



**RIGHTFULLY REMEMBERING MALCOLM AND MARTIN:  
LIVING LIVES OF SERVICE AND SACRIFICE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**P**ART 1. THE TROUBLED, TROUBLING AND taxing times in which we live, and the rugged, racist and treacherous terrain on which we fight demand more from us than episodic engagement, convenient contributions and controlled anger from the edges. Indeed, the life and death of Min. Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and all our other honored ancestors who gave their lives in service and sacrifice for us and the advancement of human good taught this fundamental lesson. It is that we must always be at the center of our own lives, at the heart of our own struggle and in the vanguard of the rightful struggles to radically confront and transform this society, contributing meaningfully to the *righteous remaking of the world*. But as our foremother Maria Stewart taught us, we must enter the field of action with open eyes, focused minds and unbreakable wills.

For as the evidence and insights of history and the teaching and lives of Malcolm and Martin have taught, the armed guardians of the established order will come for us, come to instill fear in us, to capture, confine, kill and crush us. And they will do this under the cover and camouflage of law and with the support of media messages designed to indict, discredit, and isolate all those who resist and to render them intellectually and politically irrelevant and yet personally and socially dangerous. Indeed, in the midst of our standing up and stepping forward, it will become clear that at virtually every site of power in the system, there is social policy and socially sanctioned practice to condemn and crush righteous resistance.

It is at this point that the ultimate sacrifice and martyrdom of Min. Malcolm X, February 21, 1965 and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 4, 1968, and the morality of service and sacrifice they taught and lived offer us a model and map of the way forward. Surely, most of us will never have to make a choice of ultimate

sacrifice, but we are compelled by our history, culture and circumstance to serve well and sacrifice when and where we are needed and able. To fully appreciate the lessons in the morality of service and sacrifice Min. Malcolm and Rev. King taught and lived, we must not think of their death as simply an assassination. For although we can rightly refer to their deaths as assassination, assassination indicates only what the assassins did; what the oppressor and his collaborators, enemies of Black and human freedom, did. And thus, it leaves out a lifetime of what Malcolm and King did, the many and varied sacrifices of a lifetime and of their very lives.

Also, failing to focus on their sacrifice, we would miss the lessons of their martyrdom and the expansive meaning of their lives, as well as their conscious and committed choice to give the wholeness of their lives to their people, to the liberation movement. And we would pass over their unbreakable commitment to the ancient African ethical imperative to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among the voiceless, devalued, vulnerable and oppressed regardless of the cost or consequences, including the laying down of their lives.

This is why in 1966, we of Us named February 21<sup>st</sup> *Siku ya Dhabihu*, the Day of Sacrifice, a day to commemorate the awesome ultimate sacrifice Malcolm made for us, for our Movement and to open up a new horizon of African and human history. And we called for the students, workers and all others to stay away from school and work in commemoration and to come to the headquarters of Us for a rally of *remembrance and continued resistance*. And in 1968, Us, along with other members of the Black Congress, a united front of which we were a founding member, held a memorial rally of remembrance and continued resistance for Dr. King in the wake of his martyrdom in

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April of that year. We formed a wider front calling it the Operation Unity Committee for the rally, even though the Black Congress was inclusive of the major activist organizations in the city and county of L.A. I had introduced the concept of *operational unity*, *unity in diversity*, *unity without uniformity* on a national level at the first National Black Power Conference in Newark, NJ in 1967, although it was a part of Kawaida philosophy and practice since 1965.

In both the commemoration rallies of remembrance and resistance for Malcolm and King, we stressed the moral and social significance of their service and sacrifice for our people and our struggle. And we called on our people to continue and increase the struggle, live the values for which we love and honor them and through our love, work and struggle keep alive and pass on this awesome legacy.

To commemorate and celebrate the life, leadership and legacy of Min. Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., then, we must take into critical account their recognition and respect of *the moral significance and social necessity of service and sacrifice*. Indeed, our respect and love of them is rooted especially in our profound appreciation for their teaching and living a morality of sacrifice in the service of our people and in the pursuit of freedom, justice and other human good for us and the world.

To serve is to do good for others and to be of positive use to them in varied and countless ways. And to sacrifice means to give up something of value for the sake of others or for something valued that causes difficulty, hardship or deprivation or runs the risk of or leads to harm, injury or death. There are several reasons we sacrifice, including: to build character; fulfill obligations; achieve goals; bond with each other; build community; bear witness to

truth regardless; and to wage and win struggles, especially regardless of costs and consequences to ourselves. And all of these are interrelated contributions to creating and sustaining good in the world.

It is important to note, however, that what they taught and how they lived their lives of service and sacrifice is deeply rooted in African—continental and diasporan—intellectual, political and religious history and culture. It is an ethical tradition that reaches back in time to the ancient African spiritual and ethical texts such as *The Husia* and *Odu Ifa* and is passed on thru the lives and lessons learned from ancestors like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Barker, to Malcolm X and Martin King.

**T**HESE CONCEPTIONS OF THE MORAL AND social necessity of service and sacrifice are derived from the ancient African ethical understanding that *to live is to have relations with others and thus obligations to them*. Indeed, to live is to come into being, survive, thrive and flourish through and with others and thus to incur mutual obligations to each other in various ways. Is this not the meaning of John Mbiti's interpretation "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am?" Is not this position also affirmed in the *ubuntu* insight—*ngingumuntu ngabantu*—I am a person through other people? And certainly, it is reaffirmed in the Kawaida contention that "I am related and relate; therefore I am". Given this fundamental ethical understanding, a central part to our coming into being, honoring our obligations and flourishing as Africans and human beings is to become self-consciously capable and committed *relational human beings*. And at the heart of all this are service and sacrifice for each other, especially in troubled times and urgent and ongoing struggle.

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