



**EARTH, WIND, WATER AND FIRE:
SAVING OURSELVES AND THE WORLD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

WE LIVE IN A WORLD CONSTANTLY confronted with crises and disasters – natural and human-made and of all the natural crises none is more important than the water crisis. For water is basic to life and the quality of living and thus access to safe, efficient and affordable water is a human right and central to any discussion of the needs and rights of all human beings. Indeed, water can determine whether we live or die; have food or famine, floods and droughts; whether fields and forests flower or wither and are laid waste; and whether there is the flourishing of life or the progressive loss of life and its diversity and ecological system collapse.

Moreover, issues of water and the environment as a whole are interrelated with so many other issues of our daily lives – our health and well-being, poverty and prosperity, the national and global economy, large-scale involuntary migration, extreme weather and climate change, economic decline, conflicts and wars waged to dominate and dispossess indigenous and other vulnerable peoples and thus, issues of gender and human rights. Clearly, it is not simply water events which cause most of these crises, but human action and inaction, human use and misuse of the world, and the domination, deprivation and degradation of the vulnerable peoples of the world who are constantly denied their equal rights to enjoy the goods of the world.

So, in this period of time of the celebration of World Water Day - March 22 and Earth Day - April 22, we are especially called, as African people and fellow human beings, to engage in focused reflection and action directed toward addressing this world-encompassing dual challenge of *environmental crisis* and *environmental care*. For the crisis requires care in two senses: (1) providing what is necessary for the health and well-being of the earth and all its inhabitants, especially its most vulnerable, and (2) giving *serious and sustained consideration* and *active empathetic concern* to each of these. Again, here we want to keep the human right to water within

the overall conversation about the issue of care for the earth in an inclusive comprehensive sense. In this regard, we want to use as a point of departure some ancient African ethical texts which speak to the centrality of the natural world in our lives, its provision of life-giving and life-sustaining good, and our implicit and explicit moral obligation to constantly repair, renew and remake the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

The first sacred text from the *Husia* of ancient Egypt is a sacred wish seen and said by our honored ancestors as a blessing for each and all of us. And we repeat it as a self-conscious, culturally grounded tradition, especially at Kwanzaa, in celebration and gratitude for the goodness granted us and in hope and wish that the world will continue to sustain us and give us abundant goodness. Kwanzaa, which has roots in ancient African harvest celebrations and the modern Black Freedom Struggle, carries within it also a commitment to be constantly and actively concerned with the well-being of the world and all in it. And we do this in righteous gratitude and reciprocal response to the abundant good given us and to follow the world-preserving ways and upward paths of our honored ancestors.

Thus, we say in celebration, gratitude and commitment, “May we be granted all things good and pure that heaven grants, the earth produces, and the waters bring forth from their depths.” Allowing for heaven to mean also the Divine Presence in this blessing, it also focuses on indispensable elements of the natural world. It is first a sacred wish and even a prayer that we are granted the shared gift of “all things good and pure.” Although I used the four essential elements in the title of this piece of earth, wind, water and fire, the ancient Egyptians use in this sacred wish three elements, heaven, earth and water - heaven, which includes wind (air), fire (sun) and all else in heaven; earth, the ground and all in and on it; and water and all in it. The first part is a wish that heaven grants the shared good of the four winds: symbolic of the breath of life, air; the sun for

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light, warmth and life; the clouds for refreshing and reviving rain; good weather; a stable climate; and a regular succession of seasons.

The next is a wish that the earth continues to yield the shared good of the soil itself, of fields, forests, plains, savannahs, valleys, hills and mountains, and all that lives, grows, creeps, crawls, walks, runs, flies and lands on earth. And the third wish is that the waters continually bring forth the shared good of life and food abundant; and of water itself and its vital use, and its use to drink and sustain life, cleanse, purify and perform sacred rituals, to irrigate and create energy, to cool, heal and cause to grow, flower and flourish. In all of this, there is the hope and wish that all these gifts will remain “good and pure,” safe, unpolluted, uncontaminated and unspoiled. The word used in the ancient Egyptian text for good, *nefer*, also means beautiful and speaks to the good, beautiful natural wonder of the world itself.

The second set of ancient Egyptian Maatian texts in the *Husia* teaches us the ethical imperative of *serudj ta* – to constantly repair, renew and remake the world, making it more beneficial and beautiful than we inherited it. For the sacred texts teach that the world is constantly damaged by what we do wrong and fail to do right and thus, we must constantly be concerned with maintaining and restoring the well-being of the world. In the fullness of the practice of *serudj ta*, we are: “to raise up that which is in ruins; to repair that which is damaged; to rejoin that which is severed; to replenish that which is depleted; to strengthen that which is weakened; to set right what is wrong; and to make flourish that which is fragile, insecure and undeveloped.” And we are to do this, not only for those living, but also to honor those who taught us world-preserving ways to live, work and relate in the world; and for those who come and continue after us. For as the *Husia* teaches and reminds us “the good we do for others

is also for ourselves;” for we are building and sustaining the moral community and good world we all want and deserve to live in and leave as a legacy for our people and the world.

Thus, if we are to do good and give the best of ourselves to save the earth and all in it - animate and inanimate - we must clearly and strongly understand and engage it as a simultaneous saving of ourselves. For it is not only the life of the earth that is at stake, but also our own lives. The sacred text *Odu Ifa* (33.2) tells us we must “take responsibility for the world, bear the responsibility well and do good for the world.” Moreover, the sacred text teaches us that in carrying out this important life-sustaining task, we must stop sacrificing in pursuit of wealth, luxury, comfort and pleasures that threaten and degrade the earth and instead practice a sacrifice that protects and sustains it.

INDEED, *ODU IFA* (10:5) SAYS, “the people of the world should stop making sacrifices for wealth and instead make sacrifices that will protect the earth from its enemies,” i.e., plunder, pollution and depletion on every level. The sacred text also tells us that “In this way we will live,” i.e., survive and thrive. Thus, it concludes, “And so, we should ask earnestly and humbly of each other that as long as we live on earth, that the earth not be destroyed,” i.e., either by our hand or those of others, by what we do wrong or fail to do right or by not holding ourselves or others ethically and politically accountable. Therefore, we are to *walk gently, act justly and relate rightly in and for the world*. And with the honored ancestors, we hope and say, “May we be granted life, prosperity and health, the blessings of being (and enduring) on earth; knowledge of the right and good (*Maat*) like the One who created it, and a deep and clear understanding of all that is to be done.” *Hotep. Ashe. Heri.*▲

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