



## HALIFU, HISTORY AND THE FESTIVAL: A LIVED AND LIVING LEGACY

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Watts Summer Festival offers us lessons of life, history and struggle central to our self-understanding and self-assertion as a people. Indeed, it raises and reminds us of the struggles we wage to preserve and practice our own culture and use it to expand and enrich our lives. In this regard, there are four fundamental ongoing challenges faced by the leaders and supporters of the Festival: (1) how to continue and strengthen the Festival after the loss, last year, of its well-known and well-respected leader; (2) how to resist the constant pressure to remove it from its origins in resistance and revolt; (3) how to prevent its de-Africanization in the midst of misreadings of multiculturalism and illusions of a “post-racial,” mainly “post-Black,” society; and (4) how to secure it as a lived and living legacy, embraced, supported and self-consciously sustained by Black people themselves, regardless of the presence or absence of others in support and participation.

For decades, the central figure and guiding force of the Watts Summer Festival was Tommy Jacquette-Halifu: organizer; negotiator; conflict resolver; resource raiser; advocate of the masses; down-to-earth defender of everyday people; and tall and uplifting leader without profiling, pretension or self-promotion. His transition last year was a great and grief-laden loss for the community and the Festival. And there was understandable concern, even apprehension, about the future of the Festival and its capacity for continuation, given the central and multi-task role Halifu had played in its organization and presentation to the community.

But the Festival Board, under the leadership of Pamela Garrett, chairperson, closed ranks and recommitted itself to continuing the Festival, not only to keep Halifu’s legacy

alive, but also to preserve the larger legacy of the Festival itself, to which Halifu, himself, was profoundly and unalterably committed. Indeed, he and I often talked about these challenges and the solutions necessary to meet them. To preserve the legacy is to sustain it as a lived and living tradition, that which is passed on, practiced and made an enduring and meaningful part of our lives. And thus, it means to maintain the Festival as a monument and central source of memory and understanding of the history and struggle of African people in Watts and by extension in the U.S. and the world.

Indeed, the first, and perhaps the greatest, challenge to maintaining the Festival in its most real and relevant form will be to preserve the memory of its origins in righteous resistance and struggle, culminating in the Watts Revolt, August 11 thru 16, 1965. The tendency will be for established-order funders, funded leaders, wind-watching politicians, and even some well-meaning supporters, to counsel compromise, reconsideration and “repackaging” of the memories and narratives of revolt. They will continue to try to cultivate an unannounced erasure of memories of revolt and resistance, and to replace them with general themes and vague thoughts of a static and state-sponsored “heritage” rather than a lived and living history of our people.

At the heart of any righteous remembrance, commemoration and celebration of the Watts Summer Festival must be the defining fact of its origins and existence. For whatever else is said on ceremonious occasions, the first and fundamental reason for the Festival’s existence and relevance is its rootedness in the Black liberation struggle, in Black people’s revolt against police violence and abuse, against merchant exploitation and unequal treatment; and against systemic racist oppres-

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sion that interrupted and eroded the quality of our lives in countless ways.

Moreover, any real and relevant celebration must pay homage to those who lost their lives and were wounded in the struggle, not as a matter-of-fact mentioning in the course of a brief and “sanitized” account, but as a rightful respect for the sacrifice involved, the objectives sought and the courageous and costly choice to struggle, to resist and revolt. It is to engage in a larger dialog of sacrifice, martyrdom and struggle, to link the Watts Revolt with the other hundreds of revolts in the country at the time and the thousands throughout our history.

Secondly, to maintain the Festival as a lived and living legacy of African American people, we must not misread the meaning and demands of multiculturalism and mistakenly seek to lose our own cultural distinctiveness in an amorphous and undefined mix. On the contrary, the first principle of multiculturalism is mutual respect for each people and culture as a unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world. And a second principle of multiculturalism is the right and responsibility of each people to speak its own special cultural truth and make its own unique contribution to the forward flow of U.S. and human history.

Thus, we cannot and must not read the requirements and meaning of multiculturalism as our need to de-Africanize our holidays and celebrations, adding other cultures to it. Rather, we must keep our cultural core, invite others to share with us, but remain the *center*

*and subject* of our own history and cultural celebrations. No one should ask Mexicans to redefine and restructure Cinco de Mayo to include African Americans, Jews and Japanese in the narrative and history. Likewise, no one would suggest to Jews that Hanukkah should be recast to include Mexicans, Africans, Japanese or Germans in the narrative and history of the celebration. Nor should this be expected of us. A third principle of multiculturalism is shared commitment to the constant search for common ground in the midst of our diversity and a final principle is mutual commitment to an ethics of sharing. But none of these principles require self-erasure, redefinition of our culture or cultural celebrations or the removal of a people as the center, subject and the defining and directing force of its own cultural celebration.

Finally, to keep alive the legacy of the Festival, to integrate it into our lives as a lived and living tradition and to secure it as a monument and central source of memory and understanding of our struggle and history as a people, we must see it as such, embrace it and support it more than any other group. It is Malcolm who taught us a people’s history is a people’s memory, and we are diminished without adequate knowledge and appreciation of it. It is, Marcus Garvey who taught us, “Our history is too important to be left in others’ hands.” And it is Kawaiida that teaches, no people is more sacred than our own, no history more holy, no culture more ancient and resourceful, and we must understand, assert and celebrate ourselves accordingly.

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