



**JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR ALL OF US:  
FULFILLING THE PROMISE IN PRACTICE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 12-18-08, p. A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

As the world marks and meditates on the meaning of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued December 10, 1948, it is especially important for us as an African people also to think in depth and at length on its special meaning to us. First, this is so because of our history and struggle as an oppressed people, and a natural and morally obligated ally to all other oppressed and struggling peoples. And it is also because of our ancient, modern and ongoing role as a moral and social vanguard in the world. Indeed, it is a heavy burden of history we are compelled to bear, a fight we must see to the finish. And that is none other than the task contained in the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary theme of the Declaration which is winning and fulfilling thru practice the goal of “Justice And Dignity For All of Us” in the world.

The Declaration emerges from the ruins, holocausts and human tragedies of the Second European World War. It sought to outline and encourage a renewal of hope for humanity, the possibility of a new history and way to be human in the world and the forging of a truly human future for everyone. It thus marks a critical milestone in the social and ethical evolution of humankind. The text begins where it should, affirming that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Moreover, it lists and lays out a series of rights ranging from “the right to life, liberty and security”, freedom of religion, conscience, opinion, expression and assembly to the right to be free from enslavement, arbitrary detention and torture. And it also includes rights to social security, education, work and choice of work, rest

and leisure, “a standard of living adequate for health and well-being”, to participate in the political and cultural life of the community, “enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”.

It is clearly a remarkable Declaration made more important and urgent by the continuing oppression, deprivation, degradation and suffering in the world. And again, for us it must carry the added meaning of an ancient and ongoing call to continued struggle. For it is a conversation about being human and human rights which our ancestors began first and left as an ongoing project and promise for us and the world. Indeed, the earliest conversation and concern about these vital issues emerges in ancient Africa among our ancestors in Kemet, ancient Egypt. Like the writers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would later do, our ancestors began by declaring the sacredness of the human person, their status as equal possessors of dignity and divinity, and their right to life, the sustenance of life, equality of treatment, self-determination, and the right to speak against injustice, and in the interest of justice, right and good in the world.

It is in the sacred *Husia* of ancient Egypt that Seba Kheti reaffirms the sacred teaching that humans are in the image of the Divine, and Seba Djedi teaches that as noble images of the Creator, humans possess a dignity, an inherent worthiness, in equal measure, regardless of biological or social attributes or status. Thus, he taught, they should not be killed or experimented on and this clearly speaks against taking life, experimentation on humans and torture, and again reaffirms the sacredness of human life.

Moreover, the *Husia* teaches that humans were divinely endowed by the Creator with what we in a modern language may call conditions of good for human life, dignity, well-being and flourishing. These divine endowments translate in our moral tradition as both entitlements and enablements and thus *rights*, human rights in the modern sense of the words. They are called the Four Good Deeds of the Creator, Ra.

The First Good Deed is the endowment of the breath of life “so that every person might breathe in his or her own time and place”, which carries within it the right to life. The Second Good Deed is the entitlement to the abundance of the world or the sustenance of life, “so that the humble might benefit from it like the great”. It is in modern language, the right to the goods and resources of life which provide a standard of living supportive of human dignity, well-being and flourishing.

The Third Good Deed is the “creating of every person like his or her fellow” and granting each free will. Thus, there is a dual gift: the right of equality and equal treatment and free will and the right of self-determination of persons and peoples, as read in modern Maatian ethics. And the Fourth Good Deed is the endowment of spiritual and moral consciousness, especially a consciousness of mortality, eventual judgment by history and heaven and our obligation to do Maat (truth, justice and rightness) in the world. Here modern Maatian ethical thought reads this endowment as carrying within it the right to freedom of conscience and worship and the

obligation to live one’s life in dignity-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing ways.

It is important to note that within these sacred teachings of the *Husia* of our ancestors, there is in every Good Deed, a stress on human equality in dignity and rights, on these endowments as shared endowments of humanity: shared life, shared bounties of nature and resources therefrom; shared status of equality and free will and shared moral and spiritual consciousness; and the sacred obligation to do *Maat*—truth, justice, rightness and good in the world.

So as we join the world in celebration, let us also share the recommitment with all oppressed and progressive peoples to finish this fight, to win this historic and ongoing struggle for “justice and dignity for all of us”. And let us not forget the lessons of our ancestors and elders who stress moral sensitivity and solidarity with the most vulnerable, the violated and devalued among us and in the world, the indivisibility of freedom and justice, the inseparability of justice and peace for all and our shared humanity at every level of life. For as Nelson Mandela wrote, marking this 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “We must not forget that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings”. Thus, as our ancestors taught, we are morally obligated “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place”, so that there is justice, dignity and flourishing for all of us everywhere in this our time and place.