

AGAIN, CULTIVATING QUALITY LEADERSHIP:
REAFFIRMING AND TRANSMITTING THE TRADITION

Los Angeles Sentinel, 10-29-26, p. C-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

CONSIDERING THE CURRENT STRUGGLES around the coming elections and the continuing struggles after the elections to secure the people's rights to live and enjoy lives of dignity, security, freedom and justice, I want to make a *sankofa* retrieval of thoughts and insight on the crucial need of a clear vision of a desired future and the quality of leadership these struggles require. In the context of our time, the urgent and ongoing need for quality leadership in our community, as well as in society and the world, cannot be seriously contested or safely denied. The severity and complexity of the problems we face as a people, society and world require a leadership rooted in that tradition of righteous struggle in and through which we, at our best, understand ourselves and are recognized by others as a key moral and social vanguard in this country and the world.

To raise the question of quality leadership, then, requires that it be done in the context of a tradition of leadership based on best ideas and practices of our own culture and history, not in the pathological language and approach of our oppressor. For ours is a tradition that offers standards of excellence and achievement embodied in the men and women whose awesome legacy we use to judge, generate and nurture leaders among us. Among these models are Nanas Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, Yaa Asantewa, Amilcar Cabral, W.E.B. DuBois, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and others.

Thus, it is especially important to distinguish quality leadership from the inferior forms which tend to replace it as well as the real memory of the men and women who are our definitive models. Using those models, leadership is not peddling prosperity as a religious rite of passage and ignoring urgent issues of social justice. Nor is it the daily ritual and routine of finding funds and favor in corporate and foundation offices, and adjusting positions and policies to secure and sustain them. Moreover, leadership is not media appearances as an alternative to the daily work of educating, mobilizing, organizing and serving the masses. Nor is it grateful groveling and shameless negotiation for no more than "comfortable" personal and class positions in the uncontested context of our people's oppression and denying the indispensable need for continuing struggle on every battlefront and field. Indeed, as Kawaida philosophy teaches, "Everywhere a battleline; every day a call to struggle".

Surely, if we build on the best of our history and culture, we see that from ancient Egypt to modern America, leadership has always been defined by an ethical commitment to service, social justice and good in the world and to the work and struggle necessary to achieve these aims. It is thus conceived as a moral vocation that, like every other vocations, requires a disciplined preparation that precedes and

makes its practice possible. It requires the commitment and courage to speak truth to power and to the people, to resist without compromise all forms of oppression and to reaffirm in the hearts and minds of the people their right to freedom, justice and other goods in the world; and their responsibility and capacity to achieve these and to join the people in the awesome work and struggle for these goods. Leadership, then, can be defined as the self-conscious commitment to provide philosophy, principles, and program that not only satisfy human need but transform the people in the process, making them self-conscious agents of their own lives and liberation.

It is this tradition of leadership as guidance and cooperation in the self-liberating and self-constituting practice of our people which must be transmitted from one generation to another. In this way young and emerging leaders work, study, and act in tandem with older and seasoned leaders and learn through education and actual practice the rightful way to work, serve and struggle for good in the world. And it is this kind of exchange that fosters intergenerational cooperation, mutually beneficial relations, shared visions and values, a commonality of interests, and the continuity of quality leadership.

Indeed, the central concern of the early conversations of the African American Knowledge Transfer Summit, as the name suggests, was the effective transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. But as the conversations evolved, it became increasingly clear that the issue was broader than simple transfer of knowledge. It also involved developing protocols to facilitate the transfer; the timely transfer of positions by senior leaders in the spirit and interest of intergenerational leadership, continuity and cooperation; and the transfer of relational networks built over time by senior leaders as a source of strength, resources, influence and enhanced effectiveness.

Black leadership having defined itself in the dignity-affirming, life-enhancing, world-preserving and struggle-requiring ways of our ancestors, still must prove itself in practice. And this is done especially by identifying and dealing successfully with a series of interlocking issues which problematize as well as promote quality leadership for our people.

These include, as noted above, intergenerational cooperation as well as creating common agendas and united fronts to develop and pursue them; developing ways of preventing and resolving conflict and of healing wounds and rifts that come from conflict; avoiding confusing class interests with mass interests; and building necessary coalitions and alliances from a position of power and equality without ethnic self-concealment, i.e., a senseless sacrifice of communal identity and interests.

Black leadership is also confronted with the challenge to reaffirm the rightfulness and requirement of the activist tradition, to reinforce and expand it and pose it as it is indispensable to any real practice of leadership. This challenge is clearly made more difficult by changing circum-

stances including, the dispersal of the Black community and thus the progressive erosion of the communal context and base necessary for building maximum political and economic strength and shaping a shared vision and values and collective vocation. And it also is made difficult by a wrongful reading by some emerging leaders that the age of activism and the political education, mobilization, organization and confrontation it requires is over and we are in a new age of negotiating and concession.

FINALLY, OPTIMAL LEADERSHIP requires a community of leaders bound by a covenant of commitment and cooperation which offers a shared vision of mission, meaning and struggle. Such a covenant would also posit common goals, reaffirm commitment to our people and respect for each other as fellow leaders, and outline principles and practice by which we work together, operate, pursue projects of common ground, and rebuild our movement as a collective vocation. It is with such a community of leadership that a new generation of leaders would be nurtured and supported, and the tradition of leadership excellence can be shaped and transmitted in the interest of our people and the world.▲

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