

Maat and Human Communication: Supporting Identity, Culture, and History Without Global Domination

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ancient Egyptian ideal of Maat, or the moral order, and its implications for human communication. It is argued that the communicator must always be in search of harmony, balance, order, justice, truth, righteousness, and reciprocity. Maat opens up possibilities that go beyond tolerance for the Other towards profound respect.

Keywords: African ethical ideal, ancient Egypt, Maat, global domination, human communication, intercultural communication, the Other

Introduction

In ancient Kemet, the land called Egypt, the people believed that when the universe came into being, the only force that was coexistent with the power of the Big Bang was Maat. This is the classical African idea of the enduring nature of Maat. The characteristics of this concept have been described by numerous scholars, the most important among them, is Maulana Karenga, whose book, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, has become the classic text on ancient African ethical ideas. However, my intention in this paper is to demonstrate how this fundamental African relational idea functions to create human society that is non-dominative and non-combative. In defining *Maat*, Lichtheim (1992), Bleeker (1966), and Karenga (2004) have discussed the polysemic nature of Maat, its elasticity as a concept, and the broad shoulders of the idea as a category for explanation.

I shall limit my discourse to a more defined area of Maat as the energizer of communication, identity, culture, and history without global domination. What I will do is to define Maat, explore its dimensions, and suggest how it operates or could operate in the arena of intercultural communication. African history is rich with philosophical concepts in search for Maat (Asante, 2007) often called by different names or taught by sage philosophers in villages.

An Approach to the Idea

The philosopher Maulana Karenga contends that Maat is derived from a physical concept of straightness, evenness, and levelness (Karenga, 2004, p. 6). This means that the idea of rightness or correctness was at the heart of the idea of Maat from the very beginning. Humans could understand that when water in a glass was level or a line was straight or the ears of a deer were even that a certain form of order existed. Thus, Maat became identified with truth, righteousness, justice, order, balance, harmony and reciprocity. In some respects it held sway

over all forms of rightness, including goodness and joy, that is, as the Africans called it, the expansion of the heart. Maat is a term with numerous meanings in the literature, but all of these meanings tend to point in one direction. Whether one is looking at Mubabinge Bilolo's (1986, p. 7) philosophical notion of Maat as a knowledge ideal, a justice ideal, or a metaphysical ideal, or looking at Helck's concept of Maat as the foundation of human life (1980, p. 1110ff) it is about the promotion of sanity, order, balance, harmony, peace, and justice among human beings.

Departures in Other Cultures

It is this definitional idea that allows us to see the point of departure for a discourse on Maatian communication. As Karenga observes this discourse on relations and interactions might be viewed in the same sense as "the central idea of *iwa* (character), *adl* (justice) in Islam, *jen* in Confucianism, *nirvana* in Buddhism, *dharma* in Hinduism, *tzedek* in Judaism, *agape* in Christianity" (p. 4). I could see some differences in these ideas, but I think Karenga is taking a more profound direction in seeking to connect many human traditions. The point being made here is that an exploration and a delineation of the ancient African idea of Maat would reveal elements of philosophical discourse similar to these familiar examples found in other parts of the world. Clearly these are not the only examples of strong philosophical concepts that govern human relations and communication. They merely serve to indicate the possibility that others have similar constructions.

Interrogating Domination

I am following the line of thinking in Karenga's argument because I believe it is a valid method of interrogation of intercultural communication. That is, I am interested in the origin and limits of classical models for contemporary intercultural communication realities and I am quite eager to explode the paradigm that imposes unnatural domination, whether it is male over female, race over another race, culture over another culture. Of course, for me, this is not the same as a teacher who teaches us how to drive or a professor who imparts her many years of study to us, but rather we are interested in breaking down the barriers that impose unnatural, that is, artificial and sometimes arbitrary barriers on human communication.

A Novel Idea

Of course I realize how strange this line of thinking may be since I am willing to question the fundamental basis upon which our ideas of intercultural and international communication have been based for more than thirty years. Most communicationists accept the idea that humans share sameness. One of the operational ideas in intercultural communication is that we must treat others as if they are the same as we are. However, much like the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, I think that we could sensibly abandon the notion of sameness that underlies our pretensions to universality. In the United States African people often meet whites who are still wrestling with their discomfort in the presence of blacks, who exclaim after a conversation,

meeting, or working encounter, “I do not think of you as black!” This statement is meant to express an achievement, one that often escapes the black person, who is likely to reply, “But I am black.” The fact that the white person seeks to establish sameness is only laudable in a culture of superiority where the person making the statement is really saying, “You appear to have the same cultural styles, behaviors, values, and clothes, as I have.” In other words, the communication is never one of respect for difference, for otherness, but more expressly a search for sameness as the basis for a universalized idea of communication. It is this that I reject in favor of an appreciation for cultural differences and a deep respect for otherness. Perhaps this is the space that Maat works best, in the communicative trenches where we meet each other as novelties to be appreciated, respected, and viewed as uniquely human without having to become the same.

Norm and Style

Quite frankly, Cua’s (1978) construction of a moral ideal in two forms, as a *norm* and then as a *style* of life, constitutes one way to engage the work of Karenga on the question of Maat. Since Karenga is a humanist, committed to the discovery of the best values in the African context, he is not alone in his quest. One finds Chinese, Indian, and Japanese scholars in a similar quest, always, however, within the context of culture. I see Europeans and Africans of whatever nation and region seeking the same deep values. Thus, Karenga rejects Maat as a normative way of seeing morality, arguing instead that it is more like a theme in Cua’s construction, a style of life, a point of orientation, consequently, that which inspires a people to achieve communication despite otherness. Thus it could be seen as *ubuntu* among the Zulu or *cieng* among the Dinka or *tao* (dao) among the followers of Taoism (Karenga, p. 4). Karenga has rightly positioned Maat among the thematic ideals of other ways of life. It is not different in its purpose from those ethical ways of thinking that have captivated the great teachers of the past. Did the Christian Jesus leave a detailed definition of “love thy neighbor,” or did Confucius state in detail what is meant by *jen* (*ren*)? Some have said that the main concepts of Confucianism are *jen* and *li*. *Jen* (*ren*) is equivalent to human heartedness, goodness, benevolence and that which gives us humanity. As the virtue of virtues Confucius says that he never saw it fully expressed. Without defining it, Confucius characterizes it as dearer than life itself because a person will sacrifice life to defend it and it is what makes life worth living. This feeling is applied to all humans, not just one’s own race or culture. It is the foundation of all culture and all human relationships. Then there is *li* which is best explained as propriety, rules of human behavior and proper action and the principle of social order. Clearly when one considers these characteristics of *jen* and *li*, one can see how the Chinese culture was similar to that of ancient Africa. One could raise the same questions about *Maat*, but Karenga has an answer for the questioner. He says that the Egyptians “left no extensive definition of Maat, only statements of its centrality in the conception of and practice of the good in that which is divine, social and natural” (Karenga, p. 5). This is the same idea of characterization. We can tell you what it does, how it acts, and what it provides for society and human relationships, but an exact, precise definition is difficult to discover. Maat is, as Wande Abimbola says, not so much about things to do or not to do but “a framework of possibility” (Abimbola, 1997).

Framework of Possibility

Every communication engagement with another human brings an infinite array of possibilities. When you meet a friend after a long period of absence, after the initial excitement there is the possibility that the conversation will turn to an explanation of some tragedy, some glorious achievement, some disappointments or some happiness. It does not matter whether the person is a friend, enemy, or a stranger, *the framework of possibility* exists and the function of Maat in such a situation is to search for the proper level of rightness. It is rude not to engage in the search with the other communicator. This is when we speak of rudeness, roughness, or someone who is outside of the boundaries of good behavior. Actually respect carries within it one other possibility, indeed, a necessity for what we are fond of calling effective communication, and that is the ability to *get out of each other's way*. We are eager as communicationists to talk about *rules of engagement*, but we must also be equally concerned about *rules of discretion*.

At the base of Maat is propriety and good behavior. One cannot be a good communicator unless one is a good person. In fact, in the African sense a person is a human being, and one of the defining characteristics of a human being is to be good. When you are not good then you can be called something other than a human being. In one African language, Twi, there is the expression *Oni onipa* which means she is a person. The expression *Oni onipa paa* means that she is a good person.

Implications of Maat

But what are the implications of Maat for rhetoric, for communication, for human relationships? The aim in communication is always to overcome *isfet*, that which is evil, difficult, disharmonious, and troublesome. What we observe with the practice of Maat is the inevitability of good overcoming evil, of harmony replacing disharmony, and order taking the place of disorder. This was an optimistic view of reality where one believed that justice would always rise to the top and that truth would outlast untruth.

In the ancient African text, *Dialog of a Man with His Soul* the question of living in a society with *isfet* is raised in this fashion:

To whom shall I speak today?
 Brothers are evil
 The friends of today no longer love.

To whom shall I speak today?
 Hearts are greedy
 Everyone seizes the goods of his fellow humans.

To whom shall I speak today?
 Compassion has perished,
 Violence assaults everyone.

To whom shall I speak today?
Men plunder
Everyone robs his fellow.

To whom shall I speak today?
The criminal is one's intimate friend
The brother with whom one dealt has become an enemy.

To whom shall I speak today?
The past is not remembered.
Now one does not help him who once helped.

To whom shall I speak today?
One lacks an intimate friend.
One turns to an unknown to complain.

To whom shall I speak today?
I am burdened with grief
For lack of an intimate friend.

To whom shall I speak today
Wrong roams the earth,
And there is no end to it. (103-130).

Karenga claims that with no *original sin*, that is, in the Western sense, *first sin*, no sense of human stain, as in the Judeo-Christian philosophy, the African sees no need for transformation because one must simply uncover one's inner strength based on the divine nature that is a part of every human (Karenga, p. 235). He claims that we are born in a "context of possibilities" which is akin to the idea of a *framework of possibilities*, but with a thicker, richer character involving not simply the scaffolding of the possible but the philosophical grounding of it as well. Now what can we do with this in the arena of communication? In intercultural communication, then, it is possible to learn how to correct one's practice. But this learning is not a strategy for winning or winning over but rather a function of communicative solidarity. The ancient philosophers and kings of the Nile Valley would remark, "I have offered to Ra the Maat which he loves," "It is my bread and drink," "I am of the same cloth as Maat," "Maat and I are one," and so forth.

The Common Good

I think that I should interject here that teaching and communication in ancient Africa were for the common good. If the world were to be kept aligned, it would need the community working for Maat. Since Maat was fundamental to good human relationships, the main role of the king was to put Maat in place so that it could hold back *isfet*, disorder. As a way of embracing all human life, Maat was reciprocity, justice, moderation, and the search for perfection. The

king had to live according to Maat. In fact, the prescription was “to speak Maat, to do Maat, and to be Maat.” Without this constant quest for holding back chaos, the ancient people believed that the world would be overcome by the forces of evil. Thus in one *Sebayet*, the Wisdom, by Ptahhotep, a philosopher who lived around 2900 BC, it is written (Ptahhotep, 520-532, cited in Karenga, 2004, p. 237).

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If good deeds are done by one who leads
 He will be well established forever.
 And all his wisdom will endure for eternity.
 The wise nourishes his Ba [soul] with that which endures
 So that it is well with him on earth.
 The wise is known by his wisdom,
 A noble person by his good deeds.
 His heart is in harmony with his tongue.
 His lips are accurate when he speaks.
 He sees rightly through his eyes.
 His ears are pleased to hear what is useful for his children.
 He does Maat and is free from falsehood.

The implications for the communicator are numerous. In the first place the communicator must be ethical. There is a tendency in our era to believe that communication is merely bluff. In other words, people seek to say things that they do not believe, but would want others to believe in order to sell a product, promote a cause, or gain an advantage. In the African context this is a violation of Maat and would be a danger to the society. In fact, only the foolish person seeks to avoid Maat, to evade the moral values of harmony and order. In one passage in Ptahhotep (575-586, cited in Karenga, 2004, p. 238) it is written:

Now the fool who does not listen
 He can do nothing at all
 He sees knowledge in ignorance,
 And that which is beneficial as that which is harmful.
 He does everything which is hateful
 So that people blame him every day.
 He lives on that by which one dies.
 His food is the distortion of speech.
 His character is this respect is known to the officials
 As a living death each day.
 People overlook his deeds because of his many problems.

But ethics is always challenged by fear. It is the one element that uncorks the worst type of communication in humans because it unsettles us in our own bio-sphere. How do we unplug ourselves from the machine of fear that is often systemic in our societies? Is Maat one way to address this problem? Zizek (2008) has argued that contemporary politics resorts to fear as “its

ultimate mobilizing principle,” thus stifling all genuine forms of communication. We have seen it in my own country where one of our states, Arizona, resorted to this principle to mobilize one group of people against another, less powerful group of people, with a law that required the police to question people who were stopped for some reason about their legal status. In Arizona it results in mainly whites stopping mainly Mexicans. Almost any Mexican or any person, Chinese, Indian, Native American, or light complexioned black might be stopped in Arizona as a matter of profiling by race or color. In other states, for example, Pennsylvania or Ohio, where the immigrant population is mainly European, Russian, Georgian, Irish, it would be more difficult to profile a person as an illegal immigrant because of color. The point here is that profiling Mexicans is based on fear. Could there be a conversation with the profiler and the profiled? What would this conversation entail? Is not the real problem the bio-sphere of the profiler? Those who fear immigrants, crime, godless sex, the state itself, taxation, climate change, and personal injury are pawns in the manipulation of the communication agenda. What gives one human the right to decide if another should eat or not eat? Mazama sought to answer the question, “How do we disentangle ourselves from the dreams of others in order to discover our own centeredness?” (Mazama, 2003).

To be Human

Maat seeks to unravel the entangling fear that we feel in intercultural communication. The unease that communicators often experience when they encounter someone who looks different, who speaks a different language, who practices a different belief, who possesses a different political history is the fear that must be unhinged in order for us to know a radically powerful emancipation in our communication. To be a free human, unencumbered by fears, dislikes that stifle communication, and uneasiness when we confront other humans from different backgrounds is to be authentically on the road to Maat. In this regard, Maat means that the communicator must always be in search of harmony, balance, order, justice, truth, righteousness, and reciprocity.

Our liberal tendencies, those we have often called progressives, have not delivered the freedom we had hoped for when intercultural communication emerged in the late 1970s. The reason for this lack of freedom is that we have used alterity as a theme, identifiable by difference, and it has found other uses in our conversation. For example, the Other has been looked upon as being alright, that is, okay to communicate with if the Other does not intrude on our culture, our space, our time, or our real lives. “You stay over there” and “we will stay over here” because we have no authentic reason to communicate rather than “I am different from you” and “You are different from me”, but we live on the same earth and the collective need to save the earth is our most important task. No, this is not just about trade and commerce, war and peace, but about survival of the earth itself. Let us talk and talk and communicate in such a way that reveals common themes, virtues, and possibilities. We can do this because we respect each other although we are not the same. If we were the same, the world would be boring, uniform, stagnant, and uninteresting. We must marvel in the otherness in order to have genuine communication. Thus, the old, liberal communication tolerance and openness toward the Other is hedged, not fully opened, cautious. I am not saying that we should abandon all caution to the wind, or forget about our own needs, but rather that we should abandon fear of the other

communicator, dispense with all forms of hegemony and distrust simply because the Other is different. Of course, if there are objective reasons for keeping your guards high, for example, you have been harmed or seen others harmed by an individual, then there is logic to your caution. Žizek calls this late capitalist reality of fear, however, “the right not to be harassed” (p. 41). It is to remain at a safe distance from the other.

No person can actually have effective, understanding communication without penetrating the wall of cultural resistance. I must allow you in my space and you must allow me in yours in order for us to be engaged in a truly understanding situation. Pleasure and even bliss, in a Barthesian manner (Barthes, 1975), might come from challenging ourselves to overcome otherness through a profound respect. This means that I am opened to knowing your language, your symbols, your beliefs, the colors that you prefer, the desires you have for your children, and the prospects you have for your own life without trying to make you the same as me. You respect my humanity by wanting for me what you want for yourself. There has to be mutuality or as Maat would have it, a reciprocal manner to our communication.

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