



**FOR HER PEOPLE AND HISTORY:
THE MISSION OF MAYME CLAYTON**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Perhaps, we had all imagined her there forever, serenely sitting, talking and teaching among the multitude of books and materials on her people which she had put at the center of her life. Indeed, we could not see her otherwise than constantly collecting, sorting and assembling, patiently putting together the pieces and pages of our history and sharing the wealth and wisdom she had painstakingly acquired and possessed. But the word came last week that Dr. Mayme Clayton, the honored and beloved librarian, the relentless researcher, the tireless teacher, the truth-seeker and the self-declared preserver of our heritage and history had made her transition to the other world.

Surely, we, personally and as a people, share this great loss with her family and loved ones. And in prayerful homage we say: *May the good she left last forever. May her family and all her loved ones be blessed with consolation, courage and peace. May her name be forever blessed, her work be always honored, and her legacy endure for eternity. May she rise in radiance and be received in the sacred circle of the ancestors, among the doers of good, the righteous and rightfully rewarded. And may her people praise her thru practice, by continuing the important and awesome work she has left for us to pursue and pass on to future generations. Hotep.*

In and thru her work, she had become a modern pillar and part of an ancient and ongoing tradition that cherished books, linked learning and life, and understood our history as sacred. Indeed, the sacred text of ancient Egypt, the *Husia*, taught that “better is a book than a well-built house. Better is a book than a memorial plaque in the temple.” Moreover, this ancient African civilization

of Egypt called human beings *rekhyt*, knowing beings, and its sites of learning “houses of life.” This love of learning and its linkage to life extends forward thru the Holocaust of enslavement in which our people risked their lives to learn to read and write in defiance of the existing laws that made it a crime for us.

Born in Arkansas before the Black Freedom Movement, she had come early to the conclusion that the history of her people had been deformed, denied and distorted by the oppressor. Thus, like her predecessor and counterpart in the East, the famed bibliophile and institution-builder, Arthur Schomburg, she dedicated herself to correcting the historical record and assembling facts to undermine the falsification of history. Dr. Clayton had begun her search for the missing pieces and pages of Black history in a quest to know more about the great educator and human rights activist, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. Indeed, Dr. Bethune inspired her with her timeless teaching on the meaning and obligation of our history saying, “we are custodians and heirs of a great legacy” and we must bear the burden and glory of that history with strength, dignity and determination. In fact, Dr. Clayton says of Bethune, “her strength and dedication gave me strength (and) inspired me.” She goes on to say “that’s what is important about Black History, it gives us direction and meaning.”

Dr. Clayton wanted to recover and be a conscientious custodian of this history to which she and we are heirs. But she could not readily find it and thus made her life work, the meticulous looking for the life history of our people, poking and peering thru piles of dusty and discarded materials in bookstores and basements, closets and clos-

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ing libraries, garages and garden shacks, attics and everywhere else clues, calls, conversations and letters led her. Over the years she collected over 30,000 items, a rich cultural treasure of books, films and photos, records and other audio recordings, manuscripts, magazines and sheet music, artwork, journals, playbills, pamphlets, prints, posters, correspondence and memorabilia of various kinds.

She went forth with a joy in her work, a love for her people and a faith in the rightness and relevance of what she was doing. And she identified the grounds and joy of her work saying, "I love to read and I wanted to do something for my people." So she began collecting and amassing materials which not only revealed the rich, ancient and varied character of Black life, history and culture, but also countered the racist reduction of this history to uneducated athletes in and on court, gangstas in the street, gunstlers in the house, women and children in deep trouble, and men missing for all kinds of irresponsible reasons.

She noted frequently that her work had been a challenging project, first finding deficiencies and distortions in what was present and a great and ever-growing need for what was absent. She went to college to enhance her skills as a collector and librarian, and afterwards tried to bring new direction and definitive collections to USC and UCLA, but found insufficient administrative will and blocked ways in her efforts. And so

she decided to build the educational center she looked and longed for, a library and research center that respected, recovered and reconstructed the history of African people and put it where it belonged at the beginning and center of U.S. and human history. It is to be rightfully called the Mayme A. Clayton Library and Cultural Center within the Western States Black Research and Educational Center she founded.

Dr. Clayton had shared her dream and project with me, as she had so many others. For she loved sharing her collection, reading from rare manuscripts, reciting early poems, and revealing facts that offered added evidence to the grand conception she held of Black history and Black people. W.E.B. DuBois, she said, had rightly revealed how the veil of racism had blocked and distorted the world's correct perception of us and our rightful understanding of ourselves. Completion of her project, she said, "will give reality its true dimensions and that truth will break through the veil and let us all see and let's us all know"

Given all she gave us, we owe it to her to contribute to the building of the center and to continue her work. As for her, she has built for eternity and will live for eternity. For surely it is written in the *Husia*, that those who bring good in the world, "they shall be counted among the ancestors. Their name shall endure as a monument and what they've done on earth, shall never perish or pass away."