



**BLACK WOMEN'S HISTORY:  
CELEBRATING MIRACLES, WONDERS AND STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HIS IS THE MONTH FOR CELEBRATING the miracles and wonders we call Black women, that other half of our community which makes us, as a people, whole, these equal and most worthy partners in life, love and struggle to bring good in the world. This does not mean we don't celebrate Black women any other time or all the time in the varied ways we do. It simply means this is a special month of marking, intentionally set aside to remind us and them of the great and indispensable good they have brought and bring in the world. It is a special time to reinforce the rightful attentiveness we owe them, to reaffirm the great value we find in them, and to express in countless ways the profound respect, love and appreciation we have for them. In a word, it is a time to think deeply about and appreciate the meaning and responsibility, the glory and burden, the joy and stress, and the wonder and work of being African women in the world.

In the larger society, March is called Women's History Month, but we in Us call March, Black History Month II—Women Focus, and call February, Black History Month I—General Focus. We do this first to reaffirm the fact that Black women's history takes place within Black history itself—not as a separate practice and product, but as a cooperative project within the context of a people, African people, as well as in the context of humanity as a whole. Thus, we can and do celebrate with others the history of women as a whole, but we always begin and end with honor and appreciation of our own during this special month of marking and in the principled practice of everyday life. Moreover, the seamless move from February to March from general Black history to focus on Black women's history within it rightfully stresses continuity rather than rupture, and unity in diversity rather than separateness and antagonism.

Such centering of Black women in the midst of their own history and culture as African people gives the celebration both a life-grounded

realness and everyday relevance. For it speaks of women as concrete cultural beings, living, loving, suffering, rejoicing, working, struggling and achieving in the context of a definite cultural community. It focuses on the lives they live and make for themselves within the families, communities and historical narrative that makes their lives meaningful. Thus, it respects the diversity of their lives, needs and aspirations as African women, while recognizing common ground for cooperative and mutually beneficial exchange with other women of the world.

Moreover, Black History Month II—Women Focus reminds us and them that our first and continuing focus must be on Black women, African women, in order to give authenticity and accuracy to the celebration. This shows proper respect to the original women who stood up first with the original men, African men, and together spoke the first human truth and began the long struggle and record of humans overcoming the obstacles and oppositions of nature, society, others, and self to establish and constantly expand the realm of human freedom and human flourishing in the world. For not only are African women the beginning of women's history in the world, they are also the mothers of humanity and human civilization itself.

Thirdly, understanding and celebrating Black women in the context of Black history as a whole represents an act of self-determination. It is a choosing of oneself and thus one's culture as an instructive source and an empowering model of what it means to be women in the world. And it is a rightful insistence on the dignity-affirming, depthful engagement with African women's history as a central paradigm of woman, African and human excellence, possibility and achievement. This position avoids the tendency to lose or lessen the importance of African women's history in the history of women of the dominant society who might, even unintentionally, put forth their ancestors and contemporaries as the central source for understanding the history of women.

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It is this spirit of self-determination that animated and informed the origin and development of African-centered womanism. For in the evolving discourse on the equal rights and dignity of women as a whole, Black women reasoned that neither White feminists nor feminism spoke to their unique identity, history and culture as African women. On the contrary, and as a matter of agency, they felt compelled to speak their own special cultural and experiential truth and create a unique discourse and discussion around the current and historical context and contours of their own lives and the future they were forging in love, work and struggle within their community and the world.

Finally, to celebrate Black women's history within the context of Black history, the most ancient of all human histories, is to be able to draw on the oldest tradition of womanhood. It is to open space for discussion from the earliest sources on what it means to be both woman and man in the world. In the *Husia*, the sacred text of ancient Egypt, we read the sacred teaching that all humans, women and men, are possessors of divinity and dignity in equal measure. In the *Odu Ifa* we read the sacred teaching that all humans—men and women, are divinely chosen to bring good in the world. And they are chosen not over and against each other but chosen with each other to bring, increase and sustain good in the world in love and struggle. Indeed, in our sacred texts and within the sacred narrative we know and honor as Black history, we have discovered the indispensability of the voice, visions and equal partnership of women in the success and meaningfulness of anything of weight or worth we as men aspire or attempt to do.

Moving thru history we not only have sacred texts that represent the highest form of spiritual and ethical understanding of women and men and humans as a whole, but we also have countless numbers of women whose lives are rich and indispensable lessons in how to walk as African women, and as dignity and divinity possessing persons in the world. And in their strength and dignity, dedication, discipline and accomplishments, they are models of excellence, achievement and possibility, not only for us as a people and women in general, but also for humanity as a whole. Thus, a central way to celebrate the history of Black women is to live lives worthy of the best of what it means to be African, woman, man and human in the world.

And it means constantly raising up, remembering and striving to emulate the excellence and achievement of our ancestors and similar models and mirrors among us. It means hearing the thunder with Harriet Tubman at the crossroads and choosing to return and raise up rather than run away, seeking various “comfortable” places in oppression. It means discovering the dawn of the uplifting and liberating light of knowledge with Mary McLeod Bethune and sharing it with the masses as she taught. And it means imagining a new world with Anna Julia Cooper free from favoritisms of race, class, gender, country, condition, ability, age and any other social or biological attributes, and struggling tirelessly to bring such a world into being. For always and everywhere, practice proves and makes possible everything, whether in love, life or in the aspirations and imaginations of radically and beautifully remaking ourselves and the world.

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