



**RETHINKING THANKSGIVING:  
BEYOND BIG TURKEYS AND SMALL TALK**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

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(AUTHOR'S NOTE) *THIS IS MY STANDARD column on celebrating Thanksgiving which asks for us to consider making a distinction between our thanksgiving as a principle and practice and the day the colonizers of this country set aside to celebrate triumph over the Native Americans and called the "Day of Mourning" by many Native Americans. As I've said elsewhere, "as African people, we cannot deny the ethical and spiritual value and obligation of giving thanks and being thankful. But we cannot in good faith, participate in the official forgetfulness of the established order, the cold and acute denial of the decimation of Native Americans and pretend it's just about gathering together in joy."*

The histories and holidays of the oppressed, colonized and enslaved are, of necessity, different from the history and holidays of the oppressor, the colonizer and the enslaver. Likewise, their interpretations of those histories and holidays also differ, for they are lived and learned from different standpoints. Thus, the Palestinians call the conquest and colonization of Palestine, the *Nakba*—the Great Catastrophe, and the Israelis call it the war of independence. The Native Americans call the conquest and colonization of their land and the decimation of their people genocide and Holocaust. The Europeans call it "discovery," "the move westward," "reaching the promised land," and other self-sanitizing words and phrases.

During the Holocaust of enslavement, Frederick Douglass, asked to speak on the meaning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, seen as Independence Day for Whites, told his White audience, "This Fourth of July is *yours* not *mine*. You may rejoice. I must mourn." For it

is for the enslaved African "a day which reveals to him more than any other day of the year the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is a constant victim." Indeed, he goes on to say that for the enslaved African, "Your celebration is a sham," and a repulsive mixture of vanity, heartlessness, mockery and hypocrisy. And "your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings with all your religious parade and solemnity are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages." And finally, descendants of the Wampanoag in Massachusetts who first welcomed their White visitors and invaders, call what Whites call "Thanksgiving Day" the "Day of Mourning", mourning for the millions killed and the memories erased and falsified about this great Holocaust.

We live in a country and world of brutal realities and comforting illusions, carefully crafted to mask and diminish the truth and tragedy of these realities. Certainly, one of the most comforting illusions we have in this country is the origins and meaning of the holiday of Thanksgiving with its big turkeys, small talk, scream-filled televised football games, and its revel and rampage of corporate-designed consumption. Through both official and personal pretension, we approach Thanksgiving without its history of horrors and the uncomfortable calling to mind that more than turkeys were killed for the celebration of that first day and that its roots lie in the victory celebrations of European genocidal wars against the Native Americans.

So, as we sit down in celebration of the sanitized version of Thanksgiving, let us, as

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African people, honor our ethical obligation found in the *Husia* to “not turn a blind eye to injustice or a deaf ear to truth.” Instead, let us remember the lives, cultures and whole peoples lost, and honor and share in the Native American Day of Mourning as they did our mourning and quest for freedom when we first met, joined and struggled with them against our common oppression and oppressor.

Indeed, over the centuries our histories and lives intersected and intertwined in various ways: in liberation struggles; in nation-building such as the Seminole nation; in shared asylum, establishing defense communities in Mexico against “Yankee” encroachment; shared lineage and communal living throughout the Americas; and in our common quest to defend our dignity, reaffirm our rights and make our own unique contribution to a new history of humankind. The need, then, as Malcolm reminds us, is to think in ways that liberate rather than limit us and free us from false and deficient ways of viewing and engaging the world. Thus, if we rethink the practice of thanksgiving and separate it from the official celebration, we see that giving thanks is not a problem, but celebrating genocide and/or oppression and the triumph of evil clearly is. Surely, it is an evil irony that the pilgrims who held the first White thanksgiving celebration in this country, did so to celebrate victory over those who welcomed and saved them; those who gave them food and shelter, those who taught them how to grow crops and offered them peaceful co-existence in their own land.

Moreover, it is worth noting that these people who came here running away from religious intolerance and persecution in their own country established a similar, if not more severe religious tyranny. They self-righteously saw themselves as “puritans”, pure and chosen by God; and in God’s

name, they condemned and burned their women as witches with repulsive regularity, brutally suppressed all dissent and created a White god and White religion in their own image and interest. It is with this false interpretation and inspiration from their racialized god that they went about they’re devilish work of genocide, justifying it with biblical injunctions like, “slay the heathen hip and thigh, and make them hewers of wood and drawers of water.” This racist ranting posing as religion was used also for Africans and other peoples of color.

Advancing conquest, occupation and imperial savagery as salvation or self-defense, they posed their plunder as the will and promise of God. Like their modern-day descendants, they turned god into a chooser of an elect and superior people, a ruthless real estate agent promising other peoples’ land and resources, and an ally in the genocidal wars they waged to seize them. And they now, as then, pretend shock and outrage when the oppressed people rightfully and righteously rise up in resistance.

We might reason that celebrating the European Thanksgiving Day is all right because we’re giving thanks to God not to the oppressor; reaffirming bonds between us; and it’s convenient to do this. Surely, it is always good to gather together to reaffirm the bonds between us. But do we have to do it on this day? And do we have to eat turkey, make small talk and act as if the official sanitized version of Thanksgiving Day is real, and the Native Americans are not our brothers and sisters in life and struggle and their Holocaust, like our own, merits no place in our memory, hearts and homes?

**T**HANKSGIVING IS A GOOD AND LIFE-affirming practice and we should always practice it. But let us give thanks in our own way and on our own day and throughout the year. Let us give thanks for

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the good in and of the world, the good of life and love, of sisterhood, brotherhood, friendship, family and community, and the awesome beauty and good of the world. And let us turn our prayers of thanksgiving into the *practice of good*, especially for the vulnerable among us, i.e., the poor, the disabled, ill,

aged and infant, the stranger, refugee, immigrant and captive (prisoner). And in this way, we honor the best of our moral heritage and open the way through struggle to a new history, a new world and a new way of being human and sharing good in the world.

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