



THE MISSION AND MEANING OF BEING AFRICAN:  
FORGING A FUTURE OF SHARED GOOD

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Frantz Fanon spoke rightfully and repeatedly of the importance of discovering and fulfilling our mission as a generation and by extension as a people. He said, “each generation must discover its mission and having discovered its mission, either fulfill or betray it.” But what is that mission and how do we, as African people, on the Continent and in the Diaspora, discover it? In a word, what is the framework and foundation for our quest and discovery of mission and meaning in life? The raising and resolving of the critical questions of *meaning* and *mission* in life is at the heart of what it means to be both African and human. For it deals with three fundamental issues no one can responsibly avoid. And these are issues of identity, purpose and direction.

The issue of *identity* raises the question of who am I; *purpose* raises the question of what am I to do in response and responsibility to this identity; and *direction* raises the question how am I to do what my identity requires me to do in ways that are both effective and meaningful. But the questions of identity, purpose and direction are questions that can only be answered in the context of culture. In fact, it is in the context of culture that the questions assume both their *meaning* and *urgency*. So when we raise the question of the mission and meaning of being African in the world, we must turn to our own culture for the answer. For it is both *framework* and *foundation* for our *self-understanding* and *self-assertion* in the world.

Now if we turn to our culture, we *learn* from the teachings of our ancestors in the sacred Yoruba text, the *Odu Ifa* that the fundamental meaning and mission of human life is to constantly bring good in the world

and not let any good be lost. Odu 78, verse 1, says “let’s do things with joy, for surely humans have been divinely chosen to bring good into the world.” This indeed is a beautiful conception of the mission and meaning of our lives as humans in general and as Africans in particular. For even though it defines all humans as divinely chosen, it is clearly an African gift to the world, an understanding of the concept of shared *chosenness*—unique and unparalleled in any other spiritual tradition.

I want to stress here the concept of doing good *in and for the world*. For our ancestors taught that we are responsible for the world we live in and must act responsibly in it and towards it. The sacred text, the *Husia*, teaches that we must treat the world as a sacred inheritance, and constantly heal, repair and restore it making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. This ancient Egyptian concept is called *serudj ta*. Also in the *Odu Ifa*, Odu 33:2 says that “when it becomes your turn to take responsibility for the world, you should do good for the world.” And it reinforces this charge saying, “do it well, bear the responsibility well.”

The ancestors say in the *Odu Ifa* that in order to do good for the world and to create a good world we must have several personal attributes: wisdom adequate to govern the world, a morality of sacrifice, character, love of doing good and the eagerness and will to struggle to bring good into the world and not let any good be lost. First, from the beginning of history our ancestors put emphasis on knowledge and wisdom in and of the world, and the ethical use of it. Thus, the *Odu Ifa* stresses wisdom in its varied forms as the first criterion for having a good world and the means of achieving it. As

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Africans, we carry the weight and wonder of this commitment to knowledge so central to African history and tradition on the Continent and in the Diaspora.

I am thinking here of Malcolm's commitment to knowledge, copying every word in the dictionary to develop a vocabulary so he could speak our special truth to the world. I think also of Mary McLeod Bethune, instructing us that "knowledge is the prime need of the hour," and that people rightfully want to know from us what we are learning and have learned that will help improve the condition of our people and humanity and enhance the human prospect. And I am reminded of W.E.B. DuBois who taught that our people will be elevated, like all people, by the best minds among us. And these will be not simply those who are highly intelligent and pass exams well, but those whose breadth and depth of knowledge is matched by the range and profundity of their moral sensitivity to others and their ethical commitment to do good in and for the world.

Second, the *Odu Ifa* says, that we also need a morality of sacrifice in order to create a good world. This means, as Malcolm taught, that we must live and give our lives as a testimony of some social value, a

testimony of the best of what it means to be African in the world. It means to be able to sacrifice for the cause of human freedom and human flourishing, to give one's heart and mind for the good, one's time and effort and one's whole self in the ongoing historical project of bringing good into the world.

Also, the ancestors say to create a good world we must also have *character*. And by character they mean a relatively stable disposition toward doing good. It is to have an active and enduring commitment to speak truth, do justice, be kind, especially to the vulnerable, care for the environment, pursue peace, resist evil and always seek the good. Moreover, the ancestors say that to create a good world we also need to have a genuine "love for doing good, especially for those who need it most and those who ask for our help." It is, they say, not enough to do good, we must love to do it and demonstrate it not only by how much we give but by the joy we receive and radiate in the giving. And finally, the *Odu Ifa* says that we need "an eagerness and will to struggle to bring good into the world and not let any good be lost." In this, then, we find our mission and meaning and the path to a new history of humankind and the longed-for unfolding of a future of shared good for all. (Reprint)

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