

Maat and Order in African Cosmology

A Conceptual Tool for Understanding Indigenous Knowledge

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Maat is a comprehensive construct that existed throughout ancient Egyptian civilization. Cosmologically, maat is the principle of order that informs the creation of the universe. Religiously, maat is a goddess or *neter* representing order or balance. Last, philosophically, maat is a moral and ethical principle that all Egyptians were expected to embody in their daily actions toward family, community, nation, environment, and god. This work extends maat beyond the boundaries of ancient Egyptian culture and tests its conceptual elasticity by developing it into an analytical tool for studying classical African cosmological knowledge and how it relates to cultural expression. It focuses on the conceptualization of maat as the foundation of the universe and then uses the manner in which maat appears in ancient Egyptian culture as a basis for distinguishing patterns within classical African knowledge. This pattern contains 10 characteristics or dimensions: sacred, symbolic, visual, functional, moral, oral, communal, rhythmic, multidimensional, and holistic.

Keywords: *African; cosmology; epistemology; holistic; indigenous; knowledge; maat*

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of the universe and then uses the manner in which maat appears in ancient Egyptian culture as a basis for distinguishing patterns within classical African knowledge. This pattern contains 10 characteristics or dimensions: sacred, symbolic, visual, functional, moral, oral, communal, rhythmic, multidimensional, and holistic.

Generally speaking, studies of maat can be classified into two categories: those that discuss maat within the context of ancient Egyptian civilization and those that extend the concept of maat beyond ancient Egyptian civilization. The first category contains the majority of the literature and reflects the various textures of maat as it existed in ancient Egyptian civilization. Here, we find discussions of maat as the cosmic or divine order (Frankfort, 1946; Tobin, 1989), as it appears in ancient Egyptian literature (Lichtheim, 1992), as a goddess depicted on monuments (Teeter, 1990), and as an idea of personal morality and social justice (Karenga, 2004). Although the majority of studies in this category discuss maat in a social or religious context, a few have focused specifically on the epistemological aspect of maat.

The literature in the second category contains works that extend maat beyond ancient Egypt. Some lean toward the application of maat as a social and/or moral construct particularly relevant to the study of African culture both in antiquity and modern times (Hotep, 2000; Kunjufu, 1993). Others discuss maat in relation to Greek thought and culture (Faraone & Teeter, 2004; Tobin, 1987). Essentially, the literature agrees that maat represents a fundamental order to the universe that exists on both human and heavenly planes, but the diverse nature and scope of maat fuels much of the discussion.

Like the studies of the second category, this work uses maat to establish a pattern of knowledge in various classical African societies. What are the shapes and dimensions of this pattern? How do these dimensions influence the conceptualization and expression of knowledge in various cultures? Using a maatian approach allows the conceptualization and expression of knowledge to be discussed in a new context. Kwasi Wiredu (2004) hints at this process when he speaks of the conceptual decolonialization of African knowledge, which calls for the reviewing of any such thought in the light of indigenous categories, as a first step, and as a second, evaluating them on independent grounds.

Premise for Maat as an Analytical Instrument

Forming a framework for discussing classical African knowledge using maat has two main premises. First, there appeared to be an intimate and

mutually dependent relationship between cultural production and cosmological beliefs among various cultures on the continent. The similarities are not necessarily aesthetic but ontological. Second, a theoretical framework that fully captured the complexities and indeed significance of the relationship between cultural production and cosmological knowledge was needed. African cultural production is a feast for the senses because of its rich storytelling, textile weaving, carving, constructing, dancing, singing, body adorning, and music-making traditions. But the metaphysical ideas that give meaning and context to the ceremonies, rituals, performances, and daily life created an intellectual pattern discernable through obvious cultural and environmental differences among African ethnic groups. This production is revealed to the Western mind through the focused lens of one discipline, such as art, philosophy, or anthropology, but the genius of classical African knowledge lies in how all elements of cultural production from all segments of life are integrated into an epistemological system. This integration requires an analytical tool equally comprehensive and elastic to discuss it. Using the concept of maat allows this because maat has simultaneous cosmological, social, cultural, and personal domains. The cosmological domain is where maat is “the totality of ordered existence and represents things in harmony and in place” (Karenga, 2004, p. 7). This work will focus on the ordered existence of knowledge as it manifests in classical African culture.

Forming the Pattern

To date, there are no records from ancient Egypt providing a conspicuous definition of maat, only texts that reflect contextual applications of maat. These are found in the *Pyramid* texts (Budge, 1959), *Declarations of Virtues*, *The Book of Khun Anup*, the *Book of Contemplations* (Karenga, 1984), and the autobiographies of the New Kingdom and Late period (Lichtheim, 1992). The previously mentioned texts detail how individuals—peasants, officials, and kings—upheld, practiced, created, and lived maat. From this, it can be said that maat was already in use as an analytical tool throughout Egyptian civilization by the fact that it was operational in everyday life and the determining criteria by which an individual’s life was justified (Karenga, 2004). That maat was actively practiced by all segments of society in no way diminishes its philosophical dimensions. Nor does the contextual shift between ancient Nile Valley and more recent cultural expression in Africa diminish its relevance for application. According to Congolese scholar Theophile Obenga (1995), elements of maat, linguistically, can be found in numerous African cultural groups: *me* (truth, justice,

[Coptic]), *moyo* (life, soul, mind, [Kongo]), *ma* (magic medicine, to know the truth [Ngbaka]), *mya* (to know [Mpongwe]), and *mo* (to know [Yoruba]).

Furthermore, Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop (1974), when arguing for an African origin of civilization, identifies totems, circumcision, kingship, cosmogony, social organization, and matriarchy as key areas that support the idea that ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa are variations of one cultural entity. Diop (1991) has also traced the origin and development of precolonial African civilizations and societies to establish that they are connected by a distinct set of social, linguistic, historical, and political relationships that reach back to antiquity and span the continent. In reference to religious and philosophical ideas, John S. Mbiti (1990) has acknowledged that although there are variations in the beliefs, practices, and customs among people on the continent, there is a distinguishable African ontology among cultural groups. This ontology is primarily a religious one and consists of five elements: god, spirits, man, plants/animals, and phenomena. The acknowledgment and interaction among these elements provides a foundation on which to discuss the beliefs, practices, and rituals of African religions in general terms. Magesa (1997) maintains that it is moral traditions that are modeled after maintaining the order created by god, as being a basis for discussing African religious practices. Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1995) also states that there is “underlying cultural unity or identity of various individual thinkers that justifies references to varieties of thought as wholes, such as Western, European or Oriental” (p. xxxvi). Thus, space has been created for this type of speculative discourse about broader patterns in African culture. However, it must be acknowledged that when applying a concept across space and time, there is the hermeneutical “tension between ‘reading’ into and ‘drawing’ out of” (Karenga, 2004, p. 26). In response, if one consciously maintains that it is a speculative application and, more important, avoids the notion of an ideal, this approach can be intellectually enriching. Maat is not positioned as “an ideal” or “the ideal” for discussing African sacred knowledge. Similarly, it is not a standard, therefore determining which African cultures have a concept similar to maat and which do not is not the thrust of this work. It is a paradigm, a framework with which to consider how this knowledge is reflected in cultural production.

Epistemological Issues

As mentioned previously, a premise of this work addresses the issue of theoretical framework. This means more than an intellectual argument about what defines knowledge but also includes the relationship between

culture and the creation of knowledge, that is, how culture determines what is known, experienced, and understood as knowledge. Gyekye (1996) argues that culture can not be filtered out, leaving us with knowledge that does not bear any cultural footprint. The difficulty lies in trying to identify the cultural footprint of the current knowledge base or modern sciences—natural, human, and social—because they developed during the period of Western ascension and domination of global trade, politics, and culture. Therefore, what is understood and accepted as science bears the imprint of the Western intellectual and cultural experience (Harding, 1997), which Ani (1994) argues contains an episteme of universality but is in reality a culturally specific one. This tension between themes of universality and if or how they manifest in African cultures in particular has been an issue African philosophy as a discipline wrestled with in its infancy (Wright, 1984) and continues today (Gratton, 2003). Dialogues on the perception, sources, and structure of African knowledge in light of Western philosophical ideas gives us three major lines of thinking within African philosophy: traditional African philosophy, contemporary African philosophy, and Africana philosophy (Wiredu, 2004). Each school has its conceptual boundaries, but each provides valid points for our discussion of classical knowledge. Most important are the conceptual decolonialization by Wiredu (2004) previously mentioned and Luscious Outlaw's call for realizing the potential of the geographical and conceptual flexibility afforded Africana philosophy provided there is realization that

many professional philosophers suffer as a consequence of our culturally anemic, race-tainted yet race-denying, logocentric, and Eurocentric training. The near exclusive focus, throughout our training on canonical "Western" figures and text as the paragons of "philosophy" and the near total exclusion of insights from such disciplines as history, anthropology, ethnology, psychology, theology, sociology, demography epidemiology, political science, art, music, and dance leave us all ill-equipped for working out appropriate conceptualizations to guide us in realizing the promise of Africana philosophy. (p. 92)

This is where *maat* can be useful because it allows for the full manifestation of sacred African knowledge to be recognized while providing intellectual flexibility to explore new relationships. It allows the synergy of cosmological, philosophical, artistic, and social ideas, much like how they exist in classical African communities, to be interpreted in a systematic manner. Analyzing knowledge as it relates to the creation, maintenance, and restoration of sacred order reflects an alternative epistemological reality for classical African

thought. Work is being done by scholars in both Africa and the Diaspora that illuminates these relationships in knowledge (Arthur, 2001; Finch, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Livingston, 2004).

Definition of Terms

At this point, it is critical to define several key terms being used in this work. *African* is used in the composite sense (Asante, 1990), not as an extension of ethnicities or endorsement of biological determinism but as cultural identity. *Classical* is preferred to *indigenous* or *traditional* and is used in the sense articulated by Karenga (2004) in that it refers to both the “chronology and achievement” of African knowledge. *Indigenous* connotes a connection to place and ownership; like *traditional*, it is often perceived as being opposed to, less than, or premodern or Western. *Classical* is understood as a historical level of achievement among a particular culture. *Classical African* knowledge is not less than, opposed to, or instead of Western knowledge. *Knowledge* is used in that it permits a broader scope for addressing more types of information than that which would typically be considered using the rigid definitions required for thought to qualify as philosophy (Wright, 1984). *Maat* is defined nicely by Budge (1960) as “goddess of the unalterable laws of heaven” (p. 185). This definition is profound because it encapsulates the epistemological core of this work. *Maat* as goddess means that the idea she represents is sacred in the collective mind of the Egyptians. *Maat* is identified, conceptualized, deified, and worthy of conscious praise and adoration. Thus, it becomes a part of the religious culture of the Egyptians. In addition, *goddess* recalls a time when civilizations were matriarchical in belief and practice (Diop, 1991; Wood, 1996). Last, *goddess* invokes an axiom of Thoth, which states “gender is in everything, everything has its Masculine and Feminine principles” (Chandler, 1999, p. 97). The Yoruba also adhere to this axiom, with each of the 400+1 orisha having a masculine or feminine designation. Next, “unalterable laws” implies both the permanence of *maat* and the obligation of humanity to acknowledge, follow, and uphold these laws. This gives an ontological basis for *maat* as the governing law for Egyptian society that focused on maintaining *maat*. Last, “of heaven” gives a cosmic sense to the concept. Not only do we have the principle being a goddess, unchanging, and a mandate for humanity, *maat* includes everything in the cosmos. Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition where the law is believed to have been given to man by God and applied almost exclusively to human situations, *maat* governs all aspects of creation. In ancient Egypt, the world was created using

maat and man, as a consequence of creation, and exists within this law. If man were not here, maat would still apply.

Maat as an Analytical Instrument

Each manifestation of maat in Egyptian culture creates a specific dimension of African knowledge. These dimensions are distinct yet interrelated, much in the manner that maat appears in Egyptian culture. The first dimension, the sacred or spiritual/religious, is found in *The Book of Knowing the Creations*, in which maat exists before and informs the formation of the cosmos. According to "Ra's Description of His Creation,"

when I came into being, being itself came into being . . . Heaven had not yet come into being. Nor had the earth come into being. Nor had the ground been created or the things which creep and crawl upon it. I raised up beings in the primordial waters as inert things. I found no place on which to stand. I formed it from the desire in my heart; I laid the foundation through Maat. (Karenga, 1984, p. 5)

Maat is the intention or thought of the Supreme, and everything flows from this intention. In speaking of Dogon thought, Griaule and Dieterlen (1986) state that "this thought makes of the universe an orderly whole, where the notion of law is less present than that of a pre-established harmony, incessantly troubled and continuously reordered" (p. 60). The pre-established harmony is maat. The orderly whole in which classical African knowledge operates is contextual and bound to the elements, workings, processes, and cycles of the sacred universe, not to an abstract law. Mbiti (1990) affirms this when he says that Africans have a religious ontology. All reality and phenomena, including knowledge, are understood in the context of this sacred cosmos, though in varying degrees. Another way to view this is that knowledge can have a simultaneous sacred and secular context. It must have relevance, correlation, and meaning in both realms. This echoes the Principle of Correspondence found in the teachings of Thoth, also from ancient Egyptian culture: as above so below, as below so above (Chandler, 1999).

Another example that supports the sacred dimension of knowledge is the deification of maat, which places it into the conscious mind of Egyptians as a focal point of reverence and therefore relevant to their lives. Still another sacred dimension is seen in the language in which maat is written. In Ancient Egypt, *mdw ntr* translates as "the God's words" or "sacred writing"

using a translation from its better known Greek name hieroglyphics. Words or language are sacred in the sense that God created the words or the words belong to God, along with writing itself and what is said with them. Hence, there was an aspect of writing that was maintained by devout priest scribes for nearly 4,000 years (Gardiner, 1994).

Although the Egyptians attributed writing to God, the *neter* Thoth in particular, among the Dogon, knowledge has a more abstract organic vessel, but also attributed to god Amma: "For Amma had designed the universe before creating it. The material for the design was water with which he traced figures in space" (Griaule & Dieterlen, 1986, p. 83). This is represented by an egg divided into four quadrants, each containing eight master signs, each of which produced eight more. The 256 signs are the "complete signs of the world" and represent the direct expression of Amma's thought. Unlike the Egyptians' hieroglyphs, Dogon signs are a series of curved, hook, and sickle-shaped lines that can be drawn on the earth with stones, porridge, seeds, or manure or etched onto a door. Regardless of the physical form, the important factor here is that writing itself is sacred.

The physical form of writing among the Egyptians and Dogon is the imperative for the next two dimensions of classical African knowledge: the symbolic and visual. The symbolic is the fundamental element of knowledge used by ancient Egyptians when representing their understanding of the universe. According to the definition put forth by Schwaller de Lubicz (1978), "when an image, a collection of letters, a word or phrase, a gesture, a single sound, a musical harmony or melody have a significance through evocation we are dealing with a symbol" (p. 45). J. A. West (1993), an avid student of Schwaller de Lubicz, explains symbol further: "It is a means of bypassing the intellect and talking straight to the intelligence of the heart, the understanding" (p. 129). The glyphs that compose the word *maat* are depictions of material items found in Egyptian culture: a pedestal or wedge, a sickle, loaf of bread, feather, forearm, tied roll of papyrus, and three vertical lines. The lines indicate that the concept should be understood three times, or they indicate importance. It is generally held that the glyphs are to be interpreted for their phonetic value. However, Karenga (2004) suggests that the wedge (pedestal) denotes evenness. Maat is presented visually as a silhouette of a seated woman with a feather atop her head, a woman with a feather for a head, or simply a feather. The woman denotes the feminine and goddess characteristics of maat mentioned previously. The feather is a symbol of maat because it evokes the concept of the lightness of heart experienced that is the consequence of practicing maat. Maat is evoked through the symbol of the feather.

According to Griaule and Dieterlen (1986), "the development of Dogon thought, and hence the elaboration of concepts proceeds by analogy and has constant recourse to the symbol" (p. 58). The symbol is also the "conveyor of knowledge. It will have led man to collect materials and actions in his memory but it will have familiarized him with games of abstraction" (p. 59). Again like the Egyptians, the abstractions are found just behind a common everyday item, and it only takes a small amount of the everyday item to evoke the full power of a concept: a simple feather for *maat* and a single grain of sorghum in a plate of rice infuse the qualities of the grain. Among the Akan of Ghana, there is a similar use of the symbolic because they use "the adinkra cloth and its symbols as visual markers to express their world view, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts" (Arthur, 2001, p. 12). In this collection, symbols have a specific name, meaning, and accompanying proverb. The word *adinkra* means to part, or say goodbye, and implies a "message a soul takes along when leaving the earth" (Willis, 1998, p. 29). Interestingly, in ancient Egypt, images and words regarding *maat* appear in the chambers of the deceased, therefore not intended as messages for the living. Closely related to the symbolic is the visual dimension of knowledge. Whereas symbol is the process or mode of production, the visual is the product. Though a written language can be visual and words technically are a type of symbol (Arthur, 2001), this dimension includes the art forms: images, sculptures, structures, shapes, textiles, patterns, prints, movement, and so forth. *Maat* can inform the visual aspect of knowledge in two ways as an aesthetic or subject matter. According to Finch (1998b), existing Egyptian structures reveal a precise intention as to their location, orientation, material composition, and purpose. Furthermore, every single glyph painted or etched onto walls, columns, and ceilings would first be carefully measured, sketched, then filled in or carved. The lines and angles on structures are precise; the hieroglyphs are symmetrical, perfectly spaced, and consistent. In speaking of the approach to architecture, Finch (1998b) explains it this way:

The civilizations and cultures of antiquity never lost their awe of nature, and the idea of "imposing" the will of man upon her was beyond conception. Thus the edifices erected by the superlative Nile Valley architects of antiquity seem not merely to blend with the landscape, but emerge from it. The builders took extraordinary pains not to distort the landscape in any way; the material form of civilization was subsumed by nature. (p. 101)

Furthermore, grand structures such as the pyramid complex at Giza, the Temple at Karnak, and the Temple of Ramses at Abu Simbel, because of

their orientation to specific stars and synchronicity with movements of the sun, bear an aesthetic of *maat*. *Maat* can also be subject matter. The weighing-of-the-heart scene depicted on the papyrus of Ani shows Anubis balancing the heart of Ani on one side of a balancing scale with a feather, symbolic of *maat* on the other. If the deceased lived in accordance with *maat*, his or her heart would be a little lighter than the feather. If not, Amemit, shown as a composite of various animals, sat ready to devour the heart of the deceased.

Other forms of African art can also display this dual approach to visual knowledge when considered in its indigenous context. For example, among the Bamana of Mali, the door locks serve to regulate *nyama*, the vital energy that resides in all creation, which can be manipulated by *soubaya* (sorcery). The locks, through their public display and embellishment with *tiw* graphic signs or pictographs, also reflect “a Bamana intent to use them to teach and remind people about the essential religious and philosophical beliefs and values of *Bamanaya*” (Imperato, 2001, p. 22). The *Sowo* masks of the Sande community among the Mende also serve to reinforce a spiritual message:

Each element assembled to make up *Sowo* has its own references in Mende thought and conduct, and each augments and extends the meaning of the whole. For us to understand all this will require no less than a study of the natural and metaphysical background from which the forms emerge, forms which we shall unveil, part by part, meaning by meaning. (Boone, 1986, p. 153)

Both the door locks and the masks have a specific aesthetic that govern the creation of its physical form. Yet each are a physical materialization of cosmological knowledge, and each plays a specific literal, symbolic, and vital function to the well-being of the community. Generally speaking, traditional African art was inspired by legends, myths, tales, and proverbs; served religious functions; and included assorted items such as figurines, jewelry, body art, pottery, house posts, and textiles (Adejumo, 2002). The relationship between the inspiration, intent, form, and function of traditional art can be described as an application of *maat*:

forms, tones, and texture in African art are expressions of the peoples’ perception of the world around them. In short, they are portrayals of their ways of knowing and collective aesthetic preferences. As a result, the works are often used to evoke order, tranquility, and continuity in community life. (p. 167)

Returning to the weighing-of-the-heart scene, it also illustrates the moral dimension of knowledge because it shows Ani being presented before Ausar,

Lord of Resurrection, justified for eternity because he practiced maat. Although this scene shows the journey of the soul after death, there are ample examples of maat being applied as a standard for the living. In the *Book of Khun-Anup* (also referred to as the Eloquent Peasant), there is a petition of a farmer to the High Steward to follow the principles of maat in consideration of the case. This story is important because it shows how maat permeated every segment of the Egyptian population. Jacob Carruthers (1986) illustrates this sentiment in his description of how maat is applied to governmental and administrative policy. The same maat that informed creation was the same maat to which Kemetic government officials were bound.

Another example of maat that presents the moral dimension of knowledge is found in the *Declarations of Innocence*. These statements clearly identify which actions individuals should avoid in their lifetime so that their way to the gods not be blocked. Though there is a contextual shift from the realm of the cosmic to the communal, the *Zulu Declaration of Self* along with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of proverbs dealing with good and just behavior affirm the value and place of morality in many African societies (Gyekye, 1995; Madu, 1992; Mbiti, 1992; Wanjohi, 1997).

There is an aspect of maat in which good speech is equated with doing maat (Karenga, 2004). Unlike the modern Western axiom that boasts "actions speak louder than words," both a person's words and their actions will weigh on the scales of judgment. The oral dimension, like the visual, has an aesthetic component as found in the beautiful speech of the Eloquent Peasant or *The Book of Khun Anup*. Although the content was about maat, the words were also spoken beautifully, and it was recorded for subsequent generations to appreciate. A more speculative aspect of oral knowledge exists in the fact that despite the hieroglyphs/*mdw ntr* that saturate the tombs and temples and fill numerous scrolls of papyrus, information on astronomy and building techniques for the sphinx and pyramids remain hidden from the written word. Perhaps this information was part of an extensive oral tradition. Although this remains a mystery, other cultures have fashioned a complex oral tradition that includes not only the widespread practices of storytelling and use of proverbs but also libation, songs, chanting, drumming, and divination.

Maat reveals the functional dimension of classic African knowledge because it integrates the sacred with a mundane or secular situation. Maat as manifestation. The philosophical idea actualized in thought, speech, behavior, creating, building, and living, giving each a broader meaning and context.

In traditional Akan culture, the *adinkra* symbols would be stamped onto cloth and worn during a funeral. If the cloth was commissioned, the craftsperson would counsel the patron on the use of appropriate symbols to

use (Arthur, 2001, p. 27). These symbols represent concepts in categories such as gods, universe, self, government, beauty, love, family, community, ethics, and wisdom. The cloth would then simultaneously communicate a message among from the wearer, to the departed, and the community. The simple act of wearing clothing in public becomes an expression or function of the cosmological knowledge of the culture.

This leads to the next dimension of knowledge, which is communal. Returning to *maat*, though the individual soul was justified for living *maat*, it was the community on earth that received direct tangible benefit. This dynamic relationship between individual action and communal consequence reverberates throughout African cultures. *The Zulu Declaration of Self* eloquently states the following:

I am sovereign of my life;
 My neighbor is sovereign of his life;
 Society is a collective sovereignty;
 It exists to ensure that my neighbour and I realise the promise of being human.
 I have no right to anything I deny my neighbour.
 I am all; all are me . . .
 I can commit no greater crime than to frustrate life's purpose for my neighbour.
 (Asante & Abarry, 1996, p. 373)

Among the Akan, there is an *adinkra* symbol, *funtummireku*, which depicts two crocodiles sharing a common stomach. The accompanying proverb states "the crocodiles struggle for food that goes into the same stomach." Gyekye (1995) interprets the two heads as individual thought, action, expression, and the common stomach as the basic interest of both. This stomach also represents the community that is nourished by individual actions. This nature of community is also expressed in the Akan proverb: "The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached" (p. 158). Although there is a distinct emphasis on the communal, it exists in constant tension with the cause of the individual.

Knowledge that has a communal dimension does not automatically negate the individual or her capacity for knowledge, nor does it presuppose that the community is a rigid totalitarian monolith. It instead proclaims that knowledge occurs in a human context. The collective well-being of these humans is the purpose of the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge. This approach is supported by Mbiti (1990), who states that an African ontology is anthropocentric, and in addition to the five elements, there is a force that permeates the whole universe to which some humans

have access through spirits. Through this force, the elements are balanced and maintained.

This is another example of *maat*. With humans at the center of this sacred universe, the charge befalls them to maintain the balance within it by controlling *Isfet*, or disharmony. This constant flow of harmony to disharmony to harmony again indicates a subtle rhythm that provides the rhythmic aspect of classical African knowledge. *Maat* translated as harmony has inherent implications for rhythms because both relate to music. The role of *maat* in reconciling tensions, maintaining the delicate and ever-elusive order, provides a cosmic cadence to life to which everything keeps time. Of course, there are solar, stellar, and lunar cycles tracked by many communities that are often discussed as elements of mathematical time, but they are in essence rhythms. The Dogon celebrate the *sigui* ceremony every 60 years, which equals one day in the celestial precessional year (Finch, 1998b; Griaule & Dieterlen, 1986). In addition to these pre-established celestial rhythms, there are the more commonly considered polycentric movements and rhythms of African dance and music (Welsh-Asante, 1993), which are expressed during rituals, festivals, and life celebrations. These rhythms facilitate the continuation or reestablishment of harmony within an individual, family, clan, village, or nation. Rituals are the instruments that play these rhythms because rituals help prevent and reconcile disharmony. Among the Yoruba, the *ebo* or sacrifice arranges the powers of the universe in a person's favor. Using our metaphor of rhythm, the individual in essence "calls the tune" when she makes the sacrifice with all of creation as the instruments. Among the Dagara, the funeral ritual serves as a time for the entire community to not only mourn the dead but to release pent up grief, despair, frustration, and guilt for any of life's challenges (Some, 1994). After grieving, the ceremony takes a festive tone because "the human psyche needs to play" (Some, 1994, p. 71). The musicians are responsible for triggering the release of appropriate emotions:

This time the music had a more festive rhythm, contrasting with the tense and mournful music they had been playing for the past two and a half days . . . a song heavily cadenced that had the effect of being both physically demanding yet relaxing. (p. 72)

Traditional knowledge is polyrhythmic because it simultaneously negotiates human, familial, communal, earthly, and celestial rhythms.

The polyrhythmic quality of knowledge is echoed in its multidimensionality. Though it is generally acknowledged that many traditional African cosmologies have the seen and unseen as major categories, this dualistic,

five-sense-driven description of reality is limiting because it leaves us with just two options. There are other realms that must be considered. The unseen realm is usually that of the spirits, but there are reports of encounters with phenomena that are physically real phenomena but do not originate in the physical world, or the spirit world. Instances such as altered states, dreams, visions, and life forms from other dimensions are acknowledged as sources of knowledge (Some, 1994). Because *maat* connects all, creation is inherently multidimensional.

That nothing is left disconnected in this system shows that classical African knowledge is holistic. *The Declarations of Innocence* contain references to familial, communal, spiritual, and ecological relations. The *Zulu Declaration of Self* involves a complex network of psychological, biological, social, and spiritual interactions. The modern world has tremendous knowledge about psychology, sociology, religion, and geology but little about what connects these areas and the nature of the connection. Is there a pattern, ritual, or story that makes them collectively relevant? Returning to the *ebo*, a person must prepare a sacrifice that could involve any combination of plants, foods, alcohol, animals, and objects. Though most items are found in nature, they will most likely require interaction with various members of the community to obtain. Once the *orishas* have been “fed” with the items at a ceremony, which often involves still other members of the community, the sacrifice is removed from the altar and left at the crossroads: the intersection between human and divine, material and spiritual, and sacred and secular. All of nature participates in the *ebo*, including the bird or animal that may enjoy a nice meal courtesy of the offering while symbolically carrying the message into the sky and within the earth. *Ebo* is an example of an African approach to a phenomenon that integrates elements from diverse areas.

Maat allows for this holistic expression of knowledge because it allows relationships between sacred and secular, esoteric and exoteric, material and spiritual, individual and communal, spoken and written, and danced and drummed to be explored.

Conclusion

Maat as an analytical tool addresses the complexity of human intellectual, artistic, religious, social, personal, and spiritual existence. It opens up new possibilities for understanding and exploring knowledge in a comprehensive context. *Maat* by no means represents an absolute or total

understanding of African cosmology, nor does it have to address solely African phenomenon. What maat does is provide a theoretical framework for which encounters between the academic disciplines of philosophy and dance or botany and religion can occur, much like the synergy that exists within many traditional cultures.

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