



LIFTING UP LIMBIKO'S KAWAIDA EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY: TEACHING AS A MORAL VOCATION

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IT IS A TIME-TESTED SACRED TEACHING of our ancestors in the *Husia* that to do that which is of value is for eternity. The woman and man brought forth by their work do not die for their name is raised and remembered because of it. And so, it is with our beloved sister and sacred friend, Seba Limbiko Tembo. May is the month of her coming into being and June is the month of her journeying into eternity, her rising up in radiance in the heavens and taking her rightful place in the sacred circle of the ancestors, among the doers of good, the righteous and the rightfully rewarded. And so, each year we gather together in May at the African American Cultural Center to commemorate and celebrate her life and legacy with music, praise-song, conversation, and *kikoa* (a communal meal). It is a legacy formed and given foundation in her work, service, institutional building and active commitment to struggle in the supportive context of family and community.

At the heart of Seba Limbiko's legacy is the *Kawaida* pedagogy she helped to develop and practice in the Kawaida School of African American Culture, now named the Limbiko Tembo School of African American Culture in her honor. By pedagogy we mean both a philosophy and practice of teaching. It is the way we view the moral vocation of teaching, the students and their relations, and the methods used to engage both the students and the practice of teaching. Moreover, Seba Limbiko carried this pedagogy to public school venues where she excelled and was highly respected as a teacher who could reach and teach students others avoided, wrote off and considered candidates for discipline rather than development thru the enlightening and uplifting instruction she provided.

She began to develop her pedagogy in achieving her degree in education, but she brought it to its fullness by grounding herself in Kawaida philosophy, serving as teacher and principal of the Kawaida school, teaching advocacy (membership) class, lecturing on Kwanzaa and the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles) in the community and studying to become a Seba-

Maat, a moral teacher in the Kawaida-Maat tradition. Having gained a solid foundation in Kawaida pedagogy, she excelled and continued to develop also thru exchanges and practice in public schools and other venues. As the ancestors taught, the best teacher is first and always a self-conscious and committed student for life.

Seba Limbiko's Kawaida educational practice is informed and based on several interlocking concepts about the foundational and overarching purpose of education and the teaching vocation; the sacred value of the students and essential aims and areas of knowledge transmission, production and exchange from a Kawaida perspective.

First, she comes to her profession and vocation with a Kawaida understanding of education, an African-centered, culturally rooted and ethically grounded conception. It is an understanding rooted in the Kawaida-Maatian conception of education and learning as a preparation and practice for life in the most comprehensive sense. As Seba Amenomope of ancient Egypt says, "it is instruction for life, for the well-being and flourishing of the human person".

Secondly, Seba Limbiko conceived and pursued her profession as teacher as a moral vocation rooted in a deep and ongoing respect for each and every student in all their diversity and thus, respect for the community and culture from which the students come. And she used the culture and community relations as ways to enrich and expand the teaching and learning process and practice. She practiced a respect rootedness in the Kawaida-Maatian conception of humans as possessors of dignity, an inherent worthiness that is transcendent of all social and biological attributes, equal in all and inalienable, i.e., cannot be taken away by anyone, any institution, any law or any devaluing doctrine. She thus, respected this dignity, this inherent worthiness by treating all students equally, while recognizing and engaging their differences as unique and equally valid and valuable ways of being human in the world and a source of enrichment of both learning and relations.

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An ancient Egyptian word for human being is *rekhyt*, a knowing and wise being. Kawaida's moral and educational philosophy embraces this understanding and Seba Limbiko engaged it as a reaffirmation of her belief in the *capacity* and *will* of the student to learn. As she taught, "The challenge is to cooperatively create with them the conditions most conducive to their demonstrating this human capacity and will to learn". She often quoted in this regard and others, the honored educator, Mary McLeod Bethune, who stressed that we must see our children truly as our future, cultivate and strengthen them in their striving, teach them values of "learning, living and serving", and ensure that they "not be discouraged from aspiring toward greatness" and "never lose their zeal for building a better world".

Given this foundational understanding and the concept of education and teaching as a moral vocation, Seba Limbiko sought to teach her students in the African-centered way of aiding them in their striving for knowledge in four fundamental and overarching areas. These are: knowledge of the world; knowledge of themselves in the world; knowledge of how to successfully engage the world; and knowledge of how to direct their lives toward good and expansive ends. In the classical African worldview, we are not simply human beings, but also world beings. The word in Swahili is *walimwengu*, beings of the whole world, i.e., the universe. Therefore, she taught, "beginning with the planet on which we live, we must learn to respect and preserve it as a shared heritage of the ancestors, us and those who come after".

Knowledge of ourselves in the world, Seba Limbiko taught from a Kawaida perspective, is knowledge of our cultural selves as African people. She drew here, as Kawaida does, from the great educator-ancestors, Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Church Terrell, Lucy Laney and others

concerning the stress on knowledge of self as essential to a quality education. For it is not enough to know others and the world, we must, she taught, know our culturally particular selves in the world. Without such self-knowledge, Kawaida teaches, we lack identity, purpose and direction to understand and assert ourselves in the world in dignity-affirming, learning-expansive and life-enhancing ways.

Also, Seba Limbiko stressed the acquisition of knowledge of how to successfully engage the world. Here she reaffirms the Kawaida teaching about relations and relation building as key to a cooperative creation of success and living a good and meaningful life. Clearly, part of successful engagement with the world is preparing students with skills in a given area or areas of making a living. But as W.E.B. DuBois reminds us, education is not only to ensure we gain knowledge of how to make a living, but also how to make a life.

In the final analysis, Seba Limbiko and we end where we began, conceiving and engaging education as a teaching for life. And at the heart and soul of this moral vocation is teaching students how to direct their lives toward good and expansive ends. Here she loved teaching the Nguzo Saba, an ethical communal value system directed toward community strengthening and doing good in the world.

Let us close this conversation, then, in rightful and righteous homage to Seba Limbiko Tembo, and remember and praise the good she gave and brought into the world. Let us honor her always as I've said elsewhere as "*Mwalimu*, teacher, speaker of the clear and mind-opening word, instructor in lessons of life and learning, rightfully attentive to the culture, and the dignity and respect due to everyone. Seba, moral teacher of the sacred word (and) timeless teacher of the good, the right and the possible". Hotep, Ase. Heri.

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