



**CARRYING THE SHIELD OF OSHUN:
MEDITATING ON MAAT**

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In Kawaïda philosophy and practice we take African culture seriously, in the required maximum daily dose like a not-to-be-missed medicine, not only for our psychic health and wholeness, but also for our social well-being and human flourishing. So, when we raise and address central and ultimate questions of life, we don't rush to search for solutions or seek enlightenment in distant lands. Rather, first and foremost, we turn inward to recover the rich, ancient and ever-evolving sources of knowledge and insights of our own culture which are revealed thru reflection and tested and proved in practice.

It is the teachings of our ancestors in the sacred text, *Husia*, that to honor and expand our own humanity, we must come forth each day, bringing forth the *Maat* (truth, justice and righteousness) which is within us. For surely, the text says, it is within us—in our culture and historical consciousness and in the depth, density and complex variety of our own lives. Thus, during this month of paying special homage to African women and to women as women, our culture serves as an invaluable source for continuously needed reflection, remembrance and active recommitment to the dignity, rights, liberation and good life of women in the world.

As our sacred texts and most moral and rightful reflection tell us, the cause of women is at the heart of our struggles for human equality, social justice, just and lasting peace, inclusive development and shared good in the world. This is the meaning of Anna Julia Cooper's contention that "Woman's cause is one and universal", for it is about the sacredness and inviolability of the human person, the defense of the vulnerable, the inalienable right to life, freedom, equality and the enjoyment of good by everyone. And the struggles of women and all the oppressed and

vulnerable, once won, "will mean the final triumph of right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason and justice and love . . ." among the peoples of the world.

Anna Julia Cooper comes into a conversation and joins a struggle thousands of years old. For although the UN Charter, signed in 1945, was the first internationally agreed upon document to affirm the equality of women as a fundamental human right, the conversation and ethical commitment had been established millennia before in ancient Africa in the principle and practice of Maat. Likewise, the Oshun principle which posits the indispensability of the participation and power of women for bringing good in the world is also a centuries-old conversation and commitment. So in this month of special marking, it is important to meditate on the expansive meaning of Maat and the obligation to carry the shield of Oshun.

Maat, the moral and spiritual ideal of ancient Egypt, represented as a female divine spirit and woman, is the principle and practice of rightness and good in the world. It is a power and principle by which the Creator, Ra, conceives and creates the world in truth, justice and righteousness. It is the essence of the Creator and the shared divine essence of woman and man, making them bearers of equal dignity and divinity and possessors of equal rights to life, the necessities of life, equal treatment, self-determination and freedom of conscience. Maat is also the principle that calls us to constantly repair, renew and transform the world making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Carrying the shield of Oshun is a metaphor for defending the right and affirming the indispensability of women's presence, power and participation in building and sustaining the world. For in the Creation

narrative of the Ifa tradition, found in the sacred text, *Odu Ifa*, of ancient Yorubaland, Oshun is a female divine power, an orisha, who represents and personifies this indispensable presence and power. Her name and narrative remind us to always ask ourselves and each other in everything of importance the question the Creator, Olodumare, asks the male divine powers sent along with Oshun at the time of Creation to bring good in the world. When they returned unsuccessful, having attempted their task without the presence and power of Oshun, He asked them, “Where is the woman (in what you wish to do or are doing) and did you give her due respect?”

This two-part question is what we call the Oshun question and reminds us that in all things essential, women and men are and must be equal and mutually respectful partners in the ongoing project and process of bringing good in the world. Indeed, the *Odu Ifa* says, the rightful order of the world depends on this and calls for great respect (*iba*) for woman as woman, always and everywhere, in high and humble places and in the full length of their life’s journey from infant and girl to adult and elder.

The charge for all of us, then, is to accept as common cause the cause of women in their struggle to free themselves, achieve justice and live good lives. It is to invite and insist on their presence, power and full participation in all things of value and mutual benefit. It

means also standing in active solidarity with women in their struggle against violence, oppression, exploitation and degradation in their many forms—domestic, societal, military—and working in partnership to repair the damage and destruction these violations of human dignity and rights leave in their wake around the world.

It means linking struggles of the oppressed and as the *Husia* says, to “bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice”, those who go unnamed and unnoted, those not racially, religiously or politically favored. It means not being reluctant or remiss in raising the names and defending the rights of the women and people of New Orleans, Native America, Haiti, Darfur, Congo, Native Australia, Palestine and all other not-to-be-mentioned and so-called “expendable” peoples of the world. In her classic womanist work, *A Voice From the South*, our foremother, Anna Julia Cooper, summed up the expansive meaning of the struggle of women for truth, justice and good in the world. She says, “We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition”. Indeed, it is a struggle “for the universal triumph of justice and human rights” and the opening of “a grand highway for humanity” for the pursuit of new possibilities of human relations, human flourishing and shared good in the world.

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