



## MEDITATING ON THE MEANING OF STRUGGLE: VALUING OUR INWARD AND OUTWARD STRIVING

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**E**ACH DAY WE ENCOUNTER AND ARE CAUGHT up in various things that tax and test us. And we must reach deep inside ourselves, not only to overcome obstacles, challenges and unexpected changes. We must also find ways not to be undermined, diverted or undone by these encounters and experiences. This reaching deep inside ourselves often causes us to turn to sacred sources to understand what's happening and to interpret it in ways that leave us strengthened by our striving and uplifted by the struggle. Those of us who still wage righteous and relentless struggle *inwardly* and *outwardly* to live a liberated, good and meaningful life will continuously find invaluable sources for grounding and growth in the enduringly relevant and deeply insightful sacred teachings of our ancestors found in the *Odu Ifa*. For it is about our natural and needed striving and struggle to be good, live good lives, and bring and share good in the world. I stress both inward and outward struggle, for the outward struggle in relations, society and the world requires a simultaneous inward striving for a disciplined and constantly developing heart and mind. Indeed, without discipline, development is less focused, less founded and less fruitful.

In Kawaida, struggle is posed as one of the defining features of what it means to be human. Indeed, the whole of our lives from birth to transition into the afterlife, we are compelled to struggle and, in that struggle, we define and develop ourselves. In a word, we struggle to come into being; that's called birth. We struggle to make the most out of our being; that's called life. And we struggle not to go out of being; that's called the quest for immortality. Thus, *Odu* 10:6 teaches, "We are constantly struggling all of us. We are constantly struggling." For also we are not perfect, do not always choose rightly, always make the best choice, always live a disciplined life or always live up to our highest potential. "So, we are continuously struggling, all of us."

Also, *Odu Ifa* 245:1 tells us that "If we are given birth, we should/must bring ourselves into being again." Our parents give us the gift of birth, but even then, we must struggle to come out into the world to live the life given us. And then, we

must bring ourselves into being again, that is to say, struggle to realize our potential and promise and come into the fullness of ourselves. And we must struggle to leave a legacy worthy of remembrance, a legacy of good work, service and struggle which is also a message and model for those who come after us.

Moreover, *Odu Ifa* teaches us that even if we are disadvantaged physically or socially or are about to die, we should still struggle to live as best and as long as we can. Thus, *Odu* 43:1 says, "Even if we are going to die, we must wage a life and death struggle. We should still struggle hard." This was directed especially to those confronted with the possibility or certainty of death, and for the physically disadvantaged, the lame, the blind. But in a larger sense, it is a call and challenge to all who are disadvantaged, disabled by physical, psychological or social conditions or threatened with death. Indeed, it's a call and challenge not to be defeated internally, so that externally we can wage a strong, disciplined and victorious struggle with the capacities we have and the resources and relations to which we have access. Here Molefi Asante's call for a "victorious consciousness" is key and compelling. This is the meaning of *Odu* 19:2 in its advising and cautioning against "interior deterioration," the unraveling of values and relations that are our anchor and indispensable means of orientation and assistance in any struggle we wage externally. Thus, this verse speaks of those who would go to the battlefield not knowing that "It is at home that the war is lost even before reaching the battlefield."

Interrelated with this verse is *Odu* 59:1 which says that "a constant soldier is never unready, not even once." This verse tells us we must be constantly *prepared* and *preparing*. It means continuously measuring strengths and weaknesses, and as Amilcar Cabral teaches, always struggling to turn our weaknesses into strengths. Indeed, he says, "That's what struggle means, turning weakness into strength;" transforming what is or could be a liability in life and struggle into an asset. And it means reaching inside of ourselves for the known and unknown potential and promise of growth, development and righteous change, right-

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eous change in our views, values and practice and in the ways we relate to each other and engage the world. Especially, *Odu Ifa* 33:1 instructs us, we must constantly strive and struggle to “speak truth, do justice, be kind and ... not do evil” and to “bring good in the world.”

It is this moral core at the heart and center of our struggle, internally and externally, that must always be in the forefront of all we do. Indeed, this relates to *Odu* 78:1’s affirmation: “Let’s do things we joy.... Humans have been divinely chosen to bring good in the world” and this is the fundamental mission and meaning of human life. Given this essential and overarching ethical imperative, we must wage struggle in righteous and dignity-affirming ways and be a model of the good we struggle for. Thus, *Odu Ifa* calls for a commitment that the battle we fight, the struggles we wage, always add to our honor. *Odu* 152:2 says, “May the battle I fight (the struggle I wage) always add to my honor.” We are struggling to bring, increase and sustain good in the world, and we must not emulate our oppressor or opponent and use evil means that undermine our cause, aims and identity.

The Yoruba word for honor (*iyi*) in the text also means great respect, nobleness, integrity and value. Like its synonym *ọlá*, it suggests in this verse added honor, gained for greatly respected and valued thought and practice, or behavior. The example of such an honor-bringing struggle used in the *Odu* is that of the lion. It is what we call in Kawaida, being *simba-hearted*, lion hearted, i.e., *noble in conduct; courageous in combat and uncompromisingly committed to victory*. Here I use noble in the moral sense as the Yoruba words *iyi* and *ọlá* suggest. This follows the Hon. Marcus Garvey’s teaching that in the struggle to liberate Africa, nobility and aristocracy must be based on service to the people and the struggle, not on hereditary class and status.

The *Odu* then teaches us to wage righteous struggle in the interest of human good and the well-being of the world. This struggle for good in

the world, *Odu* 78:1 says, must include as its essential goals: full and effective knowledge for all; happiness everywhere; peace within and with others; harmony with nature; health and wholeness; resilient strength to meet crisis; and the end of poverty and misery in the world. And the sacred text tells us that to achieve victory in this outward struggle, we need also to wage righteous and continuous struggle inwardly, developing virtues and strengths of adequate wisdom, especially wisdom to rightfully engage each other and the world; willingness to sacrifice; good character; the love of doing good, especially for the needy and vulnerable; and “the eagerness and struggle to increase good in the world and not let any good be lost.” *Odu Ifa* (33:2) also tells us in terms of ensuring the well-being of the world that we should take responsibility for the world and do good for the world. And *Odu* 10:5 it teaches us that humans “should stop making sacrifices for wealth and instead make sacrifices that will protect the earth from its enemies,” i.e., plunder, pollution and depletion, and of course, the corporate and personal interests that drive these. “For in this way we will live and thrive.”

**F**INALLY, *ODU IFA* 11:1 TELLS US WE MUST, IN our most earnest struggle, also model fire without its destructiveness, but with its capacity to make a way for itself. It says, “Wherever fire emerges, it will make a way for itself. Its head will clear a way for it.” Therefore, “anyone who wants to achieve anything, that person should practice sacrifice, so that a way can be opened for them as it is opened for fire.” The point here is that in our striving and struggle, we must be like beneficial fire, way-openers, using our head and heart in the most constructive ways. And we must be way-openers not only for our personal selves, but also for our collective selves, our people. This is the message and model of our ancestors, the lifters up of the light that lasts, who opened the way for all of us and brought life-giving and uplifting light and warm to the world.▲

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