



UNDERSTANDING HAJI MALCOLM AS A MORAL TEACHER:
READINGS FROM MY BOOK ON HIS LIBERATION ETHICS

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN CELEBRATING HAJI MALCOLM X'S coming into being, May 19, I want to share readings from my coming book, *The Liberation Ethics of Haji Malcolm X: Critical Consciousness, Moral Grounding and Transformative Struggle*. And I want to use these readings as a way of introducing and cultivating an understanding of him as a *moral teacher*, a teacher of the good, the right and the possible as we say in Kawaiida philosophy. Usually this title or practice is assumed for Nana Dr. Martin Luther King, but before this book and my other initiatives, there is no text or standard talk about Haji Malcolm being a moral teacher, although as I demonstrate in my book, he is a disciplined and deep thinker, greatly concerned with our defining, doing and experiencing good in our lives. And he develops and teaches an ethics of liberation around the central ideas and urgencies of "wake up, clean up, and stand up" which I translate and discuss in my book as the moral imperatives of *critical consciousness, moral grounding and transformative struggle* inwardly and outwardly.

Indeed, as I write "Of all the many and interrelated roles Nana El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, Min. Malcolm X, assumed and carried out with a disciplined excellence in his acceptance of the awesome and demanding invitation of history, none was more meaningful and masterfully performed than his vocation as a moral teacher. He securely situates himself in an ancient African moral vocation and tradition through his teaching, work and strug-

gle as one who is deeply and constantly concerned about how we as persons and a people conceive, construct and actually live our lives; how we create and experience good in the midst of suffering and hope, celebration and sorrow, oppression and resistance, constant repression and enduring resilience. And Haji Malcolm, like other moral teachers and ethical thinkers, is concerned with identifying and explaining the moral implications of his religious beliefs, of moving from theological claims to well-considered ways to recommend and encourage moral principles and practices to pursue, achieve and sustain the Good. Thus, it is as a moral teacher that Haji Malcolm developed and taught his liberation ethics which formed the core of his teachings and shaped the essential character and course of his life, work and struggle in the world. And he taught us, through concepts, principles and practice, ways to achieve moral and social excellence and to fulfill compelling ethical obligations to ourselves, others and the world.

Here, then, following the ancient model of the teacher-leader in ancient Egypt (Kemet), which in Kawaiida Maatian ethics we call - *Seba Maat* (literally, a teacher of Ma'at, i.e., truth, justice, goodness and rightness) or simply *Seba*, I pose and engage Haji Malcolm as a *Seba* (a moral teacher) who combines teaching and leadership as a moral vocation. Indeed, the ancient Egyptian word *sšm* (*seshem*), which means to lead, show the way and guide rightly, also means to

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instruct or teach rightly. Haji Malcolm, thus, is situated in an ancient and ongoing tradition of activist intellectuals, who are at the same time moral teachers, a tradition which extends back in African and world history to the classical African civilization of ancient Egypt. Here we find models of socially conscious intellectuals, leaders and teachers who understood themselves in both social and moral terms and constantly expressed in their writings an active commitment to using their knowledge and skills in the service of the people and the world, and honoring the ethical imperative of *serudj ta*, i.e., to repair, renew and remake the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. In a word, they did *Ma'at*, goodness and rightness, in and for the world.

As a moral teacher, Haji Malcolm was a master teacher and tireless student, stressing in his teaching and practice the importance of constant and lifetime learning and the moral obligation to share that knowledge with others, especially the masses of his people. I had introduced the concept of Haji Malcolm as a master teacher in an article on his socio-political philosophy, but I did not explain its expansive meaning. Master teacher was the name my organization Us had given me in the 60s and I translated it into Swahili as Maulana. Since then, following this, others have begun to use the descriptive to praise other Black figures and at least one author has subsequently used the category “master teacher” in the title of his memoir on Haji Malcolm.

In this regard, as a moral teacher and master teacher, Haji Malcolm enters, not only an ancient African tradition, but also the modern moral teacher tradition established in the U.S. and developed by a long list of activist intellectuals and leaders who preceded him, from Nanas Maria Stewart and Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass and Anna Julia Cooper to Nanas Marcus Garvey, Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker and others. They too used their knowledge and skills to serve the people and address critical issues of their time in both discourse and social practice aimed toward resistance to evil and injustice and toward liberation in the most expansive sense of the word. It is Haji Malcolm and these other men and women, most often rooted in church, mosque or temple, who raised Sebaic, ministerial and prophetic voices, teaching, preaching and putting into practice theologies and ethics of life and liberation.

Haji Malcolm's role as a moral teacher corresponds well also with his defined role as a Muslim minister and teacher within and after the Nation of Islam where he first grounds and develops himself into the committed activist intellectual and noble witness for his people in this country and the world. Also, the ministers and members of the Nation of Islam always drew the distinction between being a minister/teacher and a preacher, between teaching and preaching. And Haji Malcolm's assistant minister in the Muslim Mosque describes him as: “*the teacher at the blackboard with a world in*

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his mind and a piece of chalk in his hand (emphasis mine)”.

Finally, one of Haji Malcolm’s classic moral teachings is expressed in a statement of some of the essential and interrelated elements of his ethics, i.e., knowledge, understanding, love, patience and unity indispensable to the liberation struggle and building the good communities, societies and world we want and deserve. He says "We need more light

(knowledge) about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity". Here he wants us to know and understand each other in deep and enduring ways that foster and facilitate love, that invite patience in the pursuit of good and that build the principled and durable unity we need to achieve the life and world of shared and inclusive good we long and struggle for. ▲

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