



**THE ETHICS AND ESSENTIALITY OF STRUGGLE:
ANCESTRAL INSIGHTS FROM OUR ANCIENT SACRED TEXTS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL TASKS OF our times is to reaffirm, deepen and expand our *culture of struggle* as a people, with its rich talkings and sacred teachings and its lived and uplifting experiences of “storm riding”, “blooming in the whirlwind”, and daring to “specialize in the wholly impossible” in the midst of the most savage and brutal situations of oppression history had to offer. Indeed, it is as ethically imperative as it is compellingly essential, for it is an anchoring, defining and ongoing project and practice of constantly struggling for African and human good and the well-being of the world. And this is especially important in these times of circus and court jester politics in the crushing context of continuing oppression by fractured and deformed expressions of human beings, held together in hatred and hostility to those different and vulnerable and working to outlaw freedom, grossly limit life and restrain laughter. And our culture of struggle is committed to expanding and defending freedom, enhancing life and establishing the conditions for happiness for everyone.

Thus, it is about, as always, knowing our history and honoring it, engaging our present and improving it and imagining a whole new future and forging it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways. Likewise, it is about being ourselves and freeing ourselves in ways that recognize and respect both the particularity and universality of our mission, that is to say, our distinctively African and essentially human way of understanding and asserting ourselves in the world. For it is written in the sacred teachings of our honored ancestors in the *Odu Ifa* that “humans are divinely chosen to bring good into the world”, and this is the fundamental mission

and meaning in human life. It is vital, then, that we recognize and appreciate in practice our similar human but distinctly African way of fulfilling this sacred and sustaining mission. And this means, also and again, that it’s about how we actually live our lives, do our work, and wage our struggles, drawing from the best of our culture in order to be and become the best of what it means to be African and human in the world.

This critical self-understanding and self-assertion in the world as an African people is especially important given the increasing vulnerability to losing our larger and essential selves through a diminishing and deforming dependence on consumerist technology. Indeed, it is a technology that is reshaping, flattening and narrowing the social and moral imagination, providing limitless diversionary devices and endless opportunities to embrace illusions of power, agency and relevance as substitutes for the reality of the need to achieve each of these goals in a practice beyond the quick, the obvious and the easy.

Here the emphasis is on self-conscious immersion in our culture of struggle and contributing meaningfully to it is pivotal. It is an essential Kawaida contention that struggle is a life-giving and life-enhancing practice. It is the way we come into the world, the way we develop and flourish in the world, and the way we leave our legacy so we achieve immortality in this world and the next. Thus, we say struggle is one of the defining features of human life. We struggle to come into being and that’s called birth; we struggle to make the most out of our being and that’s called life. And we struggle not to go out of being and that’s called the quest for immortality. Struggle, then, is one of the most important

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anchors of our identity and way of being in the world and we must study, engage and practice it in a serious, substantive and sustained way, embracing it as a vital and indispensable part of the practice of everyday life.

There are many and varied lessons to learn from the libraries of knowledge found in the written, oral and living practice texts of our honored ancestors. And we must always ground ourselves in these ancient and enduring teachings of immeasurable value. The sacred teachings of our honored ancestors in the *Husia* tell us that if we are to be successful in the struggle of life, the struggle to bring and sustain *Maat*, truth, justice and righteousness in the world, we must not forget to learn and respond rightfully to the lessons of history. Indeed, it says, “Those who fight on the battle field oblivious of the past will not have a good outcome. For they lack knowledge of what they should know”. And what they should know is that which is valuable in engaging and improving our present and framing and forging our future in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world preserving ways.

The *Husia* also teaches us that at the heart and center of the Maatian struggle for good in the world, we are to measure the quality of our moral practice by how we treat the poor and vulnerable among us and in the world. Indeed, it is not only a question of struggling for them, but of struggling *with* them, aiding and enabling them to become and be self-conscious agents of their own lives and liberation. Thus, the *Husia* teaches we must “bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among the voiceless, the devalued and the vulnerable”. And the sacred teachings of our honored ancestors in the *Husia*, also teach that it is morally imperative to resist

and repel attacks on our person and people and on our right to be ourselves and live free, flourishing and meaningful lives. They say, “you are commanded to struggle against those who struggle against you”. Indeed, we are to rightfully resist when we are attacked and oppressed, but pause and pursue peace when a just peace is offered, possible and really practiced. For, the sacred teaching say, “exceedingly good is the presence of peace and there is no blame in peace for those who practice it”.

The sacred teachings of our honored ancestors in the *Odu Ifa*, also offer us several essential lessons in the importance and transformative value of struggle. In addition to posing struggle for good in the world as the fundamental mission and meaning of human life, the *Odu Ifa* reminds us that we are not perfect, but rather always in the process of becoming. Therefore, it says “we are all constantly struggling. We are continuously struggling, all of us”. Moreover, it teaches we are to constantly struggle to strengthen, renew and remake ourselves, making ourselves worthy and representative of the good and beautiful world we strive to bring into being. Thus, the sacred teachings say “Reconstruct yourself. If we are given birth, we must bring ourselves into being again”, constantly striving for excellence in all we do.

Furthermore, *Odu Ifa* teaches that if we dare to be victorious in our struggles against evil, injustice and oppression and to develop and flourish, we must struggle to build a principled, purposeful and productive unity at home. Here home should be understood as a “withinness”, within ourselves, our family and our community. It says of those who do not achieve unity before going to the battle-field, “They did not know that the battle was

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already lost at home before they even reached the battlefield”. The sacred teachings of our ancestors in the *Odu Ifa* also teach us that in our deep commitment to life and living freely and fully, we must give our all to sustain ourselves and pursue the good. And even if we are injured or disabled or “even if we are going to die, we must wage a life-and-death struggle. We must still struggle hard”. Indeed, the *Odu* says, we must “be able to suffer without surrendering”, sacrifice for the good without complaining, and dare to be like fire that everywhere it goes, “it makes a way for itself”.

FINALLY, *ODU IFA* TEACHES US THAT WE should struggle rightfully, courageously and constantly so that “the struggles we wage always add to our honor”, engender respect for us and praise for the good we

strive mightily to bring and sustain in the world. In the final analysis, our honored ancestors tell and teach us, there are several essential things needed to achieve our mission to bring good in the world, a sacred mission handed to us by both heaven and history. And struggle is at the beginning, center and end of it all and on every level. They say, “the things needed to bring conditions of good in the world are: sacrifice; character; the love of doing good, especially for those who need it and those who seek assistance from us; and the eagerness and struggle to bring good into the world and not let any good be lost”. Let us then dare to embrace these goals, dare to embody them in our daily lives and dare to achieve them. *Hotep. Ashe. Heri.*

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