



**US AT 53 | REAFFIRMING OUR REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT
AND RADICAL IMAGINATION**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

PART 1. AS WE CLOSE OUT THE MONTH OF our coming forth and founding, September 7, 1965, 53 years ago, we continue with *Sankofa* remembrance, reflection and reaffirmation of the original and ongoing revolutionary spirit and radical imagination that brought us into being and provided the foundation for our continuing resilience and our enduring resistance. And as part of this process, I want to share reflections of this revolutionary spirit and radical imagination found in *The Quotable Karenga*, which contains critical concepts that served as foundation and framework for our thought and practice of *revolutionary cultural nationalism*. All quotes which follow are from *The Quotable* first published in 1967, but representing also an earlier period of thought and practice. To talk of *revolutionary spirit* is to speak of an animated and active commitment to righteous and relentless struggle for the liberation of our people, to courageous and uncompromising questioning of things offered and imposed by the existing system, and to an ultimate overturning of the established order of oppression. And to speak of *radical imagination* is to talk of a deep-rooted rethinking and reframing of our conception of ourselves, society and the world from a standpoint in our own image and interest, from a Black frame of reference, as we say now, from an African-centered or Afrocentric framework.

In its most radical sense, this means to Us and in Kawaida, our philosophy of life and struggle embracing and engaging Africa at its best as our moral, spiritual and social ideal. This is radical in that it means *upturning* the way we understand and assert ourselves, moving from the established Eurocentric way inculcated in us at every level of life and embracing an African-centered way, a Kawaida way of understanding ourselves and the world and asserting ourselves in the world. Here I use a word from the vocabulary and vision of our revered foremother and mentor, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. She says, we must “upturn the world.” This word, “upturn” has two interrelated meanings: to turn something *upward*

or *upside down*. And I read it here as turning the African worldview, previously pressed down and suppressed, *rightfully upward* in our lives and struggle and turning the Eurocentric worldview upside down, upsetting it and ultimately overturning it completely. Indeed, in a White-dominated country and world, to think really Black, really African, is radical, even revolutionary in its contribution to reconceiving, repairing, renewing and remaking ourselves, society and the world in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

Us and its philosophy of life and struggle, Kawaida, was born, shaped and made meaningful in the fiery midst of the Black Freedom Movement, as the Movement transitioned from its civil rights phase to its Black Power period in that turbulent time of turning and overturning called the Sixties. We understood ourselves as young lions, *Simba Wachanga*, self-conscious and committed freedom fighters which our honored teacher, Min. Malcolm X, pointed to in the Congo and called for in the U.S. They were for him a model of revolutionary resistance by young people which was sweeping the world in an era of revolution and rising liberation struggles of the oppressed and dark peoples of the world. And he wanted us to recognize that we, as a people and a generation, were a part of this global historical initiative of liberation and must self-consciously accept the awesome responsibility this imposed on us.

We of Us, like so many of our age and era, were on fire with the idea and practice of liberation and steeped in the self-understanding of being a key people and a key generation in a key country at a critical juncture in the history of our people, society and the world. The U.S. was a colossal source of war and imperial expansion around the world and we were in the belly of the beast. And given our strategic position in this racist system of domination, we argued that our liberation struggle would not only expand the realm of freedom for us and others in this country, but also be a significant contribution to the global struggles of oppressed people against racism, colonialism, and imperialism. As Malcolm, our

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revered teacher, taught, this was a turning point in history where we were witnessing and participating in the righteous struggles to end White supremacy in the world. And we were eager to answer what we saw as this invitation to history and struggle.

We began by defining ourselves as an organization, naming ourselves Us in audacious affirmation of our people and in defiant opposition to our oppressor. Thus, the name Us signifies first and foremost a self-conscious, active commitment to us, us Black people, us Africans, and to our liberation and the flourishing of our lives. Also, Us signifies radical opposition and resistance to them, the oppressor. And finally, Us signifies our commitment to an African communitarian way of life, a community-oriented way of life, a life of sharing good and the responsibilities, commitment, values, work and struggle that produce and sustain the good.

Here we dared to pose Africa as our moral, spiritual and social ideal, Africa at its best and most beautiful. Thus, we said “Us is an ideal—something that has not been tried before,” i.e., a *sankofa* retrieval, reconstruction and reaffirmation of African culture in the service of liberation and in the most intellectually grounded and comprehensive ways. We put cultural revolution at the center of our struggle for national liberation, maintaining with Malcolm, Toure, Cabral, Fanon and other revolutionaries of the world that the cultural revolution precedes, makes possible and sustains the larger revolutionary liberation struggle. Thus, we said, “We must free ourselves culturally before we succeed politically.” And we also said, “The revolution being fought now is a revolution to win the (hearts and) minds of our people. If we fail to win this (revolution) we cannot wage the violent (political) one.” We also argued that “without culture, negroes are only a set of reactions to white people” and will continue to

see themselves as derivative rather than as original and in their own awesome image and rightful interests.

Moreover, we argued that “culture is the basis for all ideas, images and actions. To move is to move culturally i.e., by a set of values given to you by your culture.” Culture was to Us, not what the oppressor and lesser enemies evilly and/or ignorantly assert is our position, i.e., simply music, clothes, language and symbols. Rather culture was and is for Us *the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates and sustains and develops itself and introduces itself to history and humanity*. As I stated then “Everything we do, think or learn is somehow interpreted as a cultural expression. So, when we discuss politics, to Us that is a sign culture. When we discuss economics, to Us that is a sign of culture. When we discuss community organization, that to Us is a sign of culture.” In other words, “We define culture as a complete value system and also means and ways of maintaining that value system.”

CONCERNED THAT WE DON’T SIMPLY accept tradition without question or concern for its rightness and relevance to the realities, needs, aspirations and the best ethical understandings of our people, we made, as a central principle of Kwanzaa, the consistent joining of tradition with reason. “Our culture is based on tradition and reason,” we said. “We must take things which were traditional and apply them to (meet) the concrete needs of the people.” Furthermore, we said, “All we do is based on tradition and reason, that is to say foundation and movement. We begin to build on a traditional foundation, but it is out of movement that we complete our creation,” i.e., the creation of a new man and woman, a new society, a new world and a new hope and horizon for humankind. ▲

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