



**UNMAKING AND REMAKING BLACK MEN:
NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND CAPACITIES**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

In the beginning, our various sacred texts teach us, we were divinely conceived and constructed, born in freedom, endowed with dignity and rights, and the mental and moral capacities to choose and do good in and for the world. And we were also told the earth belonged to all of us as a resource and conditions for creating and pursuing a good and meaningful life. But, then, there was the Holocaust of enslavement; the systemic savagery of segregation; structured racial, economic, educational, political and social discrimination and disparities; the drug wars on us; and the racialization of crime and the criminalization of the race and massive incarceration. And at the end of this road to ruin and destruction are generations of too many African American boys and men.

If we are to effectively engage and solve this deep-rooted problem of oppression, social suppression, self-injury and unmaking of Black men, then, we must think deeply about what we're doing and must do; link, strengthen and combine our efforts; and construct a truly comprehensive and integrated project of rescue and reconstruction. We must move beyond episodic engagement and short term alarm about the statistical record of ravaged and cancelled futures that an uncaring, profit-pursuing and empire-seeking society imposes on the less powerful and vulnerable. After all, we can't walk into a war zone and wonder why there are so many wounded and dead.

To improve the conditions and capacity of Black men, we must at the same time engage the Black community as a source of identity, ground of struggle and building, and an indispensable resource. There are post-racial illusions about our not really being Black, but a smorgasbord of micro-identities. But whatever else we call ourselves, it is our identity as a Black people that determines our oppression, grounds our resistance and generates our in-

ternal creative capacity to conceive and construct spaces of freedom, beauty and meaning regardless of circumstances. Thus, we must not pretend that we can solve the *particular* problems of Black men and Black people within a *general* multicultural mix of policy and program. Yes, we are often similarly situated with others and thus have common interests, but we are always distinct. And that communal distinctiveness must be respected and given due attention in policy, planning and program.

Key also is building and reinforcing the capacity of families as the womb and mold in which men and women are made, cultivated and sustained in our strength and striving or seriously injured, disabled and destroyed. We can debate as we act, but we know: two parents have greater parenting capacity than one; that father and mother must be involved in responsible, meaningful and consistent ways; that grounding in moral and spiritual values are indispensable; and that vital also is cultivation of the life of the mind, health and material well-being, and commitment to striving for excellence in all things good, beautiful and right.

Furthermore, no matter what form our families have taken or take, key to improving the conditions and capacity of community, families and the children and adults in them is the building and strengthening of quality male/female relations and relationships. Indeed, part of what it means to be a man is how we relate to and treat women, rejecting animosity, violence and exploitation and coming together in co-educational processes and relational exchanges that lay the bases for mutually respectful views, values and practices which ground and guide our lives and the cooperative common ground projects of building the kind of communities, families and relationships we all want and deserve.

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Rightful attention must also be paid to defining manhood, providing an overarching framework for how Black men in all their variedness should understand and assert themselves in dignity-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing ways. The issue here is not about aspirations to move “from jail house to White House”, as if the White House is or should be the highest or most noble aspiration of a Black man. For it is not offices we seek as ultimate goals, but attributes of character that make us culturally grounded, socially conscious, intellectually and practically capable and morally committed boys, men and persons in the world. That is to say, we must strive, first and foremost, to be good persons in the world; good sons, brothers, fathers, uncles, friends and fellow human beings; those known for the truth they seek and speak, the justice they do and demand; and the respect and love they show in practice.

Thus, value grounding is indispensable to becoming and being conscious, capable and committed men. And for almost half a century, the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles) of Kwanzaa and Kawaida philosophy, have been a solid foundation and framework for cultivating moral and social consciousness and commitment and teaching how to relate and work together in mutual respect in the interest of shared good. These values, used in countless independent and public schools, rites of passage programs, student unions, and community and professional organizations, institutions, programs and projects are: *Umoja* (Unity); *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination); *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility); *Ujamaa*

(Cooperative Economics); *Nia* (Purpose); *Kuumba* (Creativity); and *Imani* (Faith).

A sixth area of attention is social policy and the role society has in solving the socio-economic, political, health, educational, legal and other problems it creates and exacerbates. Indeed, here we encounter the Kawaida conception of two kinds of responsibility. The oppressor, we say, is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation. And part of our responsibility in freeing ourselves and achieving racial and social justice is our holding society responsible for what it has done and needs to do, given its role in our history and current life. It means radically confronting governments and the corporate vultures and vampires hoggishly feeding from the public trough, profiting from the unconscionable waste of war, continually expanding the number of *prison plantations*, and leaving increasingly less for the poor, vulnerable and the masses.

And finally, as we all know, there is no strategy worthy of its name and claims without struggle. Fannie Lou Hamer taught us “we have to struggle for everything we get” and “to bring right and justice where there is wrong and injustice”. And as A. Philip Randolph taught us, “Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given, it is extracted”, especially by the struggle, “power and pressure (of) the masses”. This means we must rebuild our Movement, strengthen our *culture of struggle*, rooted in a profound and ongoing commitment to racial and social justice, human caring, freedom and flourishing, and the health, wholeness and well-being of the world itself and all in it.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.