



**“BEING STEADFAST AND STRONG IN LIFE AND STRUGGLE:
REFLECTING THE FOUNDATION, MODELLING THE MOUNTAIN”**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN THIS MONTH OF INVITED MEDITATION, MAKING resolutions and deep reflection about ourselves and the state of things in the world, I turn to the teachings of our honored ancestors, founded especially in our sacred texts, the *Husia* and the *Odu Ifa*. And I always find in them a rich, ever-ready and invaluable source for constant grounding, and for asking questions and seeking answers to the fundamental issues that confront African peoples and the world. And so, as this month closes and as the new year unfolds and flowers into its fullness, I intensify my reflection on the gift and goodness of life and the moral imperative of striving and struggle to achieve and enjoy the good, to increase it, share it and sustain it.

Here, I want to focus on and draw lessons and insights from the *Odu Ifa*. As I have noted in my book of translations and commentaries titled *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings* (Sankore Press), the *Odu Ifa*, the sacred text of the ancient spiritual and ethical tradition of Ifa, is one of the great sacred texts in the world and a classic of African and world literature. One of my favorite verses for reinforcement, especially in the midst of struggle, is Odu (2:4). It is a verse that calls to mind and reaffirms the Kawaida concept of “unbudging Blackness” which means *a self-conscious and continuing commitment to culturally grounded excellence and moral agency that is required in becoming and being African in the fullness of ourselves*.

It is also important here to note that my translations and interpretations of these sacred texts are rooted in and a reflection of the life I live, the work I do and the struggles I wage in and for community and in the context and consideration of the demands of our times. Thus, my sentiments, thought and practice are based and develop especially in the ongoing liberation struggle of our people and I am constantly concerned with that which liberates and

enhances conditions and capacities for us to free ourselves, be ourselves and assert ourselves in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving ways. And our ancestral sacred teachings are the foundation and framework for this self-understanding and self-assertion in the world. At the center of my concern, then, as a *Seba Maat*, ethical philosopher and activist-scholar, is the social and self-moral formation that stresses a liberating and liberated African excellence and agency in the interest of African and human good and the well-being of the world.

The Odu verse (2:4) in focus here is one on the commitment to the virtue of *steadfastness*. And it says: “Even if you move away from your position, I will not move. The foundation stones of the house must not fail the house. And the crown of the head must not fail the person at the market. So I will not move away. And you will not move away. Twilight was just appearing in the heavens. But some people thought day had already dawned. This was the teaching of Ifa for Eji Oye who would dawn on earth like daylight. So, if it were money that moved me, I would certainly say so. But Ifa will assign me my own good fortune”.

Again, this verse stresses the virtue of steadfastness in doing, defending and achieving the good. It promises that such a commitment to the way of Ifa, the way of goodness and rightness, will bring a good fortune beyond material gains. Moreover, the teaching invites us to see the virtue of steadfastness as essential to maintaining the good in the world as the foundation stones of the house are to upholding it and as useful to a person as the crown of the head is to one in the market who uses the head on which to carry heavy and valuable goods. We must, then, bear our burdens and responsibilities well, as persons and a people, and not

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buckle or break under any weight the world imposes on us.

This reflects an understanding that our lives, freedom and well-being and other essential goods are intricately interwoven and thus, we have a reciprocal responsibility to do our part to defend, sustain, and expand these vital and shared goods. The verse begins by declaring a commitment to hold firm to the position of the good and right even if others move away from it. But it also expresses a moral optimism toward others by declaring that "I will not move away and you will not move away". This suggests not only a genuine moral optimism about the human will and tendency to hold to the good, but also suggests our constant need to support others in their struggle to keep their position.

This moral optimism about the presence and capacity for good within the human person is rooted in the Odu (78:1) teaching that humans are divinely chosen to bring, increase and sustain good in the world. The verse says "Let's do things with joy. For surely, humans have been divinely chosen to bring good in the world". And as we say in Kawaida interpretation, this means that the fundamental mission and meaning in human life is to bring good in the world. This also affirms the equal dignity of every human person and that no one is more chosen, elect or better than another. Indeed, we are all chosen, not over and against anyone, but chosen with everyone to bring good in the world in our own unique and equally important way. Also, important in this teaching on steadfastness in Odu (2:4) is the subtle but substantive lesson that people are often drawn from their positions of steadfastness in what is right and good by misreading signs of achievement

or change. This tendency to be mistaken, deceived and diverted is heightened especially in these times in which misinformation, disinformation and lying as a way of life becomes the prominent practice of media and other sources of the falsification of reality.

Thus, the text says, although it was only twilight which was appearing in the heavens, some thought it was already daylight and apparently acted accordingly. The sense seems to be that they, misreading the situation, moved away from their positions prematurely, like those in struggle misreading the turn of events, assuming victory and walking away from the battlefield before the battle, struggle or war is won. The text also suggests that material gain, here symbolized by the reference to money, can also entice us to leave the way and lose the way. But the assertion is that if we don't confuse money or material gain with the good fortune of moral instruction and insight that Ifa offers, we will gain a special good and be among those who will, through steadfastness in the good and right, "dawn on earth like daylight."

A COMPANION VERSE OF ODU (2:4) IS ODU (16:1) which speaks to modelling the immovable mountain. This verse teaches us that in our striving and struggle to achieve and embody African excellence and moral agency for good in the world, we should model the mountain. For it says that "one who cannot be conquered is another name for mountain". Indeed, it says that "the mountain is always as firmly established as ever" and that "it will remain immortal and immovable". And again, it speaks to our being unconquerable and unbudging in our commitment to and practice of African excellence and moral agency for good in and for the world and all in it. *Ase.* ▲

DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of *Kwanzaa*; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.MaulanaKarenga.org; www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.Us-Organization.org.