



**AFRICAN RENAISSANCE AND CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS:
STANDING ON SACRED GROUND**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

For Tiamoyo and me, our trips to Africa are never simply to see ancient wonders or witness modern problems and possibilities or yet again to attend talks and plan conferences, projects and future initiatives. It is always a sacred journey to a sacred site—home of our ancestors; navel and womb of the world; cradle of humanity and human civilization; ancient source of our culture, our spiritual consciousness and our ethical commitments; and thus, of the fundamental way we understand and assert ourselves in the world. As Mecca is to the Muslims, Jerusalem is to the Palestinians and members of the three Abrahamic faiths, Chichen-Itza to the Maya, Varanasi to the Hindus, Bodhgaya to the Buddhists, Uluru to the Australian Aboriginals, and the Sacred Black Hills to the Great Sioux Nation, so the whole of Africa is to us.

For us, Africa, more specifically ancient Africa, is our moral ideal, the foundation and framework on which and within which we understand ourselves and the world, conceive our purpose and obligations in life, ground our hopes and forge our future in effective and expansive ways. We take seriously Min. Malcolm's teaching that even if we can't or don't go back to Africa physically, we should go back mentally, spiritually and culturally. And this is not to escape into the past or to neglect the real challenges of the present or avoid decisions that will determine our future. Rather, it is to ground and center ourselves in our own culture and to extract from it models and messages of human excellence and achievement and to use them to confront and solve problems and to enrich and expand our lives.

It is not an uncommon practice for persons to consult ancient texts for grounding and guidelines for how they live their lives. It is only with ancient African texts that some question the value and validity of the practice. Indeed, every day people read ancient texts of Greece, Rome, Palestine, Israel, Arabia, India and elsewhere for insight, inspiration and grounding. And we have read and read them too, but with Cheikh Anta Diop we ultimately ask what does Africa have to say about this or that critical issue?

In Kawaida philosophy, we call this dialoging with African culture, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental concerns and issues of humankind. For example, how do we build and sustain good in the world, develop and enrich our relationships, define and honor our obligations to each other, achieve justice, practice peace, and conceive and create the basis for human flourishing and the well-being of the world? And clearly, how do we conceive and bring into being a real, solid and sustainable African Renaissance?

There is, of necessity, the ancient texts say, an indispensable ethical dimension to renewal and renaissance on the personal and collective level. Indeed, in the Odu Ifa, the sacred text of ancient Yorubaland, the criteria for the good world and for repairing and renewing the world and making it good for all in it are ethical criteria. Moreover, the beginning requirement for achieving the good world and thus the African Renaissance is "wisdom adequate to govern the world." The wisdom, *ogbon*, here called for is a multi-faceted wisdom, i.e., intellectual, technical, social and political

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wisdom, but above all, moral wisdom, a broad and depthful understanding of the good and the capacity and will to apply it in the interest of the people and the world.

Likewise, the Yoruba word to govern, *akoso*, in its root and more expansive meaning, calls for gathering the people together for good purposes. And these good purposes, as the ancient Egyptian sacred text, the *Husia*, teaches, are and must be to repair, rebuild and renew the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. This is called in ancient Egyptian *serudj ta*. In both the *Odu Ifa* and the *Husia*, the stress is always on the good of the people and the well-being of the world. It is this people-rooted and yet world-encompassing conception of renewal and renaissance that will raise up Africa, return our people to their traditional greatness and place in the world and open up new horizons of hope, possibility and progress.

Molefi Asante, professor of African American Studies at Temple University and chair of the U.S. FESMAN Committee, correctly asserts that an African Renaissance must be deeply rooted in African culture. As founding theorist of Afrocentricity, he rightfully argues for a cultural centeredness that guards against cultural dislocation and parasitic dependence on others' ideas and instruction. Moreover, Asante states that at the heart of efforts toward renaissance and renewal is the regaining of our own cultural platforms and space for creativity and productivity. Indeed, he says, "by regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces and believing that our own way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of

transformation we need to participate fully in a multicultural society" and world. But without this deep and sustained cultural centering and centeredness, "we bring almost nothing to the multicultural table but a darker version of whiteness."

This, of course, is Frantz Fanon's concern that we not imitate Europe in obscene and grotesque ways, but that we think new thoughts, imagine new ways of being human in the world, new ways to satisfy human need, raise human aspirations and bring into being a new world, woman and man. The stress here is on the African person and people. For Fanon, at the heart of a true African Renaissance "is not a question of profitability, not a question of increased productivity, not a question of production rates." But rather, "it is the very basic question of not dragging people in directions which mutilate them, of not imposing on the brain rhythms that rapidly erase and unhinge it." Indeed, Fanon states the notion of renaissance, development, progress or "catching up must not be used as a pretext to brutalize man, to tear him from himself and his inner consciousness, to break him, (and) to kill him." On the contrary, efforts must be directed toward satisfying the needs and expanding the aspirations and possibilities of the people.

Marcus Garvey's lifework was for the liberation and redemption of Africa, a free, powerful, recovered, restored and united Africa. And he continues to call to us everywhere saying, "Wake up Africa. Let us work towards one glorious end of a free, redeemed and mighty nation. Let Africa be a bright star among the constellations of nations."

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kawaida and Questions of Life and Struggle*.
[www.MaulanaKarenga.org; www.Us-Organization.org and ww.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org]