



TEACHINGS OF WISDOM

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Almost every encyclopedia, dictionary, and philosophy textbook includes, among others, the following definitions of wisdom: knowledge or the result of accumulated philosophic or scientific learning; insight or the ability to apprehend intrinsic qualities and relational dimensions; judgment or the art of making good decisions and the body of knowledge and principles that develop within a specified society or period. Wisdom is also referred to as the teachings of the ancient wise men¹.

We can find teachings of wisdom in every cultural-religious tradition, general and particular sets of instructions, cast in expressions of the highest moral standards, which are called virtues, intended to promote righteous character and behavior for good practices and an ethical happy life.

Philosophy textbooks approach discussions on wisdom from the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, which is considered the philosophical model by default or from the Judeo-Christian religious perspective. Otherwise, it will be necessary to look for particular studies focusing on a specific tradition, religion, or philosophy.

The oldest teachings of wisdom can be found in ancient Egyptian literature, starting with the *Pyramid Texts*, which contain foundational sources for the moral and social development of humankind: the concept and practice of Maat (Karenga, 2006, pp. 41-42).

Although Greeks and Romans owe their scientific and philosophical development to the impressive body of knowledge produced by ancient Egyptians with whom their most notable scholars studied for decades (George James, 1954; Martin Bernal, 1987; Yosef Ben-Jochannan, 1991) consideration to ancient Egyptian teachings is barely visible in

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¹ The most ancient wise men – the *seba* - can be found in Kemet as early as the Old Kingdom period.

Western epistemology. Egypt is mostly perceived through the Western gaze over the exoticism of Oriental mysteries, the result of a European imperial perspective that denies Egypt its place in the African continent, and Nile Valley Civilizations the African matrix of human development, philosophical thought systems, and consequent worldview.

I intend to discuss wisdom from the vantage point of the anteriority of Maat as a moral concept and practice. Maulana Karenga, one of the authoritative scholars of Maatic studies, describes Maat as principle and force "*an interrelated order of rightness* [that] in the course of its development in Kemetic intellectual history evolves from the conception of Maat as a constitutive part of creation itself (...) to the personification of order, rightness, truth, [and] justice" (2006, pp. 7-8). It finds expression in the embodiment of the godly virtues of the pharaoh who, ruling by divine appointment, legitimates the king's right to rule and the creation of the state through his moral practice rooted in ethical ideals.

"Ra installed King N
upon the earth of the living
forever and for eternity,
judging people and satisfying the divinities,
realizing Maat and destroying evil."

(Assmann, 1989, p. 58 in Karenga, p. 43).

The pharaoh is a "doer of Maat", the one who brings and offers Maat; the one who appears and acts like Ra; the one who has the fundamental human responsibility to replace Isfet (evil, chaos) with Maat (order, harmony, good) in order to be "deemed the righteous in heaven and on earth" (PT 1118, Karenga, p. 42).²

The *Declarations of Virtues* together with the *Declarations of Innocence* in the *Book of Coming Forth By Day* illustrate the development of the ethical and moral political and social structure of Kemet. There is plenty evidence of the highly ethical grounds demanded of incumbent public servants, both kings, prime ministers and other state officials, anchored in ancient Egypt religious and ontological ideal of the human responsibility towards divine perfection and eternity.

² PT abbreviation for *Pyramid Texts*.

The poly-semantic concept of Maat grew to embody a religious, ethical, political, and social paradigm. In its complexity, it generated the first philosophical and ideological utterances in human civilization and the creation of a structured philosophical discourse on wisdom in order to produce a happy and righteous life.

The congratulatory texts that first appear in the tombs of the 3rd Dynasty can hardly be considered autobiographical accounts. Drawing on the works of Lichtheim (1989) and Spiegel (1935), Karenga agrees that they represented an ideal portrait of a righteous person blended with some real virtues of the deceased written as an epitaph designed to confer a pathway into afterlife and eternity (Karenga, 2006, p. 44).

Through the studying and interpretation of the *Declarations of Virtues* and *Declarations of Innocence*, Karenga and others have established a crescendo or development in the ramifications of the concept of Maat that started with showing an intrinsic relationship between the king's ethical conduct and practice in his state functions as an extension of the divine. From a list of good deeds of the righteous person in order to achieve eternity to a set of examples of righteous governance to sustain a moral society, Maat as an ethical principle of human responsibility became as much the ideal character of kingship and the function of governance as well as of society. Therefore, the *Declarations* were not only the repository of good deeds neither were they exclusive of the king. They reflected the affairs of the state and service to society conducted according to Maat. Prime ministers, such as Imhotep and other officials like judges and governors, were doers of Maat at the service of the king according to his wishes and in the name of the king: to "do Maat, to do justice as he is commanded, and create a moral community in which both Maat and the people flourish" (Karenga, 2006, p. 45).

Clearly established during the Old Kingdom, the virtues of a righteous person are those of being and doing good, through Maat. This is the human responsibility to the Creator as much as towards an ideal ethical and professional praxis anchored in Kemetic ontological sense of creation. Spirituality and morality are therefore the intertwined foundations of what Dungen (2016) considers the emergence of a structured discourse on wisdom illustrated in the 37 utterances attributed to Ptahhotep (VIth Dynasty).

According to Karenga, in Pepi-ankh-her-ib's autobiography of the 4th Dynasty we can already see a structured organization of four fundamental areas for a human being to be honored and worthy of achieving eternity: the spiritual (before god); the professional/service (for the king); the social (for the people); family obligations (in the

family circle). These are special filial obligation including respect and veneration for the ancestors to which public recognition and social memory are also linked (Karenga, 2006, p. 46).

It must also be noted that autobiographical narratives of the Old Kingdom, as they can be found in the *Declarations*, began to appear even before the word Maat itself was used and extended throughout the 6th Dynasty to the Middle and Late Kingdoms when the use of the word was no longer necessary. Cases in point are the autobiographies of Prime Minister Kagemni and that of governor Hackhuf (Karenga, pp. 50-52).

The explanation, in which several scholars, like Lichtheim, Assmann, Teeter and Karenga, concur, lies in the fact that the moral underlying principle of Maat had already been fully established as an ethical principle of moral conduct and character, of service to the society and the nation (Karenga, p. 52).

In the VIth Dynasty, the tradition of the *Sebait* (Instructions), namely with the *Sebait of Ptahhotep* (ca. 2200 BCE), was already recognized as the recorded set of teachings for an ideal ethical functioning of society where the concept of Maat had grown in scope and complexity, anchored in and translating the ontological and cosmological dimensions, metaphysical and material, of the ancient Egyptians.

Dungen (2016) and Lichtheim (1975) consider *Sebait of Ptahhotep*, that Dungen translates as *The Maxims of Good Discourse or the Wisdom of Ptahhotep* including his 37 sayings or utterances, to be eventually the most ancient writings on wisdom, because they show a "deliberate cognitive design"³.

The inscriptions on the walls of Ptahhotep's tomb show that he describes himself as a priest of Maat and his maxims or utterances seek to transmit "*that which endures in the realm of the heart, the abode of consciousness, free will, conscience, thought and speech*" (Dungen, 2016)⁴.

Lichtheim (1975, vol 1, p. 62), defines *The Sebait of Ptahhotep* as a "moral" text, which does not "amount to a comprehensive moral code", whose precepts are not "strung together in any local order"⁵. An atomized disciplinary perspective and reductive analysis

³ Consulted as an e-book, Dungen's work does not provide page numbers in the online version <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/ptahhotep.htm>. Italics in the original.

⁴ *Idem*, ib.

⁵ Cited by Dungen (2016).

of Western scholarship still frames limited interpretations or the lack of understanding of the complex philosophical dimension of the Sebait (production of sages – *seba*).

Although both authors endorse the idea that this remarkable text embodies the typical didactical literature as maxims of good discourse grounded in the verbal philosophy and theology of Memphis; that this new category of texts, no longer autobiographical but the product of a community of sages and scribes denotes a line of reasoning, a narrative structure and a set of good examples of Maat, they dare not go beyond the notion that they merely represent a *moral philosophy*⁶ (Dungen, 2006, Lichtheim 1997).

The *Sebait* (wise instructions) seek to provide orientations to righteous conduct, rectitude of mind and compassionate and balanced judgment to generate and sustain universal order and harmony in the spiritual, political, social, and personal domains through thought, speech, and action.

These wise instructions radiate from a rationale core of ontological, cosmological considerations with deep anthropological value in the Kemetic conception of the human person. Together, they make the corpus of Kemetic philosophy, not as mere discursive topics but as the expression of an ideal way of living everyday life in an ethical society rooted in Maat. The utterances are examples of how to run a just and righteous society and of attributes to achieve a happy life sustained by the correlated principle of truth. To live in truth is to live in Maat: the philosophical principle that, according to Bilolo⁷, is the place of articulation of the ideal of knowledge, love for and aspiration of science; the moral ideal of truth, justice, and righteousness; and the metaphysical ideal of knowing thy-self and the Being.

From both an ontological and anthropological perspective we must consider the place of utterances or wise instructions "in the over-all order of things" (Strombach, 1986) in a metaphysical sense: not only at the material-physical level but also at the spiritual-cosmological level.

As an extension of the divine, humans are endowed with the responsibility to constantly seek to recreate the balance and harmony of creation, drive chaos away (Isfet) and restore order (Maat).

⁶ Italics in this paragraph are mine.

⁷ In Karenga, 2006, p. 6.

In the realm of ancient Egyptian moral metaphysics and ontological foundations that undergird and inform Kemetic ethical thought and practice, the nature of Being and the conception of Being are underlying formulations in terms of worldview that shapes all human affairs and relations to the natural and the metaphysical order.

From the potentiality of Being into the realization of Being, in the path from transcendence to existence, the Creator is the model that humans emulate.

Ancient Egyptian cosmology and cosmogony are translated in the narratives and motifs of creation and the underlying ontological perspective and anthropological model stems from this fundamental notion: the Creator created creation by ordering, balance, and harmonize through mind, will, speech, and action.

Karenga (2006, p. 179) says:

Creation is not construction out of nothingness but differentiating and ordering that which exists and making it active.

Creation is the materialization of a cosmos pregnant of possibilities. Human beings are the personification of the divine order, agents of the perpetual sustainability of creation by constantly healing and repairing the world (*serudj ta*). As such, ancient Egyptian narratives of origin represent the process of creation as the movement from darkness to light, from fluidity into concreteness, from the potentiality into actuality. Water or Nun and the ocean are used as metaphors of endless possibilities and the circle, representing the universe, the expression of the seeds of existence contained in it, of wholeness and perfection.

The creative thought – *Sia* - and the authoritative utterance – *Hu* - of the Creator created existence through Maat, the very embodiment of balance and order.

Foundational concepts such as the primordial waters, the creative thought (*Sia*), the authoritative utterance (*Hu*), and wholeness or the unity of all that exists permeate many traditional African societies. Among the Dogon, the egg represents the universe, and everything within it: the air, the water, the fire, and the earth but also life, biology, energy, and power of becoming, all in perfect order.

Among the Bantu peoples, the authoritative utterance and wholeness are expressed by the power of the spoken word or Nommo, and unity is self-evident through the linguistic radical NTU which translates their holistic concept of the world as it is

incorporated in every morphological category: Muntu (human beings); Kintu (animals/objects); Hantu (place and time); and Kuntu (modality/abstract concepts). All that exists must necessarily belong to one of these categories and must be conceived not as substance but as force – energy. Universal force or energy – the point from which creation flows - conceptualized in the unifying principle of NTU.

Also for the Dinka, the same anthropological dimension is carried by the concept of cieng, which translates the human ability and responsibility to embrace harmony as a social practice, to be in harmony with nature and the Creator (Karenga, 2006, p. 215).

The deep spiritual and religious nature of the cosmological conceptualizations of ancient Egyptians is inseparable from the ontological and anthropological dimensions and, as such, ingrained in their ethical and moral values towards creation, all that exists, human beings, society, the environment, the world, and the universe. The divine image of the humans, their societal nature, ability to learn, reason, and pursue perfection, although considered divine attributes, are not in themselves expression of divine condition (see several authors in Karenga, 2006, pp. 217-218).

Being given divine legitimacy to rule over other humans in their human interactions with each other and nature, as an intermediate power between human's ideal of perfection and immortality, should not be considered as bestowed divinity on the king except on a metaphorical sense. Thutmose III is called "the image of Ra on earth" (Karenga, 2006, p. 218) and kings and queens material and physical dimension, even if they are considered sons and daughters of god, is never in question. Actually, philosophical logical analysis of the Wise Instructions also depicts a transformative potential in bringing about human activity, and Assmann defines the pharaoh's role as "the organizer of the land"⁸.

Kemetic metaphysical explanations bear a strong emphasis on humanhood in the practical and functional dynamics after creation. It is the sense that, after creating creation – *fait accompli* – the Creator retreated to his pure divine essence leaving humanity in charge of looking after creation.

The metaphysical idea of divinity presides as an ideal of perfection in the contingency of human error and imperfection. Therefore, at the image of the creator, it is

⁸ Assmann, http://www.osirisnet.net/dieux/maat/e_maat.htm, retrieved November 15, 2016.

the king's - and by extension every human being's - responsibility to cater for the well-being of humanity, restore balance and order, prevent or correct chaos: do Maat.

According to Karenga (2006), the divine affiliation was a constant in Kemetic literature from the *Pyramid Texts* to the Late Period. However, it was only with Piankhi (ca. 730-830 BCE) that the notion of the pharaoh's divinity emerged under the description of his birth owing to the spiritual impregnation of the sovereign's mother, a concept to be later foundational in Christian theology.

According to Asante and Abarry (1996), on the other hand, the Heliopolis narrative and the Memphite *Declaration of Deities*, texts which are supposed to date 2500 years before king Shabaka of the Twenty-Fifth dynasty (around 710 BCE) had them recopied, provide historical evidence of the value and power of the spoken word in Ptah's narrative of the origins of the world:

All things are brought into existence through the spoken word;
nothing that exists is without the word being spoken. Ptah, as the god
of the Declarations, emerges as the protector, creator, and sustainer
not just of Memphis but of all living things. (Asante and Abarry, 1996, p.
12)

There is an African holistic conceptualization of creation, the universe, and all that exists, ontologically, cosmologically, and philosophically that defies the analytical and dichotomized Western worldview.

Studies on major African groups including but not limited to the Dogon, Bantu, Akan, Ga, Dinka, Yoruba, and Igbo⁹ also demonstrate that the quest for the divine perfection in a holistic integrated system of existence is the most comprehensive foundation of the African cosmology, a spiritual, philosophical, and epistemological heritage of Nile Valley civilizations.

As far as both Eastern and especially Western civilizations are concerned, the influence of Kemetic cognitive, philosophical, spiritual, theological, and religious values are still very much undermined. Its impact on the Mediterranean world is now clear and,

⁹ Several examples and texts can be found in Asante and Abarry (1996). *African Intellectual Heritage*.

although its complex influence and heritage has been studied by numerous scholars¹⁰, it has barely entered western epistemology.

In fact, the overall concept of philosophy prevalent in the Western academy is the one allegedly born in ancient Greece as the highest form of intellectual exercise of the logico-reasoning mind in making sense of the universe and human beings in it, through an analytical and dichotomized perspective.

African philosophy, whose tradition goes further back in time to Old Kingdom and Kemetic Wisdom Literature¹¹, is depreciated under the ominous designation of Ethnophilosophy, and the complexity of the ancient Egyptian holistic cosmological, spiritual, philosophical, and cognitive logic of complementarity is considered as an underdeveloped project of the pre-logical mind.

Martin Bernal's extensive work, *Black Athena* (1987) demonstrates that Greek philosophy was Kemetic's offspring and George James has unequivocally proven in *Stolen Legacy* (1954) the absolute anteriority of ancient the Egyptian Mystery System. The fundamentals of this complex system had as its most important object the achievement of the greatest good, or the practice of Maat.

The greatest good was the achievement of transcendence, the deification of man and the liberation of the soul through wisdom. The enlightenment of the mind as the person devoted himself to the mastery of the Arts and the Sciences up to the stage of true spiritual consciousness was the path to immortality. This represented forty plus years of integral and complex education of an initiate into the Egyptian Mysteries exemplifying the highest love of knowledge, pursuit of knowledge, systematic and comprehensive treatment of all subjects, the study of morality, existence, and the universe. This is philosophical praxis.

The consistency of integrated production of knowledge in Kemet also contrasts with the Greek tradition of public debate on different and individualized topics. Dungen (2016) contends that:

Greek philosophy emerged as a culture of rational debate at the heart of the "polis", the city-state. The conflicts between systems of

¹⁰ A short list must at least include: Asante, M.; Assmann, J.; Ben-Jochannan, Y.; Bernal, M.; James, G.; Dungen, W.; Karenga, M.; Lichtheim, M.; Teeter, E

¹¹ In fact, Kemetic Wisdom Literature itself is a misnomer that denotes the prevalent idea among Egyptologists that these are not philosophical texts.

thought were much like political differences: they needed to be solved in public through argument & dialogue, and logic and/or rhetoric were the means to realize this.

This absence of debate and lively discussions [in ancient Egyptian tradition] does not imply the absence of philosophy, i.e. the quest for a *comprehensive understanding* (within the limitations of the given modes of cognition) of the universe and the situation of humanity, as shown by the Maxims of Good Discourse.¹²

This Greek exercise became a discipline in Western scholarship, more important as a thing in itself (Kant's "das Ding an sich") than the pursuit of wisdom, the knowledge and the expression of collective representations of society, systems of thought, and cosmological perspectives.

The highly symbolic and holistic African cosmo vision is hardly a matter of consideration by the linear deconstructive mind of the Western thinker and African philosophy is not to be apprehended through Western hermeneutical value systems.

Kwame Gyekye (1995, p. 211) offers this insightful argument that "a philosophical discourse that critically interacts or communes with African cultural and intellectual experiences, with African mentalities and traditions, will be African".

While he recognizes that African philosophical systems will not be unique, all intellectual activity, reflective of analytical attention to the meaning of Being, of the nature of physical and metaphysical phenomena; causation, ethical human character, society, and destiny comprehended and analyzed by African thinkers on the basis of African cultural and intellectual experience, is African philosophy.

As Africologists we have to question the usurpation of knowledge production by the logic and rationality of the Western paradigm as the philosophical discourse par excellence.

It is fundamental to recover Maat pedagogy, a moral ideal for human perfection, that creates moral wisdom and enables human beings to come together for the purpose of always improve the human condition.

¹² Italics in the original.

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