



**CROSSING THE BRIDGE AT SELMA:
REMEMBRANCE, REFLECTION AND RESISTANCE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

It was said in the 60s that Selma, Alabama was a most violent site and vivid symbol of southern injustice and savage oppression, but that it was also a decisive battleground of defiant and irrepressible resistance, of heroic martyrdom, courageous marches, and determined struggle out of which history and futures are made. Each year the African American people of Selma hold a major commemoration of this historic struggle in the Black Freedom Movement and of its signature event, the defiant crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, March 7, 1965, which was met with savage and sustained police brutality. It is called "Bloody Sunday," marking both tragedy and triumph, bruised and bloodied bodies, but also the unbroken and unwavering will of a people, waging struggle for the simple right to vote, and for the natural and human right to be free, enjoy justice, and to live lives of dignity and decency without racist terror or tyranny.

This annual commemoration, called the Bridge Crossing Jubilee, was founded by Attorney Faya Rose Toure, who has led it well over the years and with her husband, State Senator Hank Sanders (D-Selma), and other capable colleagues and co-workers like Connie Tucker and Sam Walker, have built it to the point where it draws tens of thousands from across the country and around the world. Atty. Toure is also founder of the National Voting Rights Museum, the Ancient African Civilization, Enslavement and Civil Rights Museum (AA-CECRM), the 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement, and many other institutions, and was a lead attorney in the Black Farmers' successful suit against government discrimination.

Atty. Toure states that "the Jubilee commemorates Bloody Sunday and cele-

brates the Voting Rights Movement and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act." But she continues, "it is not just to remember the past," but also is "a reminder of how precious the right to vote and all our gains are (and) that the struggle to secure the right to vote and our other gains goes on." And she warns that "if we are not vigilant, we will lose our gains."

The Jubilee has many simultaneous events including: reenactment of the historic bridge crossing; lectures and forums on critical issues; an intergenerational hip-hop youth summit; awards banquets; inductions into museums of history and resistance; a mock trial of the established order; book signings, etc. This year when I received an invitation to participate and present, and be inducted into the Hall of Resistance at the AA-CECRM, Tiamoyo and I were honored and pleased to join others in this annual journey and gathering of remembrance, reflection and recommitment to resistance.

The Jubilee specifically commemorates what is called "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, which began as the first Selma-to-Montgomery March and ended with a violent and vicious police attack on the marchers who were prevented from going beyond the Bridge. They had called the march first to protest the murder and honor the martyrdom of Jimmy Lee Jackson, killed defending his mother, Mrs. Viola Jackson, and his grandfather, Mr. Cager Lee Jackson, against police violence and brutality. It was called also to bring national focus on the struggle for voting rights, denied Black people as a matter of racial protocol and dominance. And it was also called to send a signal of defiance and determination to the established order, saying and singing, "ain't goin'

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let nobody turn us round.” There were two other marches after the first one was brutally driven back by the police. And it is generally accepted that the struggle in Selma contributed greatly to passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It is in this context that Sen. Sanders said, “This is holy ground where a great struggle culminated.”

The Jubilee is also a commemoration of the martyrdom of Jimmy Lee Jackson (1938-1965), whose life and death in struggle offers us insight not only into the official and unofficial violence and vicious savagery in the South in that time, but also the profound commitment and unquestionable courage of Black people in their willingness to pay the ultimate price for freedom and justice. He was a simple farmer and woodcutter from Marion, Alabama, who in the midst of grueling work, persistent poverty and overwhelming oppression dared to strive for freedom and seek justice, and ultimately offered his life as a sacred sacrifice to achieve these goals.

Dr. Martin Luther King delivered the eulogy at Jackson’s funeral, March 3, calling him a “martyred hero of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.” King stressed the need to confront and radically change the system and not simply focus on bringing Jackson’s murderer to justice. We must also be concerned, he said, “about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produces the murderer.”

Today and each year, as we remember and return to Selma, Alabama, and the many other Selmas or sites of critical and continuing struggles, it is important to remember this. Atty. Toure states there are

still many more bridges to cross in the struggle to achieve the just and good society we all want and deserve. And she argues that none is more important than crossing the bridge in the struggle for quality education for all our children. She states that “education is the hardest bridge we’ll ever have to cross” and a master key to our liberation and a good and expansive life as a people.

And in this struggle and all others, she says, we must hold the system, our leaders and representatives and ourselves accountable. Indeed, she asserts, “only an inferior nation would continue for another century to provide an inferior education to its children. (And) only an inferior ‘thinking people’ would continue to accept their inferior status once the light of truth and knowledge uncovers the key to their true liberation.”

Continuing racism is real in society, regardless of rumors of its early death and the disappearance of the laws that once imposed and enshrined it. For as Atty. Toure argues, “even when the law ceased to plant and nurture seeds of racial hatred, it did not take the necessary precautions to remove the contaminated soil. (Thus), some wild seeds continued to grow, sometimes uncontrollably.” Our task, then, is to “keep our eyes on the mission and our life’s purpose, (and) not fail to serve others or fail to teach.” For in that service and those teachings and the work, struggle and institution-building this requires, bridges of systemic domination, deprivation and degradation are crossed, and the liberation and good life we long for and deserve are ultimately and definitively achieved.

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