



**OUR ORIGINAL RISING IN ANCIENT EGYPT:  
DEFINING THE SACRED AND THE MORAL LIFE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**A** GAIN, WE RIGHTFULLY SET ASIDE TIME and space to celebrate the *sacred initiative and narrative* we name and know as Black History. It was first set aside as Black History Week by Dr. Carter G. Woodson (May the good he did and the legacy he left last forever). Later, it was decided more time was needed to celebrate and reflect on ourselves, and it was extended and named Black History Month. It is a time of reverent and reflective raising up and focusing on the particular specialness of ourselves, as we move and make our way through human history, leaving our awesome legacy in the world. Indeed, it is our unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world. That is to say, being African, being Black, in the most beautiful, sacred and soulful ways.

We of the organization Us name our history sacred because we understand ourselves and our lives as sacred. Indeed, we take the unbudging and non-negotiable position that no people is more sacred or holy, or chosen or elect, or worthy of respect than our own. Furthermore, we define our history as sacred because our struggle for freedom, justice and other shared and common human goods is a sacred struggle, a righteous and relentless struggle to bring good in the world.

As we begin to celebrate this sacred initiative and narrative of African people in the world, it is only right and appropriate that we begin with our original rising in ancient Egypt, Kemet. For there we defined the sacred, the moral and the meaningful life in foundational and world influencing ways. Because Kemet is African and we know that African history reveals evidence of significant achievements throughout the continent, Kemet in Kawaida thought becomes a way of conceiving and engaging Africa as a whole as *our moral and spiritual ideal*. And we constantly dialog with its culture, continental and diasporan, ancient and modern, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to fundamental issues of African and human life. And we use Kemet, ancient Egypt, as a focal, indeed, foundational point of departure.

My work, as evidenced in my second doctoral dissertation, *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*, and the role of our organization Us and the African American Cultural Center (Us) as the initial planners, organizers and hosts of the founding conference of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC) in Los Angeles sought to expand and deepen that critical dialog. Likewise, my 30-years of work on collecting, translating and organizing Kemet's sacred texts into a single sacred text called *The Husia* is also reflective of this commitment. And we continue to do this work within Us as we did before our outreach to others. For we, the Seba-Maat, the moral teachers in the Kawaida-Maat tradition in Us, see the moral and spiritual insights and contributions of Kemet, not only as a critical counter to the myth of ancient Egypt as a land of bondage, but also as a rich resource for engaging the critical moral and social issues of our time.

As a way to engage this rich African legacy to the world, I want to conclude the conversation focusing on five fundamental concepts that reflect Kemet's deep thinking about the sacred, the moral and the meaningful life. The first is *Maat*, the anchoring moral, spiritual and social conception in Kemet. It is a multiple meaning word, but essentially means rightness and righteousness in the world. It is also the interrelated order of rightness established at creation, involving three interrelated realms of relationships: the Divine, nature and human society. And we are to strive to establish and maintain right relations with the Divine, nature and each other. We are to do this by practicing critical virtues, especially those I defined as the Seven Cardinal Virtues of Maat: truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and righteous order. And we are to do all the good we do with a loving heart and mind.

Second, in the Maatian conception of the world, humans are created in the image of God, *senen netcher*. This is the first written conception of this and is found in the *Husia* in the Book of Kheti. Kheti says, "well cared for is humankind

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who are the flocks of God. He gave breath to their noses. They are his images and came from his body.” This concept offered as early as 2140 BCE taught and reaffirmed the sacredness of the human person and human life and thus that humans are worthy of the highest respect. But this concept also gave us an obligation to act as a divine image, as a possessor of divinity and to emulate the Divine in loving, creative, caring and self-giving ways.

Thirdly, Kemet gives us in the narrative of the sage Djedi in the *Husia* the companion concept of human dignity, *shepesu*. It posits that all humans have an inherent worthiness that is *transcendent* of all biological and social attributes – race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ability, religion, nationality, etc., Moreover, this Maatian moral concept argues this inherent worthiness is *equal in all*, using Djedi’s defense of a nameless prisoner before Pharaoh Khufu as an example and emphasizing that there are no hierarchies of inherent worthiness of human beings. And finally, dignity, *shepesu*, in Maatian moral thought, is *inalienable*, i.e., it cannot be taken or given away, regardless of social or physical status or condition. It thus becomes an indispensable pillar in the definition and defense of human rights.

Maatian ethics also gives us the *Four Good Deeds of Ra* at the dawn of creation found in the *Husia* in the Book of Vindication. These are divine endowments to create and sustain a Maatian life – a rightful and righteous world. And with every endowment named there is an associated right. And they are the *Husia* says, given to all humans, small and great, male and female, in every time and every place, everywhere and all the time. These endowments are the breath of life and the right to life; the sustenance of life and the right to the necessities of life; the dual endowment of human equality and the right to equal treatment and free will and the right to self-deter-

mination; and finally, the moral and spiritual consciousness and the right to freedom of conscience and by extension freedom of expression.

Fourthly, humans in Maatian ethics are defined also, not only as bearers of dignity, divinity and rights, but also as *rekhyt*, knowing and wise beings. And thus, there is an emphasis on cultivating a life of the mind and heart, of consciousness and commitment and using knowledge in the interest of human good and the well-being of the world. Moreover, the *Husia* teaches that the *ib* (the heart and mind) is “a divine presence within us” and we should cultivate it with utmost care and commitment. Also, the *Husia* says, we should “examine every matter that we may understand it; that we should study the structure and functioning of the heavens and earth.” And it reminds us that whatever other learning we get, we must acquire moral wisdom that aids us in developing character. For ‘it is in the development of character that education succeeds.’”

**F**INALLY, OUR ANCESTORS OF ANCIENT Egypt tell and teach us we must embrace and practice the moral imperative of *serudj ta*. It is the moral obligation to constantly repair, renew and remake the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. This is reflective of the world-encompassing character of Maatian ethics, involving both the natural and social world, our relations with the earth and environment and our relations with each other and others. We are then on every level of life obligated to: raise up what is in ruins; repair what is damaged; rejoin what is divided; replenish what is depleted or diminished; strengthen what is weak; set right what is wrong; and make flourish that which is fragile, insecure and undeveloped. And this speaks to how we should live our lives, do our work and wage a righteous and relentless struggle to bring and sustain Maat, deep and expansive good in and of the world.▲

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