



**HAJI MALCOLM AND THE MEASURE OF OUR MANHOOD:  
A RIGHTEOUS MAN AMONG MEN AND AMONG WOMEN**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

AS WE CLOSE OUT THIS SPECIAL MONTH marking the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nana Haji Malcolm's coming into being and of remembering and reflecting on the essential and enduring message and meaning of his ministerial, sebaic and revolutionary mission, I want to revisit his and our understanding of his embodied and demonstrated manhood. And I want to pose it as a concept and practice in the context of his time and ours, that moves us beyond deficiency models of Black manhood, uproots the negative and preserves the positive. For an urgent need now, as we wrote in the *Million Man March Mission Statement*, is for Black men and women to come into critical consciousness of ourselves, our tasks and the world; achieve moral grounding in right relations and service; and stand up together in righteous, relentless and radically transformative struggle. For this is the fundamental meaning of Haji Malcolm's ethically compelling battle cry and core programmatic initiative, "wake up, clean up, and stand up" for an inclusive liberation.

Here again, I want to share some concepts and contentions from my coming major work titled *The Liberation Ethics of Haji Malcolm X: Critical Consciousness, Moral Grounding and Transformative Struggle*. Earlier, I had shared some of my writings on this question, and I want first to summarize my essential contentions which I drew from engaging descriptions of Haji Malcolm by Nana Ossie Davis in his eulogy for him. In the eulogy, Nana Ossie calls Haji Malcolm "our own Black shining Prince! – who didn't hesitate to die for us, because he loved us so." He is using here a praise name, to indicate his moral evaluation of Haji Malcolm, reflective of the earned profound respect of his people because of his demonstrated commitment, character and conduct in righteous struggle

and self-sacrificing service to them and for good in the world.

As Nana Marcus Garvey taught he is aristocratic "based on service and loyalty to the race" in the liberation and flourishing of Africa and African peoples. And as Kawaida teaches, he is "royalty in righteousness," and in the doing of good in the world. And this is a self-defining virtue, male and female can and do possess and practice. Nana Ossie also describe Haji Malcolm as "our living Black manhood," and stated that "this was his meaning to his people" and that "in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves." Black manhood, here, is a metaphor for Black personhood and Black peoplehood. And thus, the contention that "in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves" speaks to and includes us as male and female, woman and man.

It is vitally important to understand that Nana Ossie's concept of Malcolm's manhood and the concept of the masses of Black people is *based essentially on his virtues first and foremost*. The English word "virtue" comes from the Latin word *virtus* which means manliness and is derived from *vir* or man and is associated with strength, energy and power. But here I want to introduce the ancient Egyptian word for virtue, *iqer*, which means excellence - moral, intellectual and relational excellence, requiring an excellence in sensibilities, thought and practice in the ways we understand and assert ourselves in the world. And for Haji Malcolm and other Black men of critical consciousness, morally grounded and committed to transformative struggle as a personal and social practice, manhood is not simple biological maleness. Rather it is reflected in strength in love and struggle, power with, not over, and virtues or excellences of heart, mind and spirit that are

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dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving in the sacred ethical tradition of our honored ancestors. Nana Ossie tells us in a statement answering those who questioned why he eulogized Haji Malcolm, that it all revolved around his conception and respect of Haji Malcolm as a “true man.” He also stated that of all the letters he received from Black people, they “lauded Malcolm as a man and commended me for having spoken at his funeral,” even though many at the same time disagreed with him. For they “knew that Malcolm—whatever else he was or was not, Malcolm was a man.” Nana Ossie, then, turns to describing character traits that anchored and cultivated his respect for Haji Malcolm as a man.

It is of no small significance that the first admirable attributes he cites to define Haji Malcolm as a man is his commitment to *self-determination* and *agency in struggle*, his challenging the oppressed, Black people, men and women, to “Get off your knees and fight your own battles.” It was through such self-determined, agency-anchored struggle, as he taught, that offered the way “to win back your self-respect” and to express your humanity by defending and developing it. Haji Malcolm also was a man, Nana Davis asserts, in his *teaching the “painful truth”* and rejecting cowardice masquerading as caution, and the pasted-on-smile and “hypocrisy in the presence of white folks.” Haji Malcolm, he argues, would not let us lie to ourselves or the oppressor to escape the oppressor’s savagery and suppression. He “kept snatching away our lies” and forcing us to be free from our less worthy selves which are cultivated in oppression. And “he would not stop for love nor money,” i.e., for any incentive that diverts, disarms, seduces, compromises and suppresses the will to speak truth, seek justice and achieve liberation.

Haji Malcolm is seen as powerful of presence, strong and yet sensitive and considerate; loving of the people, but hating injustice and oppression; courageous and caring; firm of conviction and yet constantly involved in a process of developmental self-transformation in the context of the liberation struggle. Here, manhood is a manhood not only of strength, power and energy, but also of other virtues which undergirds, informs and directs these other attributes of manhood. Thus, Haji Malcolm’s conception of manhood in relationship to women moved from his original understanding and practice defined mainly by what men do for (rightfully providing and protecting) women to one of how men should relate and work and struggle rightfully with women. And his understanding and practice moved from women independent attachment to one of women interdependent and equal in rights, relationships, responsibilities and struggle.

He is, then, a mirror and model of the manhood he teaches and calls for, constantly, challenging the men to be men in positive ways needed in life, love and struggle. He wants Black men and Black people as a whole to be proud of their identity, history and culture. As Nana Ossie says, you could not “remain defensive and apologetic about being (Black) in his presence.” He compelled you to embrace, raise up and live the sacredness, soulfulness and beauty of our unique and equally valid and valuable African way of being human in the world and awesome mission in struggle that accompanies this identity. In Haji Malcolm’s liberation ethics, the affirmation and defense of one’s humanity and human rights in struggle are central to what it means to be a man and a woman, a human being.

Therefore, he defiantly tells the oppressor “I’m the man you think you are. And if it

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doesn't take legislation to make you a man and get your rights recognized, don't even talk that legislative talk to me. No, if we're both human beings, we'll do the same thing. And if you want to know what I'll do, figure out what you'll do. I'll do the same thing - only more of it." Indeed, he will not accept the gratuitous and gratitude-seeking talk of legislating human rights, natural and God-given rights we already have and are prevented from exercising them by oppression.

**T**HUS, HE STATES, LINKING BEING MAN AND being human, "We declare our right on this earth...to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this

society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary." Here his battle cry "freedom by any means necessary" is foregrounded, suggesting it is the oppressor who determines how we are compelled to confront him, and it is we who must determine how much we are willing to give of ourselves to achieve our freedom. And being the man he is, he tells and teaches us that "Nobody can give you freedom. If you are a man (a human being), you take it" in righteous and relentless struggle. And it is, of necessity, a liberating struggle which transforms us, society and the world in the interest of a shared and inclusive ever-unfolding-and-flourishing good.▲

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