



**LIFTING AND HOLDING UP HEAVEN:
WOMEN'S AND MEN'S WORK IN THE WORLD**

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T*his is a sankofa retrieval, resharing and reaffirming of the ancient African ethical imperative of “lifting and holding up heaven,” ensuring human good and the well-being of the world as a joint Ujima project and practice of women and men.* It is a fundamental tenet of Kawaïda philosophy that practice proves and makes possible everything, that is to say, practice brings it into being, makes it real, relevant and worthy of the name and quality it claims, whether it is love or life, parenting or peace, teaching or learning, art or ethics, science, religion or righteous resistance. And so, in this month of March which pays rightful and focused attention and homage to women and calls for recommitment to secure their rights, respect their dignity and address adequately their rightful needs and aspirations, the question is always of how this is translated in practice, how is it brought into being and made real and worthy of its name and claims?

Here Kawaïda calls on us, as always, to dialog with our culture, to ask it questions and seek from it answers to the fundamental issues facing us, African people, and humankind. And certainly, the equality of women is a key and urgent issue for us, as an African people, as well as for humanity as a whole. Indeed, at the heart of the struggle for human rights, social justice, a just society and a good and sustainable world is sexual or gender equality, the equality of women and girls with men and boys. Our ancestors knew this, taught it as an ethical imperative in their spirituality and ethics, their laws and social life. But it remains a historically unfinished task and struggle. They offered us a model of moral excellence, a paradigm of social possibility, but it was still an ideal that had to be made a living reality in practice, an every-day and every-place practice.

In this month of Black History Month II—Women Focus, Women’s History Month and International Women’s Day, we do well to turn to the rich and ancient resource of our own culture for constant grounding and reaffirmation in what special ways we are to engage this month and the

celebrations, reflections and recommitments that come with it. In this regard, we should think deeply on how men and women, male and female, can share the uplifting work of the world and together wage the righteous and relentless struggle to repair and remake the world so that the world becomes as it should be, a shared good for everyone, male and female, people of all kinds and conditions in the world.

In an art text that appears in an ancient Nubian Temple of Isis, there is a depiction of Kandake (Queen) Amanitore and Nisu (King) Natakamani who are co-rulers and appear together in numerous works of art and written texts. In this depiction, they are performing the world-preserving ritual of lifting and holding up the heavens (*tua pet*), with a long history in ancient Nubian and ancient Egyptian art and texts. It at first reminds us of Mao Zedong’s declaration that “women hold up half the sky,” stated in order to reaffirm the indispensable role of women in life and struggle and their need to be free and self-determining. But this cultural art and the message it sends differ from the Chinese affirmation, even though both speak to the value, dignity and equality of women.

First, the Nubian depiction of the woman holding up half the heavens is a joint project with a man. Second, the other half is upheld by two divine beings, and each human and divine being represents one of the four cardinal points and pillars of the heavens. The presence of the divine beings, the heavens themselves, and the human beings represent the spiritual, environmental and social dimensions of the work of the world. And these are the interrelated realms of Maat-doing in the world, a world we are called to constantly repair, renew and remake (*serudj ta*).

A further Kawaïda reading of this artistic text understands its depiction of the lifting and holding up heaven as symbolic, not only of doing the good work of the world, but also raising and sustaining the highest of heaven’s values. These values, the sacred texts of the *Husia* tell us, are those that please the Divine, show proper care and

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concern for the well-being of the world, and satisfy the moral, spiritual and material needs and aspirations of the people.

The sacred ritual thus reminds us of the role of the spiritual and ethical in all the work we do, and of values, views, sentiments and practice which raise up, reaffirm and sustain us and the world; values like love, care and concern; freedom, equality, justice and peace; and mutual respect, mutual support and mutual benefit in all we do. It reminds us of the cooperative nature of our work, the equality of women and men in worth and weight in the world, and of shared responsibility for life, struggle and sustaining the world. And it reminds us that our cooperation in doing Maat, righteous and good works in the world, is not only desirable, but necessary, indeed, indispensable to the health and welfare of the world and all in it. This means, if it is real and not just hypocritical ritual or convenient reference, that our practice always measures up to our principles in all our relations whether at home, in community, society or the world.

As a principle and practice, equality speaks to overarching and long-term developmental goals and requires that women and men, girls and boys, and persons of other self-defined identities enjoy the same rights, have equal social value and status, enjoy the same access to resources and socially-valued goods, opportunities, power and protections. And yet, it is important to reaffirm, as the women of Us did in their seminal document, "From the Woman's Side of the Circle" (1969), that equality does not mean women and men, girls and boys are engaged and treated as the same without due recognition and respect for differences and appropriate distinctions. It simply means that their value, status, role, responsibilities, access, opportunities, life conditions and life chances are not determined by their sex.

Here the concept of equity is crucial, for it speaks to issues of justice and fairness, giving persons what they are rightly due, treating them as human beings, possessors of dignity, an inherent worthiness our ancestors teach us in the *Husia* that is transcendent of all biological and social attributes and identities, equal in all and inalienable. And equity directly addresses the differences in starting point, experiences, priorities of different "races" or peoples, classes and genders or sexes and seek to achieve and apply corrective measures that involve not only equal opportunity and access, but also equal outcomes.

This means and requires *targeted intervention*, i.e., intervention specifically designed and directed toward equity for women and girls, giving them what they need to realize their potential and end inequities without denying oppressed men and boys and the oppression of a people as a whole. Gender equity or gender justice which is at the heart of the struggle for the equality of women and girls, then, envisions a transformed world in which women, men, girls and boys, and peoples of all kinds and identities enjoy equal social value and status, rights and access to resources, opportunities, freedom from violence, and the agency and capacity to realize their potential and direct their lives toward good and expansive ends.

THIS IS WHAT THE ANCESTORS CALLED A Maatian world, a world of truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and righteous order. In other words, it is a world that lifts and holds up our highest values, the practice of which the ancestors teach us, pleases the Divine, satisfies needs and advances the aspirations of human beings, and ensures the well-being and sustaining of the world.▲

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