



**BLACK WOMEN IN AND AS HISTORY:
SUSTAINERS OF THE WORLD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

March marks the beginning of Black History Month II (Women Focus), called in other quarters Women's History Month, but whatever is done or decided in the larger society or even the world, the question will always remain and be raised of how do we understand, assert and celebrate ourselves, speak our special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution to the forward flow of human history. For it is not enough just to be present while others preside and propose; to sit at other peoples' table empty-plated waiting to be nourished and nurtured, or to be the standard bearer for the ruling race/class and concede to their demands for self-concealment with servile resignation and non-resistance. Our task, the ancestors tell us, is to always understand and assert ourselves in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and future-forming ways, ever lifting up the light that lasts and constantly striving and struggling to bring good in the world.

We must, then, honor the women of the world by first and foremost honoring African women, and we lift up the light for the world by lighting the way for ourselves and sharing the light with others. As Mary McLeod Bethune, taught "Let there be light, two kinds of light; (one) to light the outside world, (and the other) to light the world within the soul." Surely it is the light within us, within the depths of our souls, history and culture, that we must bring forth to light our own way and a way for the world—otherwise we walk and work in darkness and have no real message or deep meaning for the world.

The ancient author in the *Husia* says, "It is wrong to walk upside down in darkness. Thus, I will come forth today and

bring forth the truth which is within me. For surely it is within me." It is this light and lighthouse, Dr. Bethune says, that will "guide us through the fog of prejudice (and oppression) to the heaven of peace and justice". I read this light and lighthouse as our spiritual and moral values which constitute our conscience and consciousness of ourselves and the world and our awesome responsibility of being African woman and man, which begins with our relations with our immediate others and takes root and then radiates outward into the larger world.

So it is good for us as a morally and spiritually grounded and socially conscious people to use this month and moment in history to celebrate and commemorate the legacy, lives and work of African women in the world. This means that we are to contemplate and reconsider their meaning and measure in their varied and indispensable roles as grandmother and mother; sister and soul mate; friend and first responder; partner in love, life and struggle; and all the other vital roles and relationships that aid in providing the reciprocal basis for our self-understanding and flourishing as persons and a people.

Moreover, we must also pay homage to Black women as leaders, social activists, social servants, freedom fighters, builders of the not-yet new world and way to live and in that expansive and inclusive category of our ancestors in the *Odu Ifa*, as "sustainers of the world". For it is they, as Anna Julia Cooper says, who bring that indispensable and complementary side of truth and reality which contributes definitively to the promotion and preservation of the health and wholeness of the world.

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We must be clear, then, about the meaning of woman in our lives and the world. Concerning woman, the ancestors teach in the *Husia* that femaleness and maleness are equally indispensable elements of reality and being, that even the Creator who bears the sacred praise name Atum, which means “complete and all-encompassing”, contains both femaleness and maleness, yet transcends both; that central to our self-definition as persons is how we relate as female and male, woman and man, and that the Creator says, “I created male and female so that the joys of love might come into the world” and the work of the world could be done. But if we are to bring and share love and joy in the world and do the work of the world, it must be based on a mutual commitment not only to love but to also make ourselves worthy of love by practicing those values which cultivate and promote love and cause it to take root and flourish. This means, at a minimum the *Husia* says, we must seek and speak truth, demand and do justice, be gentle, kind and considerate, avoid and uproot evil and always do that which is good in and for the world.

But again, we have no message for the world if we miss the meaning of ourselves. And we miss the meaning of ourselves and our ancient contribution to moral discourse on respect for the human person and human life if we forget that at the heart of all we do, must be a profound and ever-practiced respect for each other, female and male, as

bearers of dignity and divinity, identical in divinity and equal in dignity, regardless of sex, social status or any other designation.

It is the issue of respect for women in thought, emotion, speech and conduct that lies at the center of women’s concerns about their roles and possibilities in the world. As Dr. Cooper says, it has been an ongoing struggle for Black women to defend their dignity, demand respect and “keep hallowed their persons”. And she argues that this requires unrelenting struggle until every person, every image of God, regardless of race, sex or social condition is held “sacred and inviolable”.

Finally, the ancestors teach us that this rightful respect for women depends on our respect for ourselves; the respect they demand and insist on in our relations with them; and our recognition as men of their indispensability to us, and, as the *Odu Ifa* says, to any real and great good done in the world. This is the meaning of Frances E.W. Harper’s statement that in the movement to free and transform the world, “Woman as companion of man must be a sharer”. Indeed, given the interrelatedness of life and the indivisibility of freedom, “so close is the bond between man and woman that you can’t raise one without the other” in any real or moral sense. For there is no real movement for liberation “without woman’s sharing in that movement”, giving it “right impetus” and in partnership with men, opening up the horizon of history, freedom and flourishing for everyone.

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