



**THE PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE OF OPERATIONAL UNITY:
A MORAL AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVE IN STRUGGLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE REMEMBER AND REFLECT ON THE lessons and demands of our struggle and on our riding out and remaining intact in this current rising and ravaging storm that threatens the well-being of our people, this country and the world, no principle or practice is more central and urgent than our unity in righteous and relentless struggle. Indeed, given the difficult, dangerous and demanding times in which we live and struggle, unity, especially *operational unity*, is a moral and political imperative. As I have said earlier and elsewhere, we must make a distinction between ideal unity, a total undiversified unity, and instead strive for and achieve the concept and practice of operational unity, unity in diversity, unity without uniformity, a principle and practice I introduced, and we of the organization Us have taught and practiced since the 1960s. I speak here of a reality-based and ethically grounded appreciation of the diversities and differences among us in the ways we understand, engage and live our lives, and our constantly seeking to find and build on the common ground on which we as persons, groups and a people can stand, live our lives, do our work and wage our liberation struggle in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

For as I argued then and continue to maintain now, unity cannot be measured by our belonging to only one organization, erasing all our differences, but by our ability to live, work and struggle together on the common ground of shared good in the midst of our differences. Indeed, as I've constantly taught, "We need many organizations to reflect and deal with the wide range of interests and aspirations of our people. And it is naïve and non-productive to advocate total or organic unity of all groups. What is essential,

even indispensable, is a system of mutually supportive relationships between all groups on both the local and national level for defense of our interests and development of our potential". In other words, what is needed is an operational unity that focuses, increases and directs our combined strength to defining, defending and advancing our interests. And this in principle and practice is operational unity, an indispensable part of any real and promising strategy for struggle. For as I have also stated, "Unity is not an abstract; it is a concrete need that must be translated and transformed into reflective and real examples on institutional levels", as well as in daily, decisive, and self-defining practices.

It is clearly no accident or unconscious error that *umoja*, unity, is the first principle of the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles. For without unity, none of the other principles are possible or promising. Indeed, without unity, a coming together in harmony, life at its basic and beginning level, as both a biological and social reality, is not possible or promising. And certainly without unity in some meaningful and enduring form and practice, there is no real or rewarding love, family, friendship, community or work and struggle for good in and for the world. It is in this understanding that our honored ancestors taught in the sacred teachings of the *Odu Ifa* that "All goodness became a grouping together in harmony". Indeed, the sacred text says one of the fundamental principles and practices of creation was unifying in harmony all things in groups, from gathering together trees to make the forest, grasses to make the savannah, birds to make flocks, and people to make families and communities. And this was done "So that the goodness of togetherness could come forth at once. Indeed, all goodness took

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the form of a gathering together in harmony”. And as it was in the conception and creation of the world, so it is now in our striving to reconceive, recreate and sustain ourselves and the world.

Unity also has a central place in the sacred texts of our ancestors in the *Husia* in which Lady Ta-Habet teaches it as a moral and social imperative and practice. She lists as one of her virtues the fourth cardinal virtue of harmony or unity in heart, mind and practice. She says in her autobiography, “I was one who was united in heart and mind with the people of my city”; i.e., her community. As a matter of heart, she loved and cared for the people, especially the most vulnerable. As a matter of mind, she thought about and planned good for the people. And as a matter of practice, she did good for the people.

Lady Ta-Habet also tells us that in her dealings with people, she was just and did not practice favoritism that she was “kind to her brothers and sisters”, “gave bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty and clothes to the naked”, and she “spoke goodness and beauty to everyone”. She explained this as “the way of life, the good way and the Divine way” of her faith, the Maatian way. It is the way of truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and righteous order.

In the midst of the work we have to do and the struggle we are compelled to wage in this our time and place, then, operational unity is the clear path and combined power we must build, nurture and use. Indeed to speak of operational unity is to speak of an active unity, a working, useful and usable unity. Operational unity has five fundamental parts and practices: *coming together*, *commitment*, *collaboration*, *coordination* and *cooperation*. Coming together is assembling in harmony regularly and righteously to build, reaffirm and reinforce our relations with each other, to strengthen our capacity to do the

work and wage the struggle needed in the sacred service to our people. And this *coming together* is not simply in a physical or technological space, but essentially coming together with “heart, head and hands”, as our foreparents taught, to do good in the world and for the world.

Commitment is a deep and disciplined dedication to our people, to freedom, justice, equity and other shared goods for them, to striving and struggling to achieve our goals regardless of the odds and obstacles we confront. And it is about committing ourselves to relate in rightful ways, grounded especially in *mutual respect*, *mutual interests*, *mutual support*, and *mutual benefit*. The principle and practice of *collaboration* calls for regular and rightful planning, deliberating and decision-making together in empowering rather than in disempowering and disadvantaging ways. It cultivates a culture of radical equality and equity in these processes, reaffirming the equal dignity, value and rights of each person in presence, relevance and participation, and rejecting character assassination and other dignity-denying practices in their various forms.

Coordination means constantly working to harmonize our diversities and differences in the most principled, appropriate and productive ways. It’s about harmonizing schedules, interests and activities so that there’s no divisive competition, conflict in scheduling events, holding meetings, planning activities, prioritizing initiatives or duplicating actions. It is bringing together combined power, energy, insight and initiative in engaging the most critical issues before us.

AND FINALLY, *COOPERATION* IS WORKING together on every level possible to achieve our common goal. It is in one sense most definitely practicing *ujima*, collective work and responsibility, but in a larger

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sense, it is embracing and practicing a shared culturally grounded cooperative value system which points us toward the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles: *Umoja*, unity; *Kujichagulia*, self-determination; *Ujima*, collective work and responsibility; *Ujamaa*, cooperative economics; *Nia*, purpose; *Kuumba*, creativity; and *Imani*, faith. For it is the *Nguzo Saba* that for decades now has united us as African people in a world encompassing

embrace on every continent in the world. And it is the *Nguzo Saba* and the other Kawaida concepts that undergird and inform them that call and cause us to think and care deeply about how we are daring to repair, renew and remake ourselves in the process and practice of repairing, renewing and remaking the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.▲

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