

Maat, Death and the Afterlife in Traditional Africa
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Abstract

To many people, death and dying are unpleasant phenomena. While death itself is no mystery, humans offer varied views to what happens after death. Birth, death and the afterlife among Africans are regarded as an unending process. The human soul is always in transition, commuting between two worlds: the ancestral world and the world of the 'living'. This discussion examines the African concept of life after death. It argues that most Africans who believe in life after death are largely informed by ancient traditional practices of Kemet (Egypt). The discussions support the claim that, the belief in the afterlife has influenced how Africans upholds truth, harmony, justice, righteousness and balance.

Keywords: Death, Transition, Thanatophobia, Kemet, Afterlife, Indigenous, Maat, Reincarnation

Introduction

Thanatophobia, the fear of death is common in this modern world especially among those who are detached from cultural and religious beliefs of afterlife (Owuor, 2006). Even though science at certain moments has countered the claim that there is life after death (Siegel, 1980), Traditional African Religion, regards death as a journey to life (Fu-Kiau, 2001, Obenga, 2004). The Kasena-Nankana, share in this belief (Abasi 1995). There is an existing world view that traditional cultures in Africa that practice traditional African religion are influenced by the ancient Kemetian religious practice of Maat. Kemet, currently called Egypt, is acknowledged as the ancient black land, which was inhabited by black people. This is supported by the similarities in cultural practices including the belief in life after death as reminiscent in the Kemetian concept of Maat in indigenous cultures (Diop, 1991, Hilliard, 1992 & 1995). For the soul of the dead to reach the afterworld, one would have lived according to the principles of Maat; Truth, Righteousness and Justice. In Kemetian view, Maat serves three purposes; cosmological, philosophical and religious. Martin (2008) explains,

In its cosmological sense, Maat is the principle of order that informs the creation of the universe. In its religious sense, Maat is a goddess or neuter representing order or balance. Last, in its philosophical sense, 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. (p. 951).

It is this moral ethical principle that informs how people in ancient Kemet abhors evil and extol the virtues of harmony, justice, truth and righteousness. Living in accordance to these values guarantees the people a place in the ancestral world.

Maat, death and the afterlife.

Maat in the view of Karenga (2004) is polysemous. Maat, having existed for a little over five thousand years, is deified as a female goddess. Beatty (2002) submits, she is known as 'Mistress of all the Gods,' 'Lady of the Sky,' and 'daughter of Ra' (p. 217). Total obedience to Maat is essential to attaining eternity. In this regard, Maat is a divinity as well as a concept. Maat as a concept for which is discussed, and of which Allen (2014) and Ifeanyi (1984) explain, is a prerequisite to joining the society of the dead or residing among the 'living dead'. The concept of Maat is discussed here with its reference to death and various beliefs regarding death in some indigenous cultures. In ancient Kemet, one's deeds, a totality of their lives as to their observance of Maat while on earth is measured on a scale of justice. If the heart balances the scale of an ostrich feather, they are granted eternity. Martin (2008) affirms, in the book of Khun-Anub, Ani is presented before Ausar the Lord of Resurrection and if ever he lived according to Maat, Ausar will justify him for eternity (pp. 960, 961). Similarly, as it would be noticed, when people among the Kasena culture exude some profound truth, justice, gratitude or righteousness to a fellow human beings, they are often extolled in the following words: *O nà tega o ba pɔ* (they will not decay when they die). This statement should not be taken in their literal meaning. In the Kasena sense, one is not decayed if they are remembered, or regarded as ancestors. They would be perpetually remembered or recognized during festivals and any form of sacerdotal rites. Aside of the pains of losing a dear one, and breadwinner of the family, death among Africans including the Kasena-Nankana is seen as going home. The Lou and the Komkomba see death as a call from the ancestors (Owour 2006, p. 9 – Zimoń, 2008, p. 210). This call of the ancestors is mostly referred to the very old in society. These people would not only have lived long but attained successes by way of having children, great grandchildren, are successful farmers or other enviable traits or profession worth emulating. Due to this attributes associated with the call of the ancestors that most deaths from young persons are considered as sudden or abnormal. No person who had attained the expected right age and deeds is denied the gay and fanfare that comes with their funeral. Among the Kasena-Nankana, a war dance has to be performed.



A Kasena-Nankana war dance performed to honour an elderly man. Photo by the writer

The Kasena-Nankana just like the Konkomba believed that, “Dances that emphasize and celebrate life serve to oppose death. By means of dance, Africans pay homage to the elder diseased and also express reverence and respect for them. Moreover, dances remind the Africans of and reinforce their belief in the afterlife of those ancestors whose lives were long, successful and happy” (p. 210). In this celebration, the living witnessing the dancing, aspire to live like the deceased, while comforting elegies and chants soothes the soul of the dead as they journey to the after world

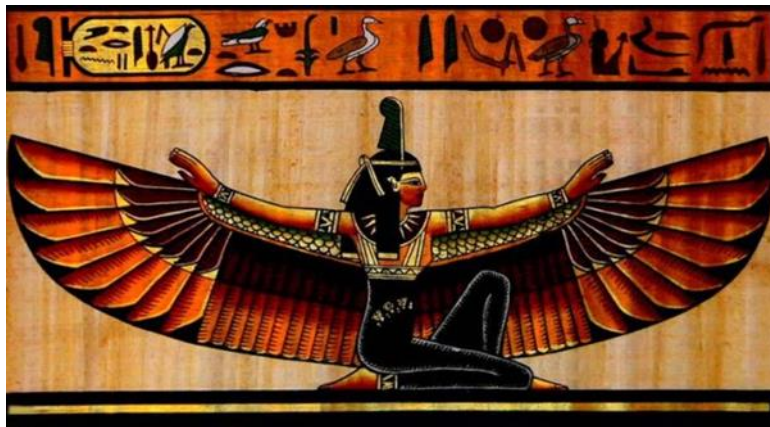
Evidence of the concept of Maat in African cultures

Living Maat; “the relationship between things thought, things felt, things spoken, and things done... were informed by divine law and order; it was not a mere theory to explain practice. Theories can change, but Maat was immutable” (Beatty 2002, p. 221). Most indigenous traditions appear to hinge on ‘Maatic’ (not necessarily the name, but the concept) practice of declaration of innocence. This has largely informed their world view regarding life after death. Among the Akans, and the Kongo people, a truthful, righteous and just life is essential to one transitioning into the afterworld and becoming an ancestor (Gyekye & Wiredu 1992, Gyekye, 1995, Fu-Kiau, 2007, Donkor, 1998). As is widely held in most indigenous African communities, people who live lives of shame, cowardice, undesired forms of deaths such as suicide, cunning lifestyle such as deceit, and injustice are hardly respected or remembered. Their deeds die with them and they soon rot in the memories of their communities. Giving insight to Maat and its virtues as held ancient black people, Beatty (2002) explains,

The feather as a symbol of truth is weighed against the heart of the deceased. If the heart were weighed against the feather as a physical specimen, the scales would never be balanced. Hence, the heart is metaphor for a person’s will and desire to be in harmony with Maat which is reflected in behavior and conduct. The heart, being in harmony with Maat, reflects the moral and spiritual worthiness necessary to enter the abode of the blessed (p. 221)

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Similarly, in consonance of the Maat principle, the Kasena-Nankana speak of the ubiquitous eye of God, which witnesses and records all our deeds. Evidentially, males are named, *Wɛbadoa* (God do not sleep) to remind the living, their deeds will not go unnoticed. Similarly, according to Maulana (2004), Djehuti (Thoth), the scribe of heaven and lord of the just measure with his pen and pallate in hand, records and announces the results of mortals when they appear before the seat of judgement. Djehuti plays the role of the African ancestors who in the afterworld, decide the fate of recently arrived souls so as to establish whether they are fit to live them in the ancestral world.



An image of the goddess Maat

and the performance of the final funeral rites (Abasi, 1995). This suggests, a soul will still be in a process of transition, an intermediate world of the living and the dead, a limbo, a place of torment so to say if the final funeral rites are not performed. This is because, it has been denied its rightful place. Akantue (2019), explicates, a clan head and his entire family whose duty it is to perform the final funeral rites stand to suffer consequences and continual torment from the lingering soul of the dead such as; nightmares, sicknesses, accidents and worse of all death if the final funeral rites are not performed. This rite is known as *fulim* in Kasem and *nyua* in Nankani, without which, the dead cannot rest in their ancestral abode. Once the soul finds rest, it waits there hoping to be reborn. Nankana names like Nyaaba (my ancestor) Mmalemna (mother is returned) are some traditional names given to children who bore strict semblance to a deceased family member who has been long dead but have recently been reborn. Unlike the Western notion of life and death, Africans holds the view that the end of death is life. "This is evidenced in the belief in reincarnation, spirits, and the ancestral cult, which varies in degrees from one African community to another. The expectation of death and the anticipation to join the ancestors has in most cases a this-worldly effect" (Imafidon, 2012, p.13). It is in the expectation of becoming an ancestor, to be reincarnated that the living strove to live by the Maat principle

Living Maat alone does not grant passage of the soul to the ancestral world in certain African traditional cultures. The inevitable things that living souls will not escape is death. How a person dies determines whether they will reach the ancestral world. Apart from living Maat, there is also the question of the mode of death. Abasi mentions, the types of death as normal deaths and abnormal deaths. He hints,

Where does the soul go?

Notwithstanding the belief in life after death, and the need for one to attain eternity through Maat, there are different cultural African thoughts regarding the journeying of the soul to the afterworld. Among the Kasena-Nankana, many determinants are crucial for the soul of the dead to reach 'Kyuuru' or 'Kem-tinga' (Kasena-Nankana word for ancestral world respectively). These include the mode of death

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Normal deaths are those of the very old, whereas abnormal deaths are those of the young and those close to or shortly after marriage. Bad deaths also include dying alone, in the bush or as the result of lightning, drowning, dying away from home, and dying from an accident. Babies are said to 'return' (jori), and so they have died only seemingly (451).

Dying as a warrior in battle field irrespective of one's age is not regarded as bad death. Contrary to the view that those who practiced Maat will become ancestors and live in the afterworld is the question of where does the soul of those who have died the bad death go? Per the Kasena-Nankana culture, those who have died a bad death, "their death has to be normalised through a specific ritual" (ibid. p. 451)). It does not however state the normality of the death absolves the person of violating Maat and that their souls can now be granted safe passage. This is because, in the papyrus of Khun-Anub, any person whose deeds are found to be at variance with Maat, their heart is consumed by the deity Ammenit. Herein, the soul dies invalidating a possible third world as in the dogma of Catholicism and as it seems to suggest in Kasena-Nankana cosmology. Diop (1989) adds, "Among the Egyptians, no felicity was possible except for the deceased who could prove, at the Tribunal of Osiris that he had been charitable to the poor and had never sinned" (p.1). It therefore appears incomplete and raises the question where the souls of the bad deaths such as suicide and persons lynched for their heinous crimes go to. A violation of one's own body is sin in and of itself. Therefore, if a person dies through one of such means, it obvious by their mode of death that they would have violated Maat.

The Kasena-Nankana, as Abasi (1995), mentions, have only two worlds: the world of the living (Tega baŋa) and the dead (Kyuuru). However, Akantue (2019) states, during the final funeral rites which fares the dead to the after world, pleas are made for the safe passage of the dead to the after world. If it is only the final funeral rites that grants the person passage, where will those who fail to meet the requirements find their souls? There appears to be a point of departure from the Kemetian principle of judgement and that of the Kasena-Nankana and others. Whereas Ammenit ensures that the unworthy are consumed ending their entire life and the possibility of a second life, the Kasena-Nankana concept of the afterworld is still left clouded in mystery. It does appear that there is a possibility of a third world for the souls of the rejected since not all will be worthy to be ancestors and be welcomed to *Kyuuru*. Hell, a Eurasian phenomenon where God punishes evil souls, is definitely not this third place since the word does not exist in major African traditions including the Kasena-Nankana. It is admitted that the soul has to journey to the afterworld and requires basic accoutrement any living person will require to live comfortably in the spirit world. In that world- the afterlife, the passing soul once a farmer will need their farm implements to till their lands. The housewife will need her earthen ware pot with which she will use to cook and fetch water. It is vital to stress, the Kasena-Nankana like the,

Dagara of north-western Ghana the journey involves crossing a river in a canoe. It is thus a sacred duty before burial to give the dead the amount necessary for the ferry-man to carry him or her across. For others, the dying person should be given water to drink just before dying to prepare him or her for the long journey. All sorts of gifts are buried with the dead: they are intended for use during the journey and on arrival among the dead forebears. These gifts of money or cowries, in addition to the strict observance (Abasi, 1995, p. 451).

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In Kemet, the ferry man of whom the dead will pay to have passage, as El-Saady (1998), concurs, is called Nemty. Exhumed tombs of great pharaohs and ancient kings have given testimony to these parting gifts. Preparing a king to journey to the afterworld in most African cultures includes adding his kingly regalia, adding his slaves to serve him in the afterworld. Even though the latter is argued to have been abolished by most kingdoms, it affirms the belief in the afterlife.



An image of Nemty, the ferryman



Kasena-Nankanas offerings on a grave during a fresh funeral

to reach the ancestral world. When their funeral are not performed, their souls lurk around with the living. Aside of this, their rejected souls are also left wandering in two worlds. The world of the living and the afterworld.

Conclusion

Most African indigenous traditions ascribe to the concept of Maat as the way to attaining eternity. What is not unique in all beliefs is with regards to the final resting place of the soul. Souls that have lived according to Maat may reside in Kyuuru and can be reborn. So is the belief in the resurrection of the righteous souls by Ausar the Lord of Resurrection. There exist divergent world views with regards to a possible third world for those who have violated Maat and those whose funerals are not performed. The title ancestor is conferred onto the dead by the

It is to be noted however, that during the final funeral rites which is believed to bid the deceased farewell, money to pay the ferry man is given, hoe blades to enable the deceased to cultivate their farm lands are presented and farm produce among other things such as fowls are given not necessarily buried but the giver delivers an elegy, or eulogy of the dead before either smashing the fowl on the ground or presenting the materials to the pall-bearers.

The deceased will collect the items in spirit. Since the dead at recent funerals do not go to Kyuuru, where do they go with the items given them in the first place? And if they do, then the first final funeral rites are needless and a mere waste of time and resources. Kamalu (1998), with regards to the Igbo people brings the argument to rest. He clarifies, "Death does not automatically make one an ancestor, but the full funeral rights have to be enacted. Without these rites the person is banished to some form of intermediate world between the spiritual and physical world" (p. 49). The Kasena-Nankana share in this notion. When a person dies it is with the final funeral rites that they are able

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living who have recognized that they had lived the concept of Maat. Fundamentally, all African cultures irrespective of the resting place(s) of the soul, insist on the concept of Maat as it assures one of being remembered as an ancestor and a possibility of being reborn again to the world of the living.

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