



## US: A 49-YEAR STRUGGLE TO BE OURSELVES AND FREE OURSELVES

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

As we celebrate and self-consciously reflect on this the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our organization Us, we, of necessity, pay grateful homage to our ancestors, spiritual anchors and unerasable evidence of the ascendant and expansive possibilities within us, revered way openers and uplifters of the light that lasts. May they always guide and guard us in the work we do, the struggles we wage and the life of excellence we strive to live. And may we always honor them by living and expanding their legacy in the worthy ways we understand and assert ourselves in excellence as Africans in the world.

We also pay grateful homage to those among us still standing tall, working, building and struggling to achieve our original and expanded goals. This grateful homage we pay also to those still in captivity as political prisoners and to those still in exile and underground. And we pay grateful homage to those who have joined the ancestors in good standing and who do and will continue to return in the whirlwind and storm with Marcus Garvey and the countless millions of other ancestors, as he promised, to aid us in our struggle for liberation and a dignity-affirming and flourishing life. So too, we pay grateful homage to our supporters, who have given generously to aid us and sustain us in our projects and initiatives in the service and advancement of our people.

It was in the summer of '65, even before our founding meeting on September 7, that we began to come into being as the organization Us, having already been active in struggles to advocate and advance the interests of our people. I made the call, reading and responding to the signs and

tenor of the time. It was a time of fundamental, fast-paced and far-reaching turning, marked and made especially significant, not only by the Black Freedom Movement in the process of unsettling self-assessment and radical reconfiguration, but also by the assassination and martyrdom of Min. Malcolm X, and the righteous rage and resistance called the Watts Revolt.

In August 1965, 49 years before Ferguson, another case of police violence had compelled the people of Watts and surrounding areas to rise up in righteous resistance, not only against such brutality, but also against merchant exploitation and racist oppression in general. Many of our founding members had participated in the Revolt and others were now working in earnest efforts to rebuild above the ruins, serve and struggle within the ranks and daily realities of our people and radically change things as they existed before the Revolt. So we came into being in the fire and furnace of revolt and struggle and we embraced and intensified it, and engaged it as a way of life. And we have not conceded or surrendered any part or piece, or even an inch or iota of the sacred ground of Black culture, social consciousness and moral commitments we recovered, reconstructed and put in service of our lives and struggles as persons and a people.

Yebo, we were those *Young Lions*, Simba, Saidi and Malaika, young men and women who stood up 49 years ago and dared to link culture and struggle, cultural grounding with radical and revolutionary thought and practice, and who made the outrageous assumption and assertion that the first step forward was a step "Back to Black", back to the best of our culture, using

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it to ground and guide ourselves in our daily lives and liberation struggle. Indeed, it is we, Us, who stood up in countless venues to declare that the key crisis and challenge in Black life is the cultural crisis and challenge, that the first and foundational battle we must wage is the battle to win the hearts and minds of our people, and that until we break the monopoly that the established order has on our minds and return to the upward paths of our ancestors and culture, liberation is not only impossible but unthinkable.

After all, how can a people free themselves, if they deny their own oppression or don't recognize it in its various forms? Also, how can a people be themselves, if they deny their own identity and wear self-degrading masks to disguise and camouflage themselves? And how can a people draw from the richness and resourcefulness of their ancient and ongoing history and culture, if they deny their culture's existence or deem it inconvenient, embarrassing or unuseful?

Indeed, without grounding in the best of our culture that rightly defines us and liberation, we could be made to think we are actually other than ourselves and that freedom is winning acceptance from our oppressor and finding an undignified but financially rewarding space in oppression. Likewise, even the talk of liberation could create confusion and fear in some and send them hurrying and scurrying to seek psychological comfort and counselling from the oppressor about the danger and damage of such talk and the utter futility and fatal end to which all such efforts inevitably lead. It is a historically constructed catechism of

impossibilities taught to capture and control the mind, empty the heart of courage and to create a people incapable and/or unwilling to be themselves, free themselves and build the good world they and all human beings naturally long for and ultimately find in liberation and a life of freedom, peace, well-being and flourishing.

Our message and the work and struggle we engage in to make it a reality was/is based on three basic propositions of our philosophy, Kawaida, sometimes called cultural nationalism and willfully misinterpreted to make others to appear revolutionary and us to seem less so. These propositions are: the defining feature of a people or nation is its culture; that for a people to be itself and free itself, it must be self-conscious, self-determining and rooted in its own culture; and that the quality of life of a people and the success of its liberation struggle depends upon its waging cultural revolution within and political revolution without, resulting in the radical transformation of self, society and ultimately the world. Thus, we were convinced with Malcolm, Fannie Lou Hamer and all our other ancestors who instruct us that we had to radically question, confront and change not only America, but also that in us which America had made us in its most racist, dignity-denying and freedom-depriving form, and imagine and dare bring into being a new way of being African and human in the world. For ultimately, this is the real road to liberation, regardless of the "no outlet", "detour" and "danger ahead" signs posted, tweeted and texted to divert and dissuade us.

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