



**MANHOOD, MISSION AND THE MILLION MAN MARCH:  
TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE AND POLICY IN STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HE MEANING AND MISSION OF MANHOOD, especially Black manhood, is an ancient and ongoing question, for it is not only about a presence, but also about a process and practice, and not only about just being, but also about constantly becoming. In a word, it is about ever striving and struggling to be our best and come into the fullness of ourselves as men, African men and human beings. Let me also say here that the same can be said about the meaning and mission of Black womanhood, African womanhood with appropriate differences as self-defined by African women in their own unique and self-affirming ways.

Each season and century of our lives poses different problems and challenges for us. And certainly, our violent and death-dealing uprooting from African society and enslavement in U.S. society posed a radically evil context of death and disablement that called on all our internal and collective energies, not only to survive, but also to endure and prevail. For the struggle was, not only to survive, but also to hold on to our humanity in the most dehumanizing context and to retain vital elements of our culture as an African people in the face of the vicious deculturalizing process imposed by our oppressor.

For indeed our oppressor had imposed a social death on us, reducing us as African men, women and children to objects, objects of labor, sex and entertainment. And yet we did not die; we reached inside ourselves, drew on our deep spiritual and ethical traditions, our internal creativity and our communal commitments to care and share and dared struggle to be free against all odds, but with an ongoing work of faith. And so, we dared to survive, endure and prevail, and thus, stood up in the very coffins the oppressor had constructed for us, survivors of our intended burial.

Even after the Holocaust of enslavement, there was the social savagery of racism called Jim Crow, segregation and other names for White dominance, deprivation and degradation of us as Black men and our people as a whole. And even today,

we are marked for disablement and death in various ways – from mass incarceration to public execution by police under the color and camouflage of law. This does not mean Black women are not oppressed also in various, similar and different ways. But it does mean that Black boys and men are singled out in a special, deadly and disabling way with police violence being one of its most visible forms.

Certainly, the Million Man March and the *Mission Statement* of the March offer us an excellent opportunity to revisit the question of manhood and mission in the context of policy proposals dedicated to self and societal transformation. For clearly, the March and the conversation and activities around it raised the issue of manhood and the responsibility associated with it that offer a model and mirror for us to measure ourselves and ask, “how do we stand today?” For as always, we are confronted with the unavoidable fact that the oppressor is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation. And key to our assuming responsibility for being ourselves and freeing ourselves is holding the oppressor responsible for oppressing us. And this is not only a question of reparations, but waging a liberation struggle that makes reparations possible in its most expansive forms.

And here in this month of remembrance and reflection, we are clearly confronted as Black men with four major sets of problems initiated and sustained by the dominant society. And we must openly and audaciously engage and overcome them if we are to be the righteous, resourceful and resilient men we ought to be. These problems are: continued indictment and demonization; alienation from ourselves and others meaningful to us; isolation through distancing and incarceration; and continuous elimination, that is to say, erasure from family and social life, the media, and from life itself through continuing and expanded police violence, general systemic violence, and violence turned inward which are interrelated. For as Nana Frantz Fanon noted, our oppressor and oppression, not boldly and constantly confronted, drives too many

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to misdirect their anger and assaults inward. But in the midst of a real liberation movement, unity and rightful anger against oppression are founded and formed in struggle. The real and relevant focus of our righteous anger becomes clear. It is the oppressor, the system of oppression and the social pathology it generates and represents.

Our challenge, then, as Black men is to regain full consciousness of self, our identity, our purpose, i.e., our mission, and our direction which emerge from this. And it is important to prioritize our liberation as Black men, regardless of the various other identities we choose and have. For other identities we can and do share with others, but we only share Blackness, Africanness with each other.

Moreover, we must avoid letting others convince us to think in the zero-sum ways of our oppressor. We don't have to eliminate standards of manhood to avoid oppressive forms. Nor is it ethical or helpful to call concepts of heterosexual men, toxic masculinity and uncritically privilege and praise homosexual and transgender concepts. We need to define Black manhood in ways that are inclusive and mutually respectful. As always, our oppressor cannot be our teacher and neither can our allies be our tutor. We must practice self-determination, define our own reality, and develop our own unique and culturally grounded ways forward.

Indeed, we need and must pursue our own language and logic of liberation, as Haji Malcolm taught, speak the truth of our own lives, work and struggle, and resist even so-called progressive attempts to give us words to call ourselves, protocols to introduce ourselves, and false consciousness which make us condemn ourselves as men. Nor can we in good faith and ethical consciousness erase ourselves, mute or mutilate ourselves because others do not approve of the culturally and ethically

grounded ways we understand and assert ourselves as Black men in the world.

Also, we must always define and understand ourselves in relation to Black women. For our relationships are not only of intimacy, friendship, and as sister and brother, co-worker, co-combatant, co-builder, etc., but also our relationship is a species and communal one. And again, this holds true regardless of the kind of relation we have. In a word, on one level, there is not only no species without male/female intimacy, but also important, there is no real community, just society or good world without quality male/female relations of various kinds. This is a central teaching of our sacred texts, the *Husia* and the *Odu Ifa*. Thus, our struggle and our lives depend on quality male/female relations, regardless of what kind, for there is no justice, peace or promise of liberation and a good life without it. But as always, the call for a good end or a righteous and rightful good is at the same time a call for a commitment to engage in struggle to make it possible and achieve it.

And so, our task, as always, is to wage a comprehensive struggle that heals, renews, re-makes and restrengthens us in the process and practice of repairing, renewing and remaking the world. And we do this in the context and company of community. We speak here of a life of health and wholeness, of brotherhood and sisterhood in varied forms, and of righteous and relentless struggle, service and sacrifice. And it is in this transforming practice that new men and women bring themselves into being and give birth to a new world rooted in freedom, anchored in justice, and grounded in an ethics of mutual caring and shared good in the world.▲

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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 *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).