



**RECALLING OUR KAWAIDA MAATIAN MASTER CLASS:
CAREFUL THOUGHT ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE EMERGING AGE OF THE CENTRALITY of artificial intelligence in our lives unavoidably raises the question of the increasing imposed artificiality of our lives, not only in terms of the mediating and problematic role of machines, screens and devices in our relations with each other, but also our conceptions of a good life, a good person and a good society. How do we hold on to our sense of humanity and human relations in the midst of technology's pervasive and problematic presence in our lives, especially the internet which has become an alternative world in which we are compellingly initiated and immersed, and which has perhaps irreversibly transformed the way we read and remember, learn and seek love, shop and "share," work and worship, and understand human relations and human relatedness?

As African people whose conception of our humanity is relational, defined by foundational and formative relations with other humans and the natural world, how do we respond to these steadily unfolding developments in the interest of African and human good and the well-being of the world? And how do we maintain and pursue our conception and active commitment to a good life, a good person and a good society? While we are raising, thinking carefully about and seeking to answer these questions, we must still deal daily with the unrelenting pathology of racism and the systemic oppression and violence which undergirds it at virtually every level and in every area of social life. And there is thus an urgent and ongoing need to continue our righteous and relentless struggle to end these conditions and build the

good society and world we all want and deserve to live in.

Clearly, in such a context, it is important for us to reach deeply into the ancient and modern best thoughts and practices of our culture as African peoples to maintain our commitment to the priority of securing African and human good and the well-being of the world in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways. And it is within this context that the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies held its 45th Annual Summer Seminar in Kawaida Social Theory and Practice. This year our gathering took the form of a virtual Kawaida Master Class in Maatian Ethics titled "Maatian Ethics and Current Critical Issues: Repairing, Renewing and Remaking Ourselves and the World, 6263 | July 9, 16, 23, 30 | 2023, sponsored jointly with the African American Cultural Center (Us).

As always, Kawaida philosophy, an African-centered philosophy of life, work and struggle provided the foundation and framework for our lectures and discussions. *Kawaida* defines itself as an ongoing synthesis of the best of African sensibilities, thought and practice in constant exchange with the world. It roots itself in ancient and modern texts—written, oral and living practice texts. And it extracts from and builds on the sacred wisdom, instructive insights, deep thinking and shared experiences of our people and culture, ancient and modern. Maatian ethics of ancient Egypt, retrieved and reconstructed by this author, is one of these bodies of sacred wisdom from which Kawaida draws and on which it builds and expands its understanding of and engagement with life and the world.

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The essential thrust and purpose of this Kawaida Master Class in Maatian Ethics was thus, to delineate and critically examine *Ma'at*, a moral ideal of rightness in and of the world, using key Maatian ethical texts as the fundamental foci for analysis, and in the process explore the usefulness of Kawaida Maatian ethical thought as a resource for modern moral discourse and philosophical reflection on critical moral issues of our times. A fundamental understanding that grounded the class and my research on and retrieval and reconstruction of Maatian ethics is one of the greatest contributions by Kemet and Africa to human thought and practice.

Our discussions began with appreciation for the fundamental understanding indispensable to any meaningful conception and achievement of a good person, good society and good world, profound respect for the human person, their dignity and rights, and their need for community to develop, flourish and come into the fullness of themselves. This understanding is derived from the *Husia*, the sacred text of ancient Egypt (*Kemet*), which teaches and taught first that humans are bearers of dignity and divinity and worthy of the highest respect and must also stand morally worthy before the Divine, nature and others to honor this divine endowed status through their doing and promoting *Ma'at*, goodness and rightness in the world.

Moreover, we discussed Kemet's early human rights discourse found in the creation narrative of the Four Good Deeds of Ra in the *Husia*. The sacred narrative speaks of the Creator Ra's four divine endowments to human beings at the dawn of creation, conditions and capacities of life which carried with them implicit human rights. These are: the breath of life and the right to

life; the necessities of life and the right to the necessities of life; equality and the right to equal treatment, free will and the right to self-determination; and moral and spiritual consciousness and the right to the freedom of conscience, worship and opinion. We also discussed and gave careful thought to the Maatian ethical emphasis on virtue, i.e., moral, intellectual and social excellence, and learning and practicing to be a good person and to build the good society and good world and to expand our sense of self and our humanity. Indeed, as we say in Kawaida, African means excellence and we must always strive, as the sacred text says, for excellence in all we do.

Ma'at expresses itself in a classic statement of Kemetic morality which affirms that we measure the moral quality of any society by how it relates to and treats its most vulnerable. Thus, persons constantly affirm in their autobiographical writings that they wished it to be said of them that "I came from my town. I descended from my district. I did good there. I spoke truth and did justice there. I gave food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, water to the thirsty and a boat to those without one." What is called for in all of this is a virtue ethics of mind, heart and practice, i.e., one of thinking good, feeling good and doing good for ourselves, others and the world. In fact, the sacred teaching is that the good we do for others, we're also doing for ourselves. For we are building the good community and world we all want and deserve to live in.

In the Maatian ethical tradition, a person is cultivated and cultivates themselves to do good by instruction in and practice of the Seven Cardinal Virtues of *Ma'at* which I conceptualized and ordered as: truth, justice,

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propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and righteous order. I defined these as cardinal in that all of these categories can be and are translated in the sacred texts as *Ma'at*. Thus, to speak truth, do justice, act properly, live in harmony, be balanced, practice reciprocity, and recognize and respect the divine, social and natural order and practice righteous orderedness in one's life, society and the world are all *Ma'at* and essential to our humanity.

FINALLY, WE SHARED THAT THE *HUSIA* teaches us that we are to seek and speak truth and do and demand justice. We are

to practice propriety, doing what is appropriate and rightfully responsive and responsible. We are to practice and promote harmony, a principled and purposeful togetherness in love, life, work and struggle. We are to be balanced in our sensibilities, thought and practice, avoiding extremes but not fence straddling in things that matter. We are to practice reciprocity, returning the good given to the living and the departed. And we are to practice and pursue a disciplined struggle for a righteous order in our lives, society and the world. ▲

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