



**READING AND WRITING HAJI MALCOLM'S LIBERATION ETHICS:
SHARING NOTES AND NOTIONS ON MY COMING BOOK**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF CELEBRATIONS already held and even more to come to mark and interpret the varied and most valuable meaning and message of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, Malcolm X, Haji Malcolm. Certainly at my university, CSU, Long Beach and at our organization, the African American Cultural Center (Us), we have already begun to mark and reaffirm the complex simplicity, intriguing magnitude and continuing currency of his meaning to Us, to liberation practices and struggles around the world and to the world itself. And we are constantly in quest for ever more insightful, accurate and useful meanings of the life he lived, the work he did and the struggle he waged internally and externally with and for his people in the interest of African and human freedom and an inclusive good for all in the world.

In my Sunday Soul Session lecture, given virtually, I talked about meeting Haji Malcolm, our conversations, finding in my research at the Schomburg a letter from me in his papers, and mostly about how his message helped mold my sensibilities, thought and practice and that of my organization and its members. For we always maintain that we were the ideological descendants of Haji Malcolm in unique ways without denying others' attachment to him in their varied ways.

As I've written elsewhere, "we took seriously in both principle and practice, Haji Malcolm's teachings on self-transformation in and for the liberation struggle, i.e.: 'wake up, clean up and stand up;' the indispensability of culture and cultural revolution as a weapon and emancipatory process to prepare, aid and sustain the liberation struggle; the return to the source, Africa, culturally, psychologically and spiritually; the right and

responsibility of self-defense, resistance and the struggle for 'freedom by any means necessary', armed and otherwise; pan-Africanism; a religion with a God in our own image and interests and which is committed to justice, liberation and the liberation struggle; Black united front strategies; and Third World solidarity".

Reading and lecturing from my manuscript, *The Liberation Ethics of Haji Malcolm X: Critical Consciousness, Moral Grounding and Transformative Struggle*, which has already exceeded 700 plus pages, I started by saying that the essential and governing interest of my work is to offer a *critical* and *constructive* reading of the liberation ethics of Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, using his pivotal moral concepts, "wake up, clean up and stand up". He used these to define the central thrust of his ministerial and sebaic mission in an October 23, 1962, interview with the *Michigan Daily*. There Haji Malcolm stated that "The Muslim program is in three parts 'wake up, clean up and stand up". I noted that I translate these calls for self and social transformation respectively as a moral imperative to achieve, practice and sustain *critical consciousness, moral grounding, and transformative struggle*.

Moreover, my intention is to first present Haji Malcolm to explore and pose Haji Malcolm's liberational ethical thought, as a useful and fruitful resource for moral reflection and practice in engaging the life situations and critical issues of our times. These include questions of how to live lives of dignity, decency and meaning and deal with continuing issues of injustice, unfreedom, inequity, suffering, oppression, and the practice of resistance and liberation in the world. Secondly, I want to introduce Haji Malcolm for the first time as an ethical

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teacher, a moral teacher of the highest stature and with the insights and capacity for incisive social analysis second to none. Usually, we assign this role to Nana Dr. Martin Luther King, but I want to demonstrate that Haji Malcolm and Nana King are co-equals as moral teachers, teaching messages of equal value and overlapping and differing concepts of liberation which demonstrate the rich, ancient and ongoing ethical tradition of African people. And I want to introduce for the first time the concept of the liberation ethics of Haji Malcolm.

A central concept I read from my manuscript and discussed was Haji Malcolm's concept of *jihad*, which means *righteous struggle internally and externally*. Although Haji Malcolm did not use the word *jihad* to describe his struggle, he gave a definition of internal jihad by defining what it meant to be a Muslim and he defined it as "striving to live a righteous life". And his living practice was both a definition and reaffirmation of his commitment to external jihad as a righteous struggle against oppression, injustice and persecution as the Qur'an, his sacred text, teaches and calls on Muslims to wage in the world.

Also, one of my favorite concepts in Islam which I first heard in a lecture by Messenger Elijah Muhammad and Haji Malcolm continually taught was *zum al nafs*, injustice to oneself. Messenger Muhammad had said in his lecture and Haji Malcolm repeated that we are often unjust to ourselves in various ways. And again although neither used the Arabic, the teaching was always there. Haji Malcolm therefore taught the many ways that we can be unjust to ourselves including not honoring the divine endowment of moral consciousness and the sacredness of ourselves; not using our minds in the most creative and productive ways; harming ourselves

and each other; accepting the oppressor's morally savage treatment and conception of us; and refusing to cultivate the ability for self-raising in and for community. He believed in the sacred agency of each and all of us, our capacity to raise ourselves from what was called the *grave of ignorance and oppression*, and to stand up in the intended coffin the oppressor prepared for us, defeat our oppressor and with other oppressed, and progressive people reconceive and remake the world.

One of the most beautiful teachings from him on the agency and capacity for self-raising in and through community is his discussion of his own life in which he said at one point he was so low he was actually walking on his own coffin. But through the power of Islam and his recognition of his God-given capacity and consciousness and his love of his people, he was able to stand up and become a noble witness to the world for his people. He says, bearing testimony of this internal capacity we call agency, the will and ability to choose and act on the good, "I, myself, being one who was lost and dead, buried here in the rubbish of the West, in the thickest darkness of sin and ignorance, hoodwinked completely by the false teachings of the slave master, am able to stand upright today, *perpendicular*, on the square with my God, Allah, and my own kind . . . , able for the first time in 400 years to *see and hear*". Here Min. Malcolm declares he has come into *critical consciousness*, achieved *moral grounding* and has *stood up* in harmony with his God and his people. And he rejoices in no longer being mentally blind or deaf, but in being able now, after centuries of oppression and after his righteous resistance and self-raising, to see and hear.

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HAJI MALCOLM'S LIBERATION ETHICS which began with the moral imperative to *wake up* and is followed by an equally compelling moral obligation to *clean up*, leads sequentially and logically in Malcolm's ethical thought to the unavoidable moral duty to *stand up*. For the waking up and cleaning up are both to be directed so that the person and people are enabled to stand up. This enabling is a result of each person, supported in and by community, engaging in a process and practice of *self-raising*,

struggling to come to themselves, be themselves and free them-selves in the fullest sense. And it is the self-raising of each person, with and through the support of the community that forms the foundation and driving force for the community or people raising itself and righteously waging its liberation struggle, a collective and mutually supportive process and practice of self-raising and self-freeing.▲

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