



**HAJI MALCOLM, MA'AT AND BLACK SPIRITUALITY:
REPAIRING OURSELVES AND THE WORLD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS A *SANKOFA* RETRIEVAL AND sharing from the legacy of enduring insights from Haji Malcolm X as we close out this month of his coming into being. The life and legacy of Min. Malcolm X weighs heavily in the scales of history and we rightfully place him in the vanguard of that long and worthy list of prophets, messengers and moral teachers, saints, sages and holy men and women who walked, worked and struggled righteously in the world, and serve as awesome symbols and essential subjects in the sacred narrative we know as Black history. Haji Malcolm taught us the moral responsibility of constant learning and living a good life, of struggle and sacrifice; the possibilities and promise of self-transformation; the evil of imperialism, capitalism and their racist and death-dealing cultures; and the difficulty, danger and yet our unavoidable destiny of struggle to change the world, if we are to live the free and good lives we deserve. And he taught us, in the way of the ancestors, to reaffirm our dignity, remember our divinity, do good and walk divinely in the world.

Thus, one of the many ways to understand and appreciate the mind and mission of Min. Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, is to situate his life and teachings within the ancient, ongoing and varied tradition of Black spirituality, and to search for signs of how well he walked in the way of the ancestors, the good and godly way of the righteous and the rightfully revered and remembered. The most

ancient African spiritual tradition of which we have written evidence is *Ma'at*, in the *Sacred Husia* of ancient Egypt. *Ma'at* is called the good way, the way of truth and justice and the way of righteousness directed toward the preservation, enhancement and ultimately the rightful enjoyment of life. Indeed, Seba (moral teacher) Amenomope says in the *Husia*, that his Maatian teachings are “teachings for life, instructions for well-being; . . . to direct one rightly; to cause one to flourish on earth, to steer clear of evil and to be praised in the mouth of the people”.

Thousands of years later, Haji Malcolm would reaffirm commitment to life as a central pillar in Black spirituality, i.e., its religion and ethics. Thus, he tells us that his spiritual tradition of Islam is a God-given “religion of life, not death, (one) that teaches us to live, the importance of living and how to live”. Haji Malcolm understands Islam, as the righteous way forward in the world. But he, like the Hon. Elijah Muhammad, and the Noble Drew Ali before them, brought a distinct cultural interpretation to Islam, an ancient African insight rooted in history and reflective of current conditions in which he found himself.

Haji Malcolm’s message was, as he said, essentially to and for the “grass-roots,” the masses, but it also had and retains meaning for all the people of the world who love freedom, cherish justice, and uphold the right and responsibility of every human to live a life of dignity and

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decency everywhere. It is this right to a free, good and meaningful life and the personal and collective responsibility to struggle to achieve it that forms another pillar in the sacred temple and life-focused template of Haji Malcolm's moral and spiritual thought.

Haji Malcolm urged us to forget the fantasies of escape and accept that "heaven demands hard work," i.e., the difficult struggle to create a realm of righteousness and good in the world. Indeed, his spiritual tradition calls for an engaged life in the world, for our constant striving and struggling to transform the world and transform ourselves in the process. For Haji Malcolm, "heaven and hell are the moral and material conditions here on earth". Thus, the transforming process of righteous striving and struggle, which is called *jihad* in his tradition, demands dealing with the concrete conditions of life, for in these are the promise of heaven and horrors of hell. The ancestors called this work and struggle *serudj-ta*, the social ethical process and responsibility of repairing, transforming and renewing the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Haji Malcolm's classic summary of his teachings "wake up, clean up and stand up" is both a way to conduct and enhance our daily lives as well as an enduring guide to the pursuit and struggle for good in the world. Thus, we can read it as a personal message of how we should begin our day and go forth doing good everywhere. We are therefore told by Haji Malcolm that we are first to "wake up," abandon sleep, rise from "the grave of

ignorance" and illusion about our suppressed and expansive selves, and acquire effective knowledge of ourselves, the Divine, our oppressor, and the world. And as Kawaida teaches in the tradition of Haji Malcolm, we are to constantly study, dialog and meditate on the meaning and awesome responsibility of being African in the world.

Also, we are to "clean up," clean our minds and bodies of that which is negative to human life and development, that which undermines, denies or diminishes our sense of our own dignity and divinity, our people's sense of community and our collective struggle for freedom, justice and world-embracing good. And we are to think righteous and expansive thoughts that would make Haji Malcolm and our mothers and fathers proud and honor our ancestors in rightful ways. Here, it is good to remember the teaching in the *Husia* that says, "one who can discipline the heart and mind has the equivalence of all the teachings." And as if he had read the ancestors of ancient Egypt, he teaches that we must develop and sustain a "moral discipline that makes it easy . . . to walk the path of truth and righteousness".

TO "STAND UP," HAJI MALCOLM taught, is to literally get up and go forth everyday, "upright, perpendicular, on the square with (our) God and (our people)," to walk in the world with straightened back and elevated head, free of illusion and unworthiness. It is to be actively and courageously committed to do the good and the right, to be truthful, just, generous, caring and kind, and to struggle

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constantly internally and externally to achieve this. It is, as the *Husia* teaches, to self-consciously “bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice,” and as Haji Malcolm says, make our lives “a testimony of some social value”. In this

way, we will know ourselves as true students and worthy descendants of this sacred martyr, master teacher, and *mujahid*, the righteous warrior, who opened the horizon of history so that the rising sun of the masses coming to power could be seen.▲

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