



GIVING THANKS AND THANKFUL GIVING: IN PURSUIT OF AN AFRICAN UNDERSTANDING

Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-20-25, p. B-1

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RETRIEVING HISTORY AND NARRATIVE IN the most reflective and sensitive ways, I want to share again thoughts about celebrating Thanksgiving Day. Indeed, it is good in the midst of this annual madness of holiday consumption and celebration sales to think about how the established order indulges in a parallel ritual of myth-making and acute denial about the origins and meaning of this day called Thanksgiving. For hidden behind its pretty harvest scenes and neatly dressed pilgrims, there is the violent ugliness and bloody untidiness of the holiday's origins which mark a time of Europeans' celebration of the triumph over and decimation of Native Americans.

As African people, we cannot deny the ethical and spiritual value and obligation of giving thanks and being thankful. Nor can we deny the sheer good of gathering together in harmony, to share a meal and enjoy the rich reward of each others' company or to celebrate the good of life in its many forms. But we must not confuse this particular day with our duty to give thanks and be thankful every day and in various other ways. Nor can we 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.

As the *Husia* teaches and reminds us, we are morally obligated "to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice." Thus, our position is always on the

side of the suffering, the poor and oppressed, the powerless and the seekers of peace and good for everyone. Indeed, it's not about having a special day of thanksgiving, but of having one built on righteous practice and rightful remembrance, not on acts of evil or acute denial of them. For surely it is good to be thankful and give thanks.

In African culture, giving thanks is both a verbal expression and a social practice. The saying of thanks is imbued with a sense of the Divine, the sacred, and is ultimately a spiritual and ethical act. Thus, to say thanks in the languages of ancient Egyptian (*Dua-en netjer en-ek*), Zulu (*Siyabonga*), and Yoruba (*A dupe*) is to say implicitly or explicitly, "We thank God for you." Both "*dua*" and "*bonga*" also mean "praise" and suggest a reverence or deep respect that is given through God or the Divine to the person(s) addressed. Moreover, to thank a person is to praise or thank God for that person, as well as for what she or he has done. Therefore, we thank the Divine for a person's goodness and the good they bring and do.

Also, this linkage with the Divine carries with it the concept that we always have something for which to be grateful even in the bleakest and most unBlack situation and times. In African tradition, life is a blessing and good in itself and open to all kinds of possibilities. Thus, in Yoruba, the word for ingratitude or lack of thankfulness is *aimo oore* which literally means "without knowledge of good, blessings or kindness." To be without knowledge of the good in life is to be unaware of its

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existence and availability; unable to identify it when it's present; and incapable of grasping its deeper and wider meaning.

Among our people, we count small and large things as blessings and Divine-given good in the world. And we must hold fast to this fundamental foundation of our thanksgiving and the hope and inspiration it gives us in defeating any dispiritedness or despair that invites us to embrace it in our daily lives. This is the meaning of the verse in the *Husia* that teaches us it is wrong to walk upside down in the darkness of despair, dispiritedness and dislocation. Therefore, it says we must come forward today, indeed, each day and bring forth the love and light of truth and justice which are within us and struggle each day to restore, maintain and expand *Ma'at* (rightness and good) in the world.

Moreover, in the most inclusive sense of the world-encompassing ethics taught by our ancestors, we must also be thankful and show thankfulness for the good of and in the world itself. This means seeing the world as sacred space, and all in it as infused with the Divine and worthy of the greatest respect. The expansive ocean and awesome mountains, the beautiful butterfly and worrisome flea, the rock, river, star and stone, field, lake and woods, all have their function and form a unity and continuity of being with us. And so we give praise and are thankful for this world and life in it every day.

Finally, in the African worldview, giving and showing thanks is a contribution to the future in a real and positive way. In the sacred teachings of our Zulu ancestors, it is said "*ukubonga ukuzibekela*," i.e., "to give thanks is to provide for our future." The word "*bekela*" literally means *store up* goods or good things for the future. Thus, to be thankful is to do good in the world. Nakheteftmut says in the *Husia* that he did *Ma'at*, i.e., right, justice and good, in the world for he "knew that the result of doing good deeds is a storehouse which our children will find afterwards."

Again, it is important to remember thanksgiving is not simply a holiday or special day set aside, but an ongoing praise, appreciation and reciprocal giving in return for the good given to us. In Zulu ethical wisdom, there is the saying "*Kwa-Zulu, sibonga ngezandla zombili*" which means "In Zululand, we give thanks with both hands." To give thanks with both hands is to give generously, willingly and with great gratitude, praise and appreciation for the good we've been given, get daily and will receive in the future. It is to give thanks joyfully by thankful giving and doing good in an ongoing practice that praises the Divine and the giver, reaffirms the sacred significance of the act, and forges for us and future generations, a constantly expanding realm of mutual giving and sharing of good.

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