

Ma'atic Beauty: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Ancient Egyptians in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*

Fouad MAMI

*Dept. of English,
African University of Adrar, Algeria*

Abstract

*Consensus among archeologists exhibits the idea that Ma'at for Kemetic peoples (ancient Egyptians) stands for the fundamental order of the universe. It organized the ancient Egyptian world and made it spiritually and artistically sui generis. In his last two novels, the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah, deploys the ancient Egyptian concept of Ma'at in order to postulate a new identity paradigm. In *Osiris Rising* (1995), Ma'at is presented as the spawning force empowering underprivileged Africans to assess slavery as essentially unethical. In addition and thanks to Ma'at, these conscious Africans deploy the concept as an ideological nemesis that tried on several occasions to stage the termination of the spiteful trade in humans. In elaborating on this concept, readers find out its potential to foster cultural understanding and coexistence in today's Africa. Similarly, there are multiple instances in *KMT* (2002) where various narrators evoke Ma'at for the sake of conceptualizing it as a prism through which Africans can refract situations and then reflect upon a range of important themes in African history. One such important theme is how Africa can project a viable culture whereby it may get out from the present dysfunctioning as this dysfunctioning is manifested in violent conflicts. Abstract, as it may easily be charged from the first, Ma'at cannot be disconnected from debates over narratives of anti-colonial and postcolonial conflicts. Indeed, Armah reveals that far from being marooned into a state of archaic, timeless and unchanging tradition, Ma'at has the potential to shape and enhance a sound and inspiring ethical code for nowadays Africans.*

Keywords: Ma'at, kemetic culture, African cultural transformation, postcolonial condition

Introduction

This [...] was no royal society. There were farmers and potters in it. There were masons and cobblers and aristocrats and fishers in it, there were priests and scribes in it. They were in the companionship not because they were peasants or princes or aristocrats or scribes, but they agreed to work to its aims. The companionship belonged to no particular portion of our people, to no family, no clan, no tribe, no nation... (*Osiris Rising*, p. 161)

This is traditional historian, Tete, in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising* (1995) informing delirious African-American Ras Jomo Cinque Equiano about the exact meaning of the symbol of the ankh. Cinque arrogantly displays the symbol, presuming it carries evidence about the royalty of his ancestry, giving him social distinction and pomp. Overlooking the treacherous past of his ancestors, Tete informs the superficial and delusional prince that the insignia can refer to anything but royalty and aristocracy. Instead, the ankh stands for the unique society combined of individuals coming from various walks of life. The society's sole objective is the observation of ways of setting justice. And the task of setting justice does not contradict or deviate from the ethical percepts of its members. Readers of *Osiris Rising* find that the society, which Cinque is interested in, happens to be a secretive anti-slavery group dedicated to the punishment of slave suppliers (factors) and their collaborators. The interesting aspect of this group is not their secretiveness or effectiveness. Instead, it is its non-hierarchical structure and method of assessing the lived experience, which should be constantly reviewed, and subject to deliberations and discussions. Readers of this part, at least, of *Osiris Rising* wonder about how egalitarian this society in many ways could have been. They also wonder about the reasons that forced the cult into secrecy and the nature of the people who opposed it and worked in order to systematically destroy it. Tsegaye Wodajo shrewdly observes that "[T]he circumstances that gave rise to the formation of the ancient organization – hedonism and divisive tendencies among the chiefs – are once again in great abundance in the postcolonial African social

and political terrains.”¹ But in as far as slave trade is concerned, it is interesting to note that there was a group of forward-looking Africans who approached the problems of their days in terms other than some fateful or superhuman dictation.

It is interesting to note again that the ankh society is but the practical translation of the concept of *Ma'at*. In *Osiris Rising*, *Ma'at* is presented as the spawning force empowering underprivileged Africans to assess slavery as essentially unethical. In addition, thanks to *Ma'at* again, these conscious Africans deploy the concept as an ideological nemesis that tried on several occasions to stage the termination of the spiteful trade in humans. In elaborating on this concept, one finds out its potential uses in the cultural battle of today's Africa. There exists multiple definitions to this concept, yet the consensus among archeologists is that *Ma'at* for Kemetic peoples stands for the fundamental order of the universe. It organised the ancient Egyptian world and shaped it spiritually and artistically *sui generis*. People used to trust *Ma'at*, knowing that however troublesome a given situation might look, little escapes the watchful wisdom of *Ma'at*. Armah also pays a special interest to this foundational principle. There are multiple instances in *KMT* where various narrators evoke it for the sake of fulfilling their collective aspirations. Below I try to contextualize Armah's ways in displaying this term and deploying it as an instrument for present social change.

Before doing just this, it is important to underline that in reconstructing the dynamic tradition of *Ma'at*, Armah's aim is not simply limited to showing how he writes a religious history of his own – that is, reconstructing a historical narrative about the set of religious beliefs and practices of the desired African renaissance. Rather, the purpose in what follows is illustrating that Armah's deployment of the concept functions as a prism through which Africans can refract situations and then reflect upon a range of important themes in African history. One such important theme is how Africa can project a viable culture whereby it may get out from the present dysfunctioning and violence. Abstract, as it may easily be charged from first reading,

¹ Tsegaye Wodajo, *Hope in the Midst of Despair*. Africa World Press, Inc. (2004), p. 153

Ma'at cannot be disconnected from debates over narratives of anti-colonial and postcolonial resistances. The resurgence and expansion of the concept, the way Armah outlines it in *KMT*, shows its selective deployment as an effective tool, among a range of many, in the cultural battle of an identity formulation based on peace and coexistence between self and other. In short, Armah has revealed that far from being marooned into a state of archaic, timeless and unchanging tradition, *Ma'at* has the potential to shape and enhance an ethical code for nowadays Africans.

Ma'at, the Desired Ideology of the Renaissance in *Osiris Rising* and *KMT*

Reflecting over *Ma'atic* significance cannot be divorced from thinking over the concept of deity. In this connection, Armah is certain to maintain the correlation between the two concepts as they were conceived by Kemetic people. In the excerpt from *KMT* below, the word *Ma'at* appears among several deities. The reader could easily mistake it for a deity; still the mistake will not deflate the meaning, which the writer seems to have initially set. Despite its difference from deity, *Ma'at* occurs in association with a number of gods in order to highlight its utility and magnitude for the Egyptians. It brings together nearly all the ethical attributes of the gods and combines them in one unified and unifying principle. As it calls for balance, grace, justice, beauty, genius, grace and all the virtues inside man, *Ma'at* can be defined as a sum of pure derivatives from these deities. In the end, it makes an ideology carrying very befitting potentials for a praxis.

These are the netcher names we gave the streams flowing together to make the living river of shared intelligence: Kheper for initiative, Harthor for boldness, Ast for the magic wisdom of genius working, Re for the presiding harmony of creation, Jehwty for the precision that makes shared intelligence a working habit, and, great sister of our values, Maât for balance, Maât for grace, the beauty of things and bodies, Maât for justice, the beauty of hearts connected, Maât for genius, the beauty of

intelligence merged with grace, with justice, with balance in shared work. (*KMT*, p. 218)

Armah here draws attention to the leveling and egalitarian trends of *Ma'at*. In *Osiris Rising*, Armah illustrates this through Hapa's most powerful and corrupt man, Seth Spencer Soja. Seth's initial fury against Asar is rooted in the suspicion that the latter might be taking active part in a secret society, with the ankh symbol functioning as its emblem. The reader may easily detect that in trying to intimidate the newcomer Ast, Seth desperately seeks to impress her and thus win her to his side against Asar. Similarly, the reader still can observe that *Ma'at* is the argument between the two men. For Seth targets not only the kind of society Asar aims to found, but obviously the ethics that form that society as enfolded in the symbol of the ankh:

You obviously don't know that the symbol you call the ankh is an old one here. You can see it in various forms in the pagan fertility cults still surviving here, and in some of the sculpture. But in the form printed on the articles it was used by a dangerous secret society that tried at one time to destroy all social and political institutions here: monarchy, the aristocracy, slavery... (*Osiris Rising*, p.35)

Asar signs the articles he writes using the ankh as his group's logo. Though old and largely in circulation throughout Hapa, the ankh, as Seth attests, is given a new and 'subversive' meaning. According to Seth still, Asar has been able to denature the logo in order to break political institutions and create a classless society, which is, for Seth, one version of chaos. In a raised voice that betrays his rage, he adds before Ast: "But the secret society that used the ankh sign or whatever you call it didn't even have an internal hierarchy. It was bent on leveling society, beginning with itself." (*Osiris Rising*, p. 36) Ironically, and while trying to deface his opponent in Ast's eyes, the reader discovers that it is Seth, Asar's archenemy, who is bound to endear Asar to Ast. What Seth rebuffs on the grounds of 'leveling society' and destroying 'hierarchy' is a vision of life experienced according to the precepts of *Ma'at*; hence Ast's initial desire to come to Africa and help found that very kind of societal order and organic

beauty. Not surprisingly, Seth's main condemnation of Asar turns to be Ast's main attraction to Asar. Earlier in the novel, the reader has Ast's background of loss and search for meaning while still in America. The same loss and search is approached in mythical terms: "Hrw triumphant, steady between Jehwty and Maet sisters. She saw time, saw herself in its passage, saw its passage in herself, felt in her soul its energizing flow." (*Osiris Rising*, p.8) Further, the reader finds that Ast wrote her thesis on 'identity and social justice in the philosophy of ancient Egypt.' Certainly, it is the possibility for a *Ma'atic* society that has kept feeding her desire for a better world and has finally triggered her decision to quit America for good and rejoin her roots in Africa.

It is interesting when addressing hierarchy, as it is handled in this context by Seth, to observe that hierarchy contradicts *Ma'at*. Seth's hunger for power and control, shown in his taking pride in the state of the art security fortress, initially blinds him to other possibilities according to which human societies can be organised. His code of ethics shows a maniacal fascination with control and domination; he cannot conceive of power in terms of collective sharing and genuine listening. According to Marilyn French, patriarchy is essentially to blame for such a state of affairs. Because "[t]he need to dominate" cannot be a true call from the deep essences of man. It is a need that is conditioned only by patriarchy. By tracing the sources of that primitive need, French finds that it is only "a substitute for faith in affection and other satisfactions."² One can learn that trading affection and emotions with control has been detrimental to man's very nature and his longing for egalitarian ethics, like the ones enfolded in *Ma'at*. Consequently, man's sense of value needs to undergo a conscious paradigmatic shift from transcendence and the desire to act as gods, or on behalf of gods, toward embracing nature, including the nature within humans.

The state-of-the-art security facility from which Seth manipulates the state of Hapa, in *Osiris Rising*, together with the high tech weaponry

² Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals*. Summit Books, New York (1985), p. 512

put at his disposal, contradicts the physical setting in which it is planted. That security center stands in sharp contrast to its surrounding locale, filled with disorder and destitution. Furthermore, and as it isolates him from its natural extension with the rest of the population, the citadel building covers Seth's egoistic and, very possibly, maniacal desire to be transcendent, the unmoved mover, the god of Hapa and its people. The denaturalized setting eloquently tells of the increasing gulf between him and the rest of the population, therefore, between him and nature. Such a desire may not be at all imaginable without patriarchal modes of thinking. In warning Asar against the power and, hence, threat that Seth can exercise, Ast says: "SSS has as much power as one person can get in this country. But he is unhappy. He feels insecure at a deeper level than you admit." (*Osiris Rising*, p.164) It is not difficult to notice that Asar is the antithesis of Seth and all that Seth stands for. Asar, on the contrary, is more drawn to nature and more in tune with the environment he lives in and the group of activists he works with. He is determined to lead his life naturally in the way he thinks is the best, regardless of all the threats posed by some power-mad security officers. Truly, Asar does not attribute to himself a transcendental character; his personal security is not on his agenda of priorities as long as he is part of a group working for the same egalitarian and *Ma'atic* ends.³

The *Ma'atic* ideal, then, comes in a context that makes it antithetical to patriarchal modes of perceptions and practice. In addition, it is interesting to note that patriarchy, as illustrated through the character of Seth, and in its strive for power and control, spells only violence and chaos. Order and balance, as *Ma'at* foretells, can be reached through a paradigmatic shift toward matriarchal modes of perception, which are synonymous with *Ma'at*. Below, I examine *Ma'at's* potential for constructing an ideological platform. Then, I will shed

³ In referring to Seth and Asar, Ode Ode analyses these two antagonistic characters more in terms of carriers of ideas instead of ordinary human beings who just accidentally have differences: "Thus both the individual who chooses to reveal the beast in mankind, on the one hand, and the one who aligns himself or herself with action aimed at communal uplift, on the other, are subjected to intense scrutiny by the narrative." Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah: Radical Iconoclast*. Ohio University Press, (2000), p. 134

light on some of the reasons that hamper *Ma'at* from living up to the positive role it is theoretically said to be capable of assuming in today's Africa. The method in which these two steps are processed is historical; I will examine what archeologists and Egyptologists developed in their recent findings.

Can Ma'at be deployed as an Ideology?

According to the German scholar Jan Assmann, without *Ma'at* the world is absolutely devoid of meaning and purpose. *Ma'at* confers to the universe the satisfaction that every evil making of whatever kind and nature is to be addressed whereas all good deeds are rewarded. For Assmann:

Maat designates the idea of a meaningful, all pervasive order that embraces the world of human kind, objects, and nature – In short, the meaning of creation, the form in which it was intended by the creator god. The difference manifests itself in the phenomena of *Isfet*, “lack.” Sickness, death, scarcity, injustice, falsehood, theft, violence, war, enmity – all these are manifestations of lack in a world that has fallen into disorder through loss of its original plenitude of meaning. *The meaning of creation lies in its plenitude which yields order and justice.* Where, all are cared for, no one is oppressed, no one commits deeds of violence against others, no one need suffer. *Suffering, scarcity, injustice, crime, rebellion, war, and so forth had no meaning for the Egyptians.* They were symptoms of emptying and estrangement of meaning from the world, which had distanced itself from its origin in the course of history... They did not see reality in the contingency of ordinary or extraordinary occurrences and events, but in *Ma'at* as the embodiment of an original plenitude of meaning that manifests itself in provisioning and justice.⁴

⁴ Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*. Trans. David Lorton. Cornell University (2001), p.3 (Emphasis added)

It is better to process *Ma'at* and its diametrically opposed concept, *Isfet*, as the manifestation of two possibilities whereby the world can be conceived. Plenitude and lack are the two states that show how the world is essentially postulated and therefore, the condition where the divine is, by and large, experienced in the eyes of the people of *Kemet*. Abundance and joy, not lack and suffering, posit the order of things on this earth. The ethical implication of this formula is that in the production of value, there is absolutely no logical justification for egoistic minds displayed through competition, jealousy, hatred or murder. Everyone is basically entitled to have the joy his/her heart yearns for provided he/she pursues exactly what the heart knows it need. Longing for what lies in the hands of others is to shut the vibrations of the heart; cause competition and create, as a result, sorrow. The abundance of possibilities and choices lies at the heart of *Ma'atic* ethical strategy and value system. For if abundance is the order of the universe, scarcity cannot be just an accidental state of affairs. Scarcity becomes primarily a means of perpetuating control over confused populations. With his traditionalist vision of history, Malidoma Patrice Somé reads the present civil wars and mal developments in Africa against the background of “[C]olonialism [that] weakens a native people by, among other things, sapping its economy and creating scarcity.”⁵

Inculcating this strategy and checking people’s daily ethical standards imply that *Ma'at* precipitates either God’s wrath or love. It can be explained around via only these two diametrically countervailed forces (God’s wrath or mercy) with which the world functions. Above all, *Ma'at* negates *Isfet* and in turn, *Isfet* negates *Ma'at*. If for any reason shortage of goods is predominant, all sections of Egyptian society realize the misdeed and, hence the need for adjustment so that

⁵ Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*. Tarcher Penguin, New York (1998), p. 14 Somé interestingly continues: “Everyone knows that scarcity results in the loss of human dignity. A person whose identity has been violated becomes subject to control. If a gun is then given to such a person to use as a way of restoring his sense of dignity, chances are he will use it. My people are frustrated by the lack of credibility they experience from the modern world, and many have lost hope that anything but the gun will be heard.”

the *Ma'atic* lacuna is restored. In this sense, *Ma'at* and *Isfet* function as a system of checks and balances; a moral scale whereby ancient Egyptians measure the ethical standards of their daily choices. The scale helps everyone so that everyone can always dedicate his or her efforts for the restoration of the reign of *Ma'at* since that would be the point where individual as well as communal welfares converge. For people would fear straying aimlessly from emptying the original plenitude already existing. A twenty-first century reader is, then, left wondering about how practical and efficacious such a scale will be in curbing people's evil; hence lifting society to the idyllic heights of gods.

If Armah's Seth is Armah's fictional means of probing the ethicality of Africa's present polity and the way, in ideal situations, this polity should be constructive, discussion of *Ma'at* has, then, to project insights on political organization. Again, *Ma'at* probes into heavy questions about the ruler and the ways in which that ruler is supposed to run the state. Like Armah, Maulana Karenga is a scholar with an Afro-centric perspective. Karenga finds Assmann's revered stance vis-à-vis royalty a little problematic. Karenga has a book length study on *Ma'at*, entitled: *Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (2004), in which he argues in favour of *Ma'at* that is free from royal power. The gist of his idea concurs with Armah's in the sense that *Ma'at* can be a viable and redeeming ethical option for today's world. Interestingly enough, he does not define *Ma'at* as a theoretical abstraction. Karenga rather insists on the practical side of the concept. According to him, the practical side, that which touches people's everyday concern is what really shapes and defines *Ma'at*. That convergence is justified on the ground that *Ma'at* constantly carries an ideal edge to it. People frequently strive in order to achieve the *Ma'atic* condition, so *Ma'at*, in its overall and encapsulating significance, functions as a test that checks their everyday ethical choices, and by implications constantly strives to better them. For Karenga, *Ma'at* is defined similarly with the way Armah does:

This [the practice of Maat] evolves out of an ontology, which poses a unity of being and posits Maat as the fundamental ground for this unity. Ethically this has meaning in that it becomes a task of

king and members of society to uphold this Maat-grounded world, which is essentially good, and to restore and recreate it constantly. It is in this context that Maat expresses itself as an ongoing ethical project... the central category here [in Karenga's study] by which Maat is understood is the right with its expansive range of meaning indicated in its various forms: rights, rightness, rightful, rightfulness, righteous, righteousness, upright and uprightness. This field of meaning of Maat as the right includes in such meanings: that which is in accordance with the fair and due, i.e., justice; in accordance with fact and reason, i.e., truth; in accordance with the fitting and appropriate, i.e., propriety; and in accordance with the virtuous and valuable, i.e., the Good, etc. Thus, the idea of the right in its expansive field of meaning captures a significant part of the poleysemic concept of Maat. And this focus on the right in the concept of Maat is relevant and required in the interrelated realms of the Divine, the natural and the social.⁶

Reference to the king and members of society and their responsibility for keeping up with the meaning of *Ma'at* remains a paramount priority in its definition. Unlike Assmann's explanation of the same concept, Karenga's does not presume that the king acts on behalf of retrieving or flying gods. On the contrary, *Ma'at* in its wider meaning, is presumed on the idea of setting up the right; yet this task is not, because it cannot be, the exclusive power of one king or a single individual however powerful that individual might be. All active participants, a king as well as members of civil society, act as the executive powers for the fulfilment of *Ma'atic* meaning. Continuing in the same explanatory line, Karenga posits:

Given this, in its essential meaning, *Maat is rightness in the spiritual and moral sense in three realms: the Divine, the natural and the social.* In its expansive

⁶ Maulana Karenga, *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*. Routledge, New York & London (2004), p. 10 (Emphasis in the Original)

sense, *Maat is an interrelated order of rightness, which requires and is the result of rights relations with and right behavior toward the Divine, nature and other humans.* As moral thought and practice, *Maat is a way of rightness* defined especially by the practice of the seven cardinal virtues of truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order. Finally, as a foundation and framework for the moral ideal and its practice, *Maat is the constantly achieved condition and requirements for the ideal world, society and person, i.e., the Maatian world, the Maatian society, and the Maatian person.* And it is in this inclusive understanding that this project [this book] is conceived and pursued.⁷

It is of much service to the reader if one stresses here the idea of the *Ma'at*, the way Karenga processes it, as both: *an ideal* and *a project*. The part of the ideal entails that *Ma'at* is better regarded as a prism that reflects or, at least, pushes the ethical limitations, which an ordinary ancient Egyptian should focus on in order to attain. While the part of the project indicates that it is a never-ending assignment; it has to be constantly chased as Karenga himself admits: “to establish the value of this restored tradition as an ethical option in our time; and [...] to bring this interpretation forward to engage it with contemporary ethical discourse and discussion.”⁸ In stressing the meaning of *Ma'at*, as both an ideal and a project, one has perhaps to keep in mind that this meaning stems and is so engendered from a peculiar Egyptian vision of reality that conceives being only in becoming. One cannot claim to be alive unless he/she is constantly striving, heading and moving in between moral and ethical states. Existence is permanently entrusted to states of feelings and can never stand still. That is the reason why an ordinary Egyptian’s moral worth is permanently checked. Françoise Dunand and Christine Zive-Coche maintain that even “...the creator [...] came into existence, using the

⁷ Maulana Karenga, *Ibid.*, p. 10 (Emphasis in the Original)

⁸ Maulana Karenga, *Ibid.*, p. 13

verb *kheper*, which means “to become” and “to transform””⁹ Hence the idea of *Ma’at* as an ideal instead of that which is already existing; a working platform, or an ideology, permanently leading to the betterment of the human moral and ethical existence.

In observing the practical side of this concept, and in connection with statecraft, *Ma’at* underlines the fact that one’s identity is always in the making, a never-ending campaign and, consistently an enduring project. This is again another instance where Armah’s idea of the concept matches Karenga’s. Being, in the *Ma’atic* system, can be processed through the idea of eternal becoming. In other words, whenever one, because of some reason, is encumbered before fulfilling the obligation of constant becoming, then that person has started on the process of moral decay and is only awaiting physical extinction. *Ma’atic* ideology, if so one may call it, involves what Karenga calls the concept of perfectibility; a notion that enfolds “perpetual process of becoming, perpetual striving, going through stages of moral achievement, of self-mastery, reciprocity and all other virtues and excellences.”¹⁰ As noted above, part of any royal’s obligation is to attend to “the orderedness of being.” And if this obligation of offering and extending *Ma’at* to the world is not met, then the royal in question has failed to prove, not only his entitlement for the privileges of royalty, but his/ her very existence as a human being.

This obligation of extending *Ma’at* to others gives rise to what Karenga notes as the “constellative” aspect of the *Ma’atic* person. That person is always processed as part of a group that is constantly striving for the aim of realizing *Ma’at* in their everyday life. This aspect of group solidarity and homogeneity reminds readers of Asar and his fellow group of teachers. Ode Ogede keenly observes: “Not only do these individuals as a group have conversations distinguished by being devoid of any gender bias and by being marked with a high level of intelligence, they get to the core of the ailments troubling the continent and what needs to be done to remedy it permanently because

⁹ Françoise Dunand and Christine Zive-Coche. *Gods and Men in Egypt*. Trans. David Lorton. Cornell University Press, (2004), p. 55

¹⁰ Maulana Karenga, *Ibid.*, p.231

of their cooperative spirit.”¹¹ Each one performs the task he/ she is most excellent at and capable of so that in the meanwhile, and at the group level, the most desired transformation inside man and on earth becomes attainable. When such a kind of group collaboration becomes second nature, the Egyptian person becomes the man-god he aspires to. Therefore, if we take the emulation of the divine as the identity of the Egyptian person, that identity is composed mainly of excellence and devotion to the work of betterment, plus the atonement of one’s efforts to the exigencies of the group. The individual within a vigorous group and a group with healthy individuals can fairly approximate how identity functions in ideal conditions for ancient Egyptians.

The Metaphor of Ma’at Transliterated

After reviewing these insights brought by both Assmann and Karenga, it becomes fairly clear that Armah’s project of self-transformation is principally traditional. It is an exercise in the recovering of tradition via the use of selective memory. In this sense, Armah’s work can be classified as typical of memory as opposed to history where the principal interest lies not in tracing differentiations and discontinuities, conflicts and contradictions, but in finding a coherent tradition to which he can connect. Armah, it is understood, desires the elevation of the tradition of *Ma’at* to the rank of a classical and rich stockpile of ideas, able to serve as a mode of perception and procession in contemporary life. In other words, *Ma’at* can be adopted as an ideology for the desired African renaissance. For this reason, it becomes fairly evident that it would be inconsequential to characterise Armah as someone suffering from some acute phase of Egyptomania, some people might so regard him.

Armah’s frame of reference is determined by his quest for a “classical tradition” upon which to found his African identity. The Egyptian concepts about the origins of the world, the way he conceives and dramatised them, are centered around the idea of a self-generating god. Armah, like Karenga, links this with the concepts of human creativity regarding man’s self-development. That understanding finally encompasses very deep insights into moral self-creation and

¹¹ Ode Ogede, *Opcit.*, p. 145

the realization of *Ma'at*. Said differently, the typical modern day African, for Armah, is someone who breaks the manacles of false tradition, as it is fed by arcane and lazy practices together with foreign malicious designs, and works with like-minded people for liberating aims set up by a conscious group. This is what Armah himself has stated recently in his autobiography, *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006)

Change would come in the form of unity. To work toward unity, significant numbers of Africans would have to grow into *a new and active sense of continental identity*. It sounds obvious, but it needs stating: it will take conscious, active Africans, individuals and groups ready to live purposefully as Africans (as distinct from Ghanaians, Nigerians, Senegalese, Tanzanians, Somalis, Rwandans, Ibos, Hutus, Tutsis or Twa, Christians and Muslims), to create the human Africa of the future. (*The Eloquence of the Scribes*, p. 101. Italics mine)

Regretfully, Armah does not put such a statement in the mouth of a character in a fully-fledged story of his. In other words, though conscious about the fact of translating the ethics of *Ma'at* into modern-day African situations, he so far comes short of bridging the ideal with the real in his last two novelistic experiences. His *moral calculus*¹², if one may so call it, lacks a dramatic touch with the present reality. Tommie Lee Jackson's remarks concerning the protagonist of *The Healers* can be extended to Armah's last two novels. Jackson's note is the following:

Undoubtedly, the novel lacks credibility, since fictional realism is sacrificed to social symbolism. The characters are forced to assume roles, which, in

¹² The term "moral calculus" is a term of the contemporary American writer William T. Vollmann in his *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*. Harper Perennial (2003). This is a seven volume study on violence, running up to 3300 pages in length, where Vollmann closely examines philosophically the origins of violence, its justifications and results.

turn, make them cardboard characters, rather than real
–life personalities.¹³

Jackson complains from the ideological overdose in the novels he read; a fact which he sees threatening the poetics of the drama and risks turning it into a political tract.

In addition, although Armah's position *vis-à-vis* the need of a new and egalitarian morality is sound and binding, because it matches what other African thinkers point to, he does not offer the reader reasons why it is so. To take only one thinker and in his insistence on the need for a new ethical attitude, Willie E. Abraham reminds researchers of what he calls 'value vacuum' resulting from the loss of independence and the 'confusion' associated with that loss¹⁴. While Abraham adequately identifies a combination of factors, with decipherable causes and effects, Armah does not look to be sufficiently sensitive to direct and practical pressing demands of the continent. In short, his project of *Ma'atic* rediscovery can be easily indicted as clarion call for a mythically constructed Kemetite life.

In reality though *Ma'at*, as explicated by Armah, serves in a corrective agenda for African politicians as well as ordinary people. It is not news that Africa's problems are so complex and so dense because of the still heavy influence of the inhibitive past on the present. Therefore, no amount of explication about the beauty and symmetry of *Ma'at* can induce decision-makers in Africa, together with their subjects, to abandon violence and fraud; these latter have become undeletable markers of a stagnant and repressive culture. Recently, a number of African writers have indicated the need to have a new moral model which is not defined as essentially African, but based on peaceful and egalitarian approach to life. From the images they draw in their novels, it looks as if the souls of Africans are suffering untold proportions of low self-esteem, being thus traumatized under the yoke of tyrants of all sorts, causing only civil wars, child-soldiering, human- and drug-trafficking. The unsolved problems of the generation

¹³ Tommie Lee Jackson, *Ayi Kwei Armah and French Existentialism*. PhD Thesis. University of Nebraska, (1985), p. 127

¹⁴ Willie E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*. The University of Chicago Press. (1962), p. 191

of independence, ranging from uncontrolled urbanization and sporadic programmes of development, have escalated and have resulted in an untold number of crises at an unprecedented scale¹⁵. The overall picture gets worse every day, and as one reads the recent works of some of these African writers, he or she gets a bleak picture about the ethical standards of African ruling elites. Albert Memmi, in a recent study, assesses the extent to which African and third world cultures have been damaged:

The reality one experience in everyday life and that constitutes one's ordinary experience is one of interminable convalescence from the consequences of colonization, widespread poverty, and the scandalous wealth of a small minority, the corruption of the haves and the petty bribes of the majority. There is a sense of mass resignation in spite of the sporadic disorderly, ineffective, and easily repressed outbreaks, the refusal of responsibility or complicity of the elites, the diminishment of culture to the benefit of religious obscurantism, the motivated and derisive plotting associated with politics, the envious comparisons

¹⁵ Because of this one has only to read *Song for Night* (2007) and *Becoming Abigail* (2006) by the young Nigerian novelist Chris Abani. Also, the Nigerian Helon Habila seems to capture the heart of the crisis which African youth face in his *Measuring Time* (2007). Uzodinma Iweala is a Nigerian writer. He devotes his *Beasts of No Nation* (2006) exclusively to the problem of child soldiering in war-trodden zones in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Ivorian Ahmadou Kourouma in his *Allah is Not Obligated* (2006) and *Waiting for the Wild Beast to Vote* (2003) offers gloomy and heart-breaking narratives about the corruption of politician, their lack of any ethical standards except staying in power and swindling the peoples' assets. Kourouma brilliantly shows how the youth simply suffer in consequence. The Ugandan Moses Isegawa, in *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), locates the source for low moral standards of most of the Ugandan people in general because of uncontrolled urbanization and lack of planning. This has resulted in having psychopaths like Idi Amin in power. Interesting though, is the fact that Isegawa weaves his story in a careful way so that readers get informed about the growth of despotism in Africa. Mugezi, the narrator, does not hesitate to call his own parents 'despots' breeding future despots.

(almost always detrimental) with other people, some of whom, less gifted by nature, nevertheless manage to succeed in their development.¹⁶

The result on youth is so destructive that it affects their chances for good health and their life expectancy. What is worse is the fact that their 'capacity for interest in life and trust in other human beings, of [one's] very integrity' becomes severely wounded¹⁷. Such a state of affairs leaves serious questions about how effectively one may apply *Ma'at* in present-day African life. Following this, one can conclude that Armah's project of self-transformation faces no simple obstacles. But in keeping in mind that the problem is, from first to last, a problem of culture, as evidence proves, one would consider as viable Armah's offer of a set of values derived from kemetite philosophy of life.

Conclusion:

All in all, Armah's project of self-transformation shows strong aspects as well as weak ones. The new moral principle as developed through *Ma'atic* ethics he brings to reflection in his last two works are excellent elements of culture that can get Africa from the present impasse. As it locates the essence of being in becoming, *Ma'atic* ethics serves a corrective purpose, that is, to warn Africans against trading with their moral standards lest they desire their own annihilation. Armah processes *Ma'at* as Africa's gift that would lead to a 'renascent Africa'. While good in itself, the reader can question how *Ma'at* can be enhancing in a radically changing Africa, and where the sway of modernity leaves little or no space for such minutiae. Willie Abraham has remarked that culture, especially in the African context, has three major facets or aspects: value, material and institution. Each aspect interrelates with the other two creating an interesting synergy, which is an undivided whole¹⁸. Overlooking such a dynamic, one risks nursing a myopic vision that relates only partially

¹⁶ Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. Trans. Robert Bononno. University of Minnesota Press, (2006), p. 95

¹⁷ William T. Vollmann, *Op.cit.*, p. 35

¹⁸ Abraham, *Ibid.*, "The interrelation between the three aspects of culture can be found everywhere..." p. 33

to the lived reality. Armah's drama thus does not seem to emphasize the interconnection between the value and institutional aspects, in his case, *Ma'at* together with deity, and the material aspect. Because he processed them in terms of isolated particulars, Armah does not show how *Ma'atic* ideals do correlate in order to generate an industrialised, stable, prosperous and democratic Africa. In the final analysis, Armah's identity quest, from a purely thematic perspective, can be said to resemble Egyptomania or a postmodernist narrative attempting to connect some elements of a past, which he thinks useful. Armah's distrust of modernity, its biases and implications oblige him to take refuge in traditional lore, plunging deep in the past so that he unearths the civilisation of *Kemet*

Cited Works of Fiction:

Armah, Ayi Kwei. *KMT: In the House of Life*. Senegal: Per Ankh Publishing Cooperative Popenguine, 2002.

_____. *Osiris Rising* Senegal: Per Ankh Publishing Cooperative Popenguine, 1995.

_____. *The Eloquence of the Scribes*. Senegal: Per Ankh Publishing Cooperative Popenguine, 2006.

Vollmann, William T. *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003.

Bibliography:

Abraham, Willie E. *The Mind of Africa*. The University of Chicago Press. (1962)

Assmann, Jan. *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*. Trans. David Lorton. Cornell University (2001)

Dunand, Françoise and Zive-Coche, Christine. *Gods and Men in Egypt*. Trans. David Lorton. Cornell University Press, (2004)

French, Marilyn. *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals*. Summit Books, New York (1985)

Jackson, Tommie Lee. *Ayi Kwei Armah and French Existentialism*. PhD Thesis. University of Nebraska, (1985)

- Karenga, Maulana. *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*. Routledge, New York & London (2004)
- Memmi, Albert. *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. Trans. Robert Bononno. University of Minnesota Press, (2006)
- Ogede, Ode. *Ayi Kwei Armah: Radical Iconoclast*. Ohio University Press, (2000)
- Somé, Malidoma Patrice. *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*. Tarcher Penguin, New York (1998)
- Wodajo, Tsegaye. *Hope in the Midst of Despair*. Africa World Press, Trenton NJ. (2004)