



**MEDITATING ON WOMAN IN THE WORLD:
SACRED SOURCES FROM ANCIENT AFRICA**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

As March, Black History Month II—Women Focus, comes to an end, and with it, all the special speeches, learned lectures, plays, poems and various other programs and performances to celebrate and honor Black women, it is good to pause and reflect on the meaning and history of this varied and rightful attentiveness. Indeed, although recent in its current form, this rightful and righteous respect has ancient roots and a deep relevance, often hidden in the ceremonial, official and episodic engagement we lend it.

It is a complex concern not only with the women we value, even venerate, or those we know and love, work, dream, struggle and enjoy life with. Nor is it only about ancient and more recent ancestors. Nor, also, is it simply about remembering and recognizing the achievements, contributions, sacrifices and oppression of women. Indeed, it is all this and more, for at the heart of this remembrance, recognition and respect is the first-order and ultimately unavoidable question of the meaning of woman as woman and as a sacred and complementary being in the world, equally indispensable to its foundation and flourishing.

It is in ancient Egypt that we find the earliest recorded engagement with it as evidenced in their sacred texts, we now call the *Husia*. And it is how they engaged and answered this question of the divine and real life meaning of woman as woman and as a sacred and complementary human being in the world that caused them to create a society that respected the dignity and rights of women in ways most modern societies are still working toward.

In ancient Egypt, the deep thinkers and moral teachers, *Seba*, meditating on the

meaning of woman and man, conceived them as sacred, divine, dignity-bearing and complementary. They posed a theology, ethics and social system that conceived of reality and rightness as requiring a complementarity of male and female principles and persons in equality and mutual respect. This reality of rightness is called *Maat*, the principle and practice of rightness in and of the world, i.e., in the realm of the Divine, nature and society. And it is expressed especially in truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order which inform the rightness of our practice and relations in the world.

They began with theology, for they understood that our conception of God represents and reinforces deep-rooted beliefs and thoughts about ultimate questions and issues of life. And the question of the meaning of woman and her relation with man are among the ultimate and first-order questions. The theologians in their understanding and explanation of God did not privilege maleness by posing God as exclusively male and thus giving men a higher status in the world. Nor did they present woman as derived from man and thus of a derived relevance in her relationship with him and in the world.

Instead, they posed God, Ra, in the name and nature of Atum, i.e., Completeness and Perfection. In this completeness and perfection, Ra contains both male and female aspects without being either, forming a Divine Singleness that transcends and goes beyond them both. This understanding is reaffirmed in the prayers of the people who prayed, “Hail to you Ra, Perfect each day, Creator of all, Beneficent Mother of divine spirits and human beings.”

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Others prayed, calling “Ra the one who created all that exists, the father of fathers and the mother of mothers.”

Closely related to this concept, our ancestors of ancient Egypt taught us and the world that humans, male and female, are in the image of God (*senen netcher*), as found first in the Book of Kheti. Thus, they are divine and sacred, to be placed beyond violation, degradation and devaluation. This is a great spiritual and moral concept Africa gave the world and precedes any other similar concept from any other culture by centuries. Moreover, women and men are also defined by the ancient Seba as possessors of dignity as well as divinity. Now, this concept of dignity is indispensable to our concept of the ethical and informs our definition, defense and promotion of human rights. And it is an equally indispensable way of defining what it means to be a woman and man—in a word a human being.

Dignity (*shepesu*) is defined in the *Husia*, especially in the Book of Djedi, as an inherent worthiness which is transcendent, equal and inalienable in all. It is transcendent in that it is beyond all social and biological identities and attributes, i.e., beyond race, class, gender, and all the other ways we define ourselves and are distinguished by others. It is equal in everyone without exception or condition. And it is inalienable, incapable of being transferred or taken away by anyone. So again, woman, as well as man, is in ancient Egypt conceived in the most ethical way, as a possessor of dignity and divinity, worthy of the highest respect.

It is, then, on this basis that Kemet, ancient Egypt, conceived and put in place a

legal and social system in which women were equal with men, enjoyed equal rights and participated in all areas of social, economic, religious and political life. None of this is to say Kemet was a perfect society or always practiced its highest principles or had no real and serious flaws. But we must concede the great achievements in understanding and treatment of women that these early essential and indispensable Kemetic concepts represent and the clear absence of them in other contemporary societies which made women derivative, inferior and simply supportive of men using their religious and cultural doctrines to establish and defend these practices.

At the heart of these essential, even indispensable, spiritual and ethical teachings are timeless lessons. Clearly, central to all is the sacredness of the human person, female and male, and their right to freedom from violation, degradation and devaluation. Also, there is the continuously stressed concept that we come into social being as male and female, and reflect and best express our divinity and humanity in rightful and mutual respectful relations with each other. And this too we are taught: that the sense and reality of our completeness, wholeness and fulfillment is in the practice and promise of a complementarity that constantly seeks and struggles to build the good, Maatian world we all want and deserve to live in. Such a commitment to work and struggle to radically reconceive and reconstruct this world must take as a central principle respect for our unity in diversity and our divinity in our humanity with all its flaws and rich potential for flourishing.

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