



**RIGHTEOUS REFLECTION ON BEING AFRICAN:
A KWANZAA MEDITATION**

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DR. MAULANA KARENKA

During this Kwanzaa, as always and as our ancestors centuries before us, we gather together again to celebrate and share the good we've gained and garnered; to remember in reverence the sacred names, noble deeds and enormous sacrifices of our ancestors; and to recommit ourselves to our highest values and most exalting visions, and to an ongoing practice that proves their worth and brings into being the good they embody and ensure. And we gather too to reaffirm our rootedness in our own culture, to reinforce the bonds between us as African people and to meditate on the expansive meaning and awesome responsibility of being African in the world.

As Kwanzaa draws to an end and the old year meets and merges with the new, we are, as always, obligated and urged by ancient custom and ongoing current concerns to sit down and seriously engage in righteous reflection on being African in the world. To speak of righteous reflection is, in an Ebonics sense of the word righteous, to talk of thought that is real, ethical and excellent. That is to say, thought that is free from the artificial, false and formulaic and comes from the heart as well as from the head. What is aimed at here is thought which is informed by an ethical sensitivity to the subject under consideration. And this holds true whether in our concern for each other or for the health and wholeness of the world; for the loss of human life or the mutilation of historical memory; and for the deprivation of material needs or the denial of dignity and rights due everyone.

This process and practice of righteous reflection culminates on January 1, *Siku ya Taamuli*, the Day of Meditation. Here we are to focus even more so and think deeply

and continuously about our lives and the world, about critical issues that confront us and the world and our responsibility to understand and engage them. Indeed, we are to measure ourselves in the mirror of the best of our history and culture and ask ourselves where we stand as a representative and embodiment of the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

This cultural measurement and mirroring is achieved thru asking and answering three fundamental questions. Building on the insights of Frantz Fanon, these are: who am I; am I really who I am and am I all I ought to be? Now to ask who we are is both a personal and communal question which cannot be righteously separated. For we are anchored and embedded in a definite community and culture and reflect the strengths or weaknesses of that community and culture even unintentionally.

To answer the question of "who am I?", we must embrace an expansive conception of our identity, rejecting racist conceptions that problematize, indict and distort our sense of Blackness or Africanness or diminish or limit its root understanding as an expression of excellence on every level. This means embracing a conception of African that defines our identity way beyond the given names and assigned numbers on our birth certificates, licenses or social security, insurance or other identity cards. It means understanding the personal in the context of the communal and the cultural, for inherent in the history and culture of our community is the source and answer of who we are and must become and be.

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However else we see ourselves, our conception of who we are must include at least three foundational identities forged in the crucible of critical periods of history and struggle. These identities are: 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., Reaffirmation of our Africanness and social justice tradition. And these leave us clear lessons and legacies which pose social struggle; moral grounding; human dignity, durability and adaptive vitality; and a profound commitment to excellence and achievement as indispensable to defining the best of what it means to be African and human in the world.

Now, to ask "am I all I ought to be?" is to recognize the many ways our identity and the excellence it demands are eroded, undermined and otherwise damaged in the fire and furnace of oppression. Indeed, it is Fanon, again, who reminds us that in the belly of the beast of oppression, those less able to withstand the acidic toll it takes on the human person, often go thru four stages of psychological disintegration. Thus, they: doubt themselves; deny themselves, i.e., their identity; condemn themselves and then mutilate themselves both psychologically and physically. Fanon notes that in such a context of severe and savage oppression, they "wear the mask", desperately seeking relief from the racist reality surrounding us. And he rightly argues there is no relief or remedy except in struggle on a personal and collective level to defend one's humanity and free oneself from oppression and from

the pathology it represents in the oppressor and reproduces in the oppressed.

It is knowing who we are in the most expansive sense and reaffirming it in thought and practice that we can answer the question and honor the ethical imperative of being all we ought to be. Indeed, to be all we ought to be is to join in struggle to create a context of freedom, justice, well-being and peace in the world which aids us in realizing the fullness of our humanity and flourishing as persons and a people. To ask and answer the question "am I all I ought to be?" then, speaks to the interrelatedness of our identity as both African and human and the awesome responsibility this places on us to repair and radically reorder the world.

It is clear from the teachings of our ancestors and our long experience in history that how we conceive and conduct our personal lives shapes and even determines the well-being of our families and people, society and eventually the world. Our responsibility, then, is in expanding concentric circles from family to the whole of humanity and the world. It is in this understanding that the *Odu Ifa* teaches that "doing good worldwide is the best expression of character". And the *Husia* instructs us that we are morally obligated to seek and speak truth in high and low places; to demand and do justice everywhere; to protect and provide for the poor and vulnerable in every place; to do and spread goodness throughout the land; and to constantly repair and renew the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

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