



**LIVING A KAWAIDA LIFE:
SELF-UNDERSTANDING, RELATEDNESS, STRIVING AND SHARING GOOD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ONE OF THE GREATEST AND CONTINUING challenges of our lives, in both ordinary and extraordinary times is to know how to live a good life and then to actually live it in a conscious, committed and determined way. Such a practice proves itself difficult in the absence of a guiding philosophy which defines the meaning and measure of a good life and urges us to pursue and practice it. Kawaida philosophy, a African-centered philosophy of life, work and struggle offers a foundation and framework for such a pursuit and practice.

Kawaida defines itself as an ongoing synthesis of the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world. It roots itself in ancient and modern texts – written, oral and living practice texts. And it extracts from and builds on the sacred wisdom, instructive insight, deep thinking and shared experience of our people and culture. Within this framework, I want to identify and discuss four essential elements in pursuing and practicing a good, full and meaningful life. These are: *self-understanding, relatedness, striving, and sharing good.*

It is the sacred wisdom of the *Husia* that teaches us that we must have a critical *self-understanding* for us to live the good life we aspire to and deserve. To live the best life, we must have the best understanding of ourselves. Otherwise, we settle for less than we deserve, do less than our identity demands, and achieve less than that to which we ought to aspire. The *Husia* defines us in essential ways that are indispensable to pursuing and practicing a good life in both an ethical and African sense. Indeed, these insights give us an expansive conception of ourselves and thus of not only what we deserve, but also of what is demanded of us.

First, Seba Kheti teaches that we are “images of the Divine” and originated from this sacred source. Paheri defines humans as being a dwelling place of the Divine, saying “I knew the Divine Presence in human beings.” And knowing this, he acted accordingly. And Rediu Khnum

wrote that he understood himself as an instrument, an agent of the Divine. He said, “I know myself as a precious staff of the Divine, endowed with excellence, dignified, noble in appearance and godly to behold.” Furthermore, he tells us that our knowledge, moral sensitivity, and character are key to our understanding, pursuing and achieving the good. He thus says, “It was my mind/heart that advanced my position; it was my character that kept me in front.” In a word, it was his commitment to the good.

Finally, Seba Djedi teaches that not only are we bearers of divinity, but also bearers of dignity. Indeed, he poses dignity itself as a divine endowment of human beings. Here we mean by dignity an inherent worthiness which is transcendent of all other identities and conditions, equal in all, and inalienable. These interrelated aspects of our identity make and keep us aware of our specialness and causes us, if rightly understood and honored, to be constantly concerned that we not do anything to violate or dishonor this identity or allow others to treat us in dignity-denying and disrespectful ways. This speaks to the high evaluation we must have and demonstrate of ourselves. And if we rightfully understand ourselves in such sacred and expansive ways, we are obligated to assert ourselves in the most dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving ways.

Central also to pursuing and living a good life is understanding and honoring our *relatedness*, our kinship and common ground with others, our relatedness within our families, with our ancestors and future generations, and with the world African community. This is the meaning of the Zulu teaching “*ngingumuntu ngabantu* – I am a person through other people” and the Kawaida contention, “I am related and relate, therefore I am” or collectively, “we are related and relate, therefore we are.” In a word, our relations bring us into being, nurture and sustain us and provide an indispensable goodness to our lives.

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And likewise, this means recognizing and responding rightfully to Nana Anna Julia Cooper's teaching that "We take our stand on the unity of humanity, the oneness of life and unnaturalness and injustice of all favoritism whether of race, sex, country or condition." Also, and ultimately, this sense of relatedness and its contribution to living a good life requires our sensing and accepting, not only the oneness of life, but also the oneness of being itself. This speaks to our ancestors respect for the world itself and all in it and the environmental and wholistic ethics this evokes, cultivates and encourages. It is called in Kawaida Maatian ethics, *serudj ta*, the moral imperative to constantly repair, renew and remake the world making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Here I use *striving* and *struggling* interchangeably, each meaning great, sustained and goal-oriented efforts to achieve and obtain goods of life. It might be great effort for moral or intellectual excellence, freedom or justice or for love or to be a good person, a good friend, brother, sister or comrade in struggle. And it might also be to achieve the material and social basis for a good life, a life of dignity and decency, of prosperity and promise. We talk here of conditions and capacities for the pursuit, achievement and practice of good in variable and valuable ways. This ceaseless striving for the good, Kawaida teaches, is rooted in the very nature of being human. So, striving and struggling are central to what it means to be human, to be alive, to develop, to flourish, and to leave evidence of our existence and worthiness of remembrance.

And finally, to live a Kawaida life, a good life in the most beautiful and meaningful way is the *sharing of good*. We say in Kawaida, all the great goods are shared goods. This includes love, a shared good; family, community, friendship, shared goods; sisterhood, brotherhood, freedom,

justice and life itself, all shared goods. This insight is expressed in Lady Ta-Aset's teaching that "the good we do for others we are also doing for ourselves." For we are building and sustaining the moral community and world we all want and deserve. Such a community and world of shared good is a community and world of mutual respect, mutual interests, mutual support and mutual benefit.

Here I define service to and sacrifice for others as a shared good, the good of self-giving and receiving in reciprocal return. And I understand this giving of self in the service of others as not only a way to define and develop oneself, but also a fundamental and indispensable way to know oneself. Indeed, how can we know who we are except by what we, in the final analysis, prove in practice – whether it's claims to love, generosity, courage, commitment, friendship or goodness itself.

The *Odu Ifa* says that a good life is a condition of full knowledge of things; happiness everywhere; peace within and without; harmony with nature; freedom from fear of the unknown and uncontrolled in our lives; and freedom from poverty and the misery that accompany it. And then the sacred teaching tells us that to achieve this good life, we must acquire wisdom adequate for the challenges and good of the world, develop character, make sacrifices, love doing good, and constantly and eagerly "struggle to increase good in the world and not let any good be lost."

IN OUR RIGHTEOUS QUEST FOR A GOOD LIFE, then, let us understand ourselves in the most expansive, dignity-affirming, life-enhancing ways, and relate rightfully to each other, others and the world and all in it. And let us strive and struggle constantly to create and sustain an unending good and share it in ways that expand caring, justice and reciprocity in the world. ▲

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