions, I defined Kawaida as an ongoing synthesis of

tradition and reason informed by practice. Thus, Kawaida philosophy takes inherited tradition and constantly re-shapes it, seeking paradigms representing the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

Kawaida was conceived and practiced as a liberational philosophy born in the midst of the ideological and practical struggles during the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960's. These struggles had an overarching dual aim and thrust – to be ourselves and free ourselves so that we could live good and meaningful lives and come into the fullness of ourselves as persons and a people. And central to that process was retrieving the best of our ancient and modern cultures and using it to ground ourselves, center ourselves and direct our lives toward good and expansive ends. This process took place under various categories: Back to Black, return to the source, coming into consciousness of our African selves and acting accordingly, cultural revolution and later *sankofa*, reaching back and retrieving it, i.e., the best of our culture – continental and diasporan – ancient and modern – and using it in liberative and life-enhancing ways.

It is out of Kawaida philosophy that in 1965 I created the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles, a communitarian African value system and the core communitarian values of the pan-African holiday *Kwanzaa*, a celebration of family, community and culture which I created in 1966. These seven values in Swahili are: *Umoja* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination), *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility), *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics), *Nia* (Purpose), *Kuumba* (Creativity), and *Imani* (Faith).

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I created the Nguzo Saba as a foundation and framework for being ourselves and freeing ourselves through striving and struggle for good in the world. The practice of these principles was directed toward a constant striving and struggling for liberation, building community and other good in the world. To say these values are communitarian is to say that they understand and engage the human person as a person-in-community, related and relating in principled, purposeful and productive ways. Therefore, they stress interrelatedness, togetherness, caring, cooperation, collaboration, other directedness and again striving and struggling. And they offer liberating alternatives to vulgar individualism, mindless consumerism, degrading imitation of others, disconcern and disregard for others and alienation from the earth and our responsibility toward it.

These Seven Principles serve as essential views and values used by people to ground themselves culturally in the way they live their lives, do their work and wage their struggles for good in the world. They use them to name and ground themselves, to name and instruct their children, to name their organizations, institutions and projects, and to develop and conduct various programs and projects of community service, building, development and struggle.

I created Kwanzaa for several reasons: to reaffirm and return to our rootedness in African culture; to give African people everywhere a special time to come together, reinforce the bonds between us, celebrate ourselves and meditate on the awesome meaning of being African in the world; and finally, to introduce and reinforce the importance of communitarian African values, especially the Nguzo Saba. For indeed, they are the hub and hinge around which the holiday turns. Now Kwanzaa is celebrated by millions throughout the world African

community on every continent in the world. And it has become not only a source of cultural grounding for these millions, but also an essential means to expand the arc of embrace and use of Swahili and Swahili communitarian views and values.

Also, it's important to notice in keeping with the understanding of Swahili as a language of liberation and my being deeply involved in the Black Liberation Movement, I created Kwanzaa as an act of freedom, an instrument of freedom and a celebration of freedom. It was created as an act of freedom, as a liberating return to our culture without requesting or needing approval or recognition from others and as a means of resistance to racism and the cultural imperialism of the dominant society. Also, it was created as an instrument of freedom, a means of building a culture of resistance, raising cultural and political consciousness and cultivating a commitment to the liberation struggle. And it was created as a celebration of freedom, a celebration of ourselves and of liberating practices to free ourselves and be ourselves in radical rupture with the established order of oppression.

Since the 1960s at the African American Cultural Center (Us), I taught and tutored Swahili, continental and African culture, conducted life-cycle ceremonies using Swahili language concepts, i.e., *Akika* (Birth and Naming); *Majando* (Rites of Passage); *Arusi na Ndoa* (Wedding / Marriage); *Kupa Majina* (Naming); *Maziko* (Transition). We also hired and invited volunteer instructors and tutors from Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda to teach Swahili and continental African culture. Also, I have taught Swahili at California State University, Long Beach where I am professor and chair for the Department of Africana Studies and where I won approval for its use for the then language graduation requirement. And of course, I used Swahili to meet my

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language requirement for my master's degree and first doctorate degree, not needing a second language for my second doctorate, though I used Swahili and other African languages in my second dissertation. Furthermore, at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos Nigeria in 1977, as chair of the African American Delegation to the Education Forum, I advocated for Swahili to be the pan-African language for the continent of Africa and the global African community.

FINALLY, THE THEME THIS YEAR FOR THE World Kiswahili Language Day of "Kiswahili for Peace and Prosperity" reminds me of the lectures on peacemaking I have given over the years using the Swahili concept of *mapatano*. Kawaida's concept of the practice of peace is rooted in the term *patana* with its implication of peace as

a mutually getting, a shared justice derived from the word *pata* – to get, achieve, secure. *Patana* is the reciprocal form of the verb, stressing reciprocity in relations and behavior, i.e., come to terms, agree, be reconciled, work in harmony and thus achieve peace, the core concept of a mutually getting which leads toward justice and peace or peace with justice. Therefore, the peacemaker, *mpatanishi*, is one who reconciles and achieves peace and harmony, *mapatano*, among persons and peoples by ensuring everyone gets their due. Here, I link African cultures stressing the Maatian ethical emphasis on peace which says "Exceedingly good is the practice of peace. And there is no blame for those who practice it." For a genuine peace is a reflection of justice in the world and a dual and interrelated basis for a shared prosperity that achieves and sustains human good and the well-being of the world.▲

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