



**MARKING FATHER'S DAY:  
MEDITATING ON THE MEANING OF MANHOOD**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-18-09, p. A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

In the Sixties, we sat around tables talking about new times and the new world we were struggling to bring into being. We were men with a sacred and consuming mission—liberation and a higher level of human life. We had expected beautiful new beginnings and powerful ways to assert ourselves in the world. As Black men in motion, speaking a clear and cleansing truth to power and the people, and organizing and mobilizing our people for liberation. We had imagined a revolution, not only in society but in our own lives and in the way we understood and asserted ourselves in the community, society and the world.

Our women were there struggling as much and as ever beside us, although we know now we did not always give them the recognition and respect they deserved. We had mostly imagined that we would change all this after liberation. We had not fully realized we had to build relations and engage in practices that prefigure and make possible the good world we were struggling for. It was a mistake that we would deeply regret and correct afterwards. Still, in spite of this and other mistakes of various kinds, we pushed forward, forging our identity and destiny in relentless opposition to the established order.

But then something happened to us and our people. The revolutionary struggle began to unravel; groups were dismantled prematurely and began to disappear; families fragmented; police and FBI suppression increased and proved to be disruptive, divisive and deadly; and the stress of it all broke the brittle and drove the frightened and less committed down various avenues of escape. And many Black men

went missing, AWOL, absent without leave from both the battlefield and the homefront. Steadily, many started leaving home and hangin' out with the homies, droppin' out and dopin' up in dirty places, gangbanging, being locked down and let out on a short leash called probation or parole, bringing home a hidden history called down low, and trying to recover and rebuild unraveled relations and a new life in the midst of thick uncertainty and thin opportunity. And then there were those who were left behind without fathers or mentors and who made up their life as they went along. Now they and many among us, fear growing up and getting older, and thus play the role of perpetual teenagers, revering rap subculture as a mini-religion, and steadily learning and living the loose and lumpen life and lyrics it encourages.

And so now, we are too often reduced to talking about lost lives, dried-up dreams, ruined relations, fractured families, deadly diseases running rampant, low or absent educational achievement, unemployment, self-destructiveness, and underground predatory practices that disrupt and damage the community and deal death every day. Yet, somehow we must as Black men, stand up, step forward and with our women, rebuild our lives, families and community, and continue the liberation struggle so many of us walked or were carried away from under various conditions.

To do this, we must first know and respect the meaning of manhood and see it as a self-conscious personal and social achievement and practice. This means moving beyond the simple biological fact of maleness and increased age and engaging in

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a process of bringing ourselves into being in the most culturally and morally grounded ways. This is the meaning of the teachings of the *Odu Ifa* (245:1) which says "If we are given birth we must bring ourselves into being again." It, then, is not enough to be male; we must make ourselves into men, and having achieved the status, sustain and constantly refine the idea and the practice. This is why the ancestors established rites of passage (*majando*) for men as well as women, to begin at an early age to teach us how to become and be African men and women in the world. For we are males by birth, but we must learn and struggle to be men, especially African men in a European-dominated context.

Regardless of what they and others say about us, we must define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, speak for ourselves and carve out of this hard rock we call reality a place for us and our loved ones to stand in and flourish. And we cannot do this if we define ourselves as "n-'s", name ourselves dogs, create only harm and havoc, speak the vulgar and vicious language and lyrics of our own degradation and instead of making new and life-enhancing places, mindlessly participate in practices which destroy us, damage our people and delight our oppressor.

Next, if we are to heal ourselves and repair the world, we must do it in partnership with our women. We must take our stand here on the awesome and indispensable need of quality relationships between man and woman whatever other relationships we might treasure or find

attractive. Our partnership in life, love and struggle is as necessary as sunlight, as indispensable as air, and as life-sustaining as water. It is also as stabilizing as earth, and as life-enhancing as love and learning. Thus, we must find a way back home to rebuild and reinforce the family, and forge a new relationship with this other half which makes us whole, a relationship of complementarity defined by equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility in life, love and struggle.

Finally, we must heal, repair and transform ourselves in the midst of our ongoing struggle to repair and transform the world. Our health and wholeness depends on our taking responsibility for our own lives and breaking the hold of an oppressive, sick society. And it means living a life of service, sacrifice and struggle to build the good world we all want and deserve. It is important here to note that in spite of the bleakness of the pictures painted, there still remains a majority of Black men who have weight and worth in the world. And even those who have fallen have left traces we can follow to find and raise them.

Thus, together we must free ourselves from all things and thoughts which enslave and oppress us. We must build brotherhood support groups like the Senu Brotherhood Society, mentor young boys, stop the therapeutic chest-thumping about how bad we be, and begin the long and difficult struggle to build a good world and be respected as men among men, and men among women anywhere we are in the world. (Revised Reprint)

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