



**NOTES FOR THE NEW YEAR:
ANCIENT AFRICAN ETHICAL TEACHINGS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Now, at the beginning of this the year of our people 6253, let us again, in the tradition of our ancestors, wish for African people everywhere, as well as all the peoples of the world: blessings without number and all good things without end. May these blessings and good include above all, freedom from domination, deprivation and degradation; justice as a way of life and path to peace; power of the masses to live lives of dignity, decency and self-determination in the most expansive sense; and an enduring peace for the peoples of the world which is founded in justice, developed in reciprocity and respect, and secured in a solidarity rooted in cooperative projects of common good. And may we recommit ourselves to work and struggle tirelessly for the good we wish and to practice principles in our personal and social lives that produce and promote the good life for everyone in the world, whether in Congo, Haiti, the U. S., Palestine or elsewhere.

It is here that we must remember, reflect on and recommit ourselves to our identity as those divinely chosen to bring good in the world as taught by the ancestors in the *Odu Ifa*. This means at a minimum, we must constantly seek and speak truth; do and demand justice; be respectful, kind and considerate to each other; value and care for the vulnerable; and lift up and love doing good. It means also that we must reject and actively resist all forms of oppression; and constantly repair and transform the world in the interest of the good.

At this time when the edges of the old and new year meet, we, as Africans, are to sit down in sober assessment and measure ourselves in the mirror of the best of our cul-

ture, ask how do we stand, and then recommit ourselves to our highest cultural values and practices. This practice is built into the last day of Kwanzaa, January 1, the Day of Meditation. To measure ourselves we are to ask and answer three basic questions: who am I; am I really who I am; and am I all I ought to be? The first question is to reaffirm our serious acceptance of our identity as Africans, elders of humanity, fathers and mothers of humanity and human civilization; sons and daughters of the Holocaust of enslavement, and authors and heirs of the Reaffirmation of the 60's, i.e., the reaffirmation of our Africanness and social justice tradition thru intense, sustained and transformative struggle.

The second question is to reaffirm the realness and rootedness of our commitment to *the meaning of African as excellence in the world*, and our resistance to seductive and coercive calls to conceal, condemn, mask and mutilate ourselves in various ways. And the third question is to reaffirm our active commitment to constantly bring forth and be the best of what it means to be African and human for ourselves and the world.

So, in the midst of all our New Year resolutions and recommitments, let us remember and resolve to uphold in principle and practice five overarching pillars of African spirituality and ethics, in a word, an ancient path to living a good and meaningful life and leaving a legacy worthy of the name and history African. These are: active respect for the Transcendent and sacred; the dignity and rights of the human person; the well-being and flourishing of family and community; the integrity and value of the

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environment; and the reciprocal solidarity of humanity and its cooperation for common good.

The first pillar, which serves as foundation and framework for how we understand and assert ourselves as Africans in the world, is a profound respect for the Transcendent and the sacred. This means the spiritual and the ethical, regardless of the various faith traditions we embrace. To speak of that which is transcendent is to speak of that which is beyond but embraceable; ultimate but found in the ordinary; sacred and accessible to us all. Here I use transcendent, ultimate and sacred interchangeably. And I maintain that at the core of any real African concept and practice of a good life is to have a sense of and hold fast to the sacred, i.e., that which is beyond violation, devaluation or disrespect in any way, and infuses our lives with a profound commitment to the highest good.

Indeed, this is a sure antidote against the barrenness of spirit, the hardness of heart and the emptiness of soul that have shaped so many of our lives in the context of rampant consumerism and ruthless pursuit of profit. It is the wall of defense against selling ourselves and our souls for money, machines and technological toys which divert us from the deep questions we must ask and answer about how to live good, meaningful and expansive lives, respect and relate to each other in mutually-beneficial ways, secure the planet from plunder, pollution and depletion, and leave an African legacy worthy of the highest level of humanity.

It is this foundational principle of respect for the Transcendent and sacred that undergirds and informs the other pillars. Thus, our respect for the rights and dignity of the human person is rooted in the ancient African ethical teaching in the *Husia* that humans are in the image of the Divine and are bearers of dignity and divinity, worthy of ultimate respect and possessors of the right to life and to the sustenance of life and all those goods which make life meaningful. Likewise, it is an African understanding that humans exist and live in a web of vital relationships and that in order for them to survive and develop, the well-being and flourishing of family and community must be achieved and secured. In a word, we come into being and are grounded and flourish in relationship.

Moreover, our active respect for the integrity and value of the environment is rooted in our ethical obligation of *serudj ta*, i.e., to constantly repair, heal and transform the world in the interest of human good and of the world itself as a sacred space. Likewise, the *Odu Ifa* teaches that we are responsible for the world and must do good for the world, i.e., speak truth, do justice, be kind and do nothing to injure the earth or each other. Finally, this work for the well-being and wholeness of the world requires a human solidarity rooted in the quest for common good and in mutual respect for each people as a unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world.

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