



**THE OSHUN QUESTION AND QUEST:
UPLIFTING WOMEN, OURSELVES AND THE WORLD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

TO PAUSE IN PRAISE AND MEDITATE ON THE awesome meaning and measure of African women in this special month rightly returns us to a *sankofa* conversation with our history and culture. Indeed, the essential and ongoing conversation with our history is at the same time a continuing conversation with our culture, a constant search for ever more expansive and enriching ways to be African women and men in the world. And so, whenever there is a holiday or holy day, we are to turn to our culture to ask what is its essential message and meaning. And how do we use it to uplift the lives of the masses of our people and ourselves, as well as the world? Thus, at this time of Black History Month II, Women Focus, we should think about the sacred teachings of our ancestors concerning women and their meaning to us and the world. We should think about the joy they bring, the hardships they suffer, the hope they have, and the struggle they wage to be free and fulfilled, to find and hold fast to meaning and good in their lives and to create, extract and enjoy good in the world. And we should, as men and women, embrace each other in love and struggle and commit ourselves in persistent practice to a life of dignity and decency, security and peace and to the end of deprivation and domestic, communal and societal violence.

For we know that so many Africans and other women and people of the world lack rightful access to the goods they need and deserve. We know also that the vulnerable are routinely made victims, the poor are preyed on with repulsive regularity, and the ill and aged are often assigned a convenient corner in which to waste away and die. We know too the undeserved and ongoing added suffering of those considered to be the wrong color by the racist and colorless cretins and globalizing criminals who ravage and try to rule this world. And we know there is no real remedy or repair for the ills and ruin, the disease and damage in the

world except the relentless struggle for the good, the right and the possible.

We talk so easily about our love and respect for women—our mothers, wives, little girls, lovers and other real and ideal versions. And we, this month and always, rightfully praise them for the good they have done and do. But the question is what will we dare dream and do for and with them. What will we do to satisfy the needs, end the pain, stop the pillage and plant good and beautiful things that grow and expand the mind, nourish the body, elevate the spirit and provide space for the love and care we all long for?

In the Kawaiida Ifa ethical tradition, there is this principle and practice we call “asking the *Oshun* question.” It is, according to the *Odu Ifa* (248:1), a question asked at the beginning of creation by Olodumare, Lord of Heaven and Earth, to the male *orisha* (divine beings) who returned to heaven without completing the task given them. Olodumare had sent male and female *orisha* in the world to make it a good world and had given them the *ashe*, the power and ability, to do the good they wanted and willed. But the male *orisha* excluded the one female among them and attempted to complete their common tasks without her. So, they failed and returned to report their failure. The first question Olodumare asked them is “What about Oshun, the one female among you?” And he also asked them, “Did you give her due respect?” They responded that they did not give her the respect she was due. Then, Olodumare told them to return and give Oshun due respect and all their work would succeed. The *Odu* says, “They returned to earth and they began to give due respect to Oshun. Then, all their deliberations and efforts began to go right.”

The importance of this sacred teaching is apparent on several levels. First, the composition of the workforce sent is 400 male *orisha* and one female *orisha*. One can read this in two

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ways—as an indication that the issue is woman/female whether one or 1,000. And also, the lesson is that the *ashe* of one who is right is greater than the power of those who are numerous and wrong. Secondly, the teaching is about the very work of creation of the world, and thus essential to how we understand both its foundation and functioning.

Thirdly, the point of the indispensability of the female element in existence and the world is reaffirmed not only by Oshun's ability to thwart or make successful the work of creation, but also by the Divine direction to the male orisha to return to earth and give Oshun due recognition. That Olodumare, Lord of Heaven and Earth, gave this specific direction carries with it an unsurpassable authority for the moral necessity of the respectful inclusion and due recognition of the female in all matters of importance in the world.

Olodumare's two questions before giving the direction to respect and include Oshun in the work of creation are instructive and rich in symbolism. First, he compels the males by his question to recognize the presence of the female in the creation process. Secondly, he asks them did they give her due recognition? The first and second questions are linked and both are about due recognition. But the first question is to indicate that recognition of the female presence in the serious activity of world creation is the beginning basis of respect for female as female, woman as woman. The second question compels the male orisha to realize that the female principle is indispensable to the rightful building and righteous functioning of the world. Thus, the question of due respect is one of not just

recognizing the presence of woman, but also *recognizing the indispensability of woman*. Indeed, this is expressed in the male orisha's inability to complete the tasks assigned to them and Oshun, because they failed to recognize and respect Oshun as an indispensable partner in the cooperative project of co-creation of the world.

The lesson here is that in all things essential, women and men are and must be partners in the constant co-creation of the world. And thus, African men are morally compelled to ask in every important and essential activity, the two questions Olodumare asks. First, we must ask *what about the women*, where is she in the process and project, in the things we plan and do? Secondly, do we give her due respect as a person and an indispensable partner in the ongoing project and process of bringing good in the world, in other words, building the good world we all want and deserve?

IN THE TRADITION OF OUR ANCESTORS, LET US celebrate our victories and redouble our efforts this month and always by practicing the best of our values, values that remind us and reaffirm us, as the *Odu Ifa* teaches us, that we, all humans, man and woman, male and female, are *eniyan*, chosen ones, divinely chosen to bring good in the world. Moreover, the sacred text says we are to struggle diligently and eagerly to “increase good in the world and not let any good be lost.” There is a whole world to heal, repair and radically restructure and we must do this work and wage this struggle together. In conflict and divided we are already defeated, but together we can hold up the pillars of heaven and make firm the foundation of freedom, justice, peace and good in the world.▲

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