

The Human Foundation Cultural Forum

Maat: Truth, Justice and Order

A Lecture Delivered by

His Excellency former Minister of Antiquities:

Professor Dr. Mamdouh Eldamaty

3rd of March 2018

Professor Aliaa Rafea (Chair of Human Foundation) welcomed Professor Dr. Eldamaty, pointing to the importance of Maat for Egypt and the world today, and asked Prof Dr. Fathi Saleh to introduce Dr. Eldamaty to the audience as they both worked together in different projects, one of which was about providing a digital map for all of the antiquities' sites in Egypt. Professor Saleh expressed his appreciation to Dr. Eldamaty's contributions to the field of antiquities as a head of the Egyptian Museum, as a minister, and as an expert in the field. Professor Saleh mentioned the great Egyptian artist Hamed Said who was an admirer of the Egyptian civilization's vision of Ma'at.

Dr. Eldamaty's lecture revolved around the variety of meanings and connotations of Ma'at. On the level of cosmos, Ma'at is the organizing principle which keeps order in the universe. On the societal level, Ma'at organizes the relationship between the Pharaohs and the people. On the individual level, Ma'at keeps the moral ethics functioning in daily lives. Ma'at provides rules for organizing relationship within the family, within the workplace, and between people and their natural environment.

Maat acquires its meanings according to contexts within which Egyptians used. For example Neb Ma'at means the Lord of justice. The Pharaohs ruled according to Ma'at, and some of them considered Ma'at a major principle in their quality of governance. Akhenaton was known as "Dweller in Truth (Ma'at)". The rulers' legitimacy is granted by keeping Ma'at in function. Maat was the source of efficacious power for both; gods and people.

Dr. Eldamaty brought to the attendee's attention that we cannot translate the term Ma'at literally, as it doesn't mean truth, justice and order only, it also points to honesty and good manners, and other varieties of meaning.

Ma'at was wedded to the Egyptian Civilization from the dawn of history. As early as the Pyramids funeral texts, Ma'at was mentioned. Even one of the Pharaohs was named "The Son of Ma'at". Ma'at formed the core principle in Egyptians beliefs, in relation to divinity, politics, and social systems.

In reading the famous texts of the eloquent peasant, we encounter Ma'at as a major principle through which the eloquent peasant based his argument. The eloquent peasant was not working in agriculture, but he lived in rural areas, so Dr. Eldamaty suggested that its might be more accurate to call him "eloquent villager". The story narrated that a villager was tricked by a farm manager, and was accused of encouraging his donkey eat from a crop that did not belong to him. To punish him the farm manager took his donkey in custody. The villager raised a complaint to the ruler of the province, who has admired the villager's eloquence, but at the same time didn't respond to his requests. He wanted to read more of the villager's writings, and enjoy his eloquent style. The villager wrote nine letters that are considered to be among the finest pieces of complaint literature in ancient Egypt.

The villager has repeatedly mentioned Ma'at in his letters. In the beginning; his words expressed his hope for implementing justice. Then, he started reminding the Minister that there is a day when heavenly justice will be served in the afterlife, where those who were not fair in their earthly lives shall deserve punishment. Eventually, the words of the villager started to reflect his anger, after he has been waiting patiently for so long, without being treated with justice. In the eighth Petition he says: "Apply Ma'at for the sake of the Lord of Maat, who is just, and his justice exists, "Maat is immortal and shall walk with those who apply it to the grave. Their bodies shall be buried, but their names will never be wiped off the face of earth. They shall be remembered for their goodness, according to the divine law". The eloquent villager continued his words criticizing greed, as it was considered to be one of the worst qualities that a person can be characterized by in ancient Egypt. Ancient Egyptians regarded greed as a door that might lead people to lie, or commit sins.

However, the Ancient Egyptian literature was not limited to the field of complaints only, as the concept of Ma'at was also found in what is considered to be advice literature. A wise man that has lived around the third millennium BC, in the time of the fifth dynasty of ancient Egypt, has referred to Maat in his teachings: "If you want your behavior to be distinguished; keep away from all kinds of evil, and beware of greed; it is a serious and incurable disease....those who adapt themselves to Ma'at will be immortal and shall be liberated, while walking freely following its footsteps".

The importance of Ma'at in Ancient Egypt was not confined to the earthly life, as it was extended to the afterlife. Words indicating that the deceased person has applied Maat through his words and deeds used to be inscribed on the walls of the tomb. The heart would be put in one scale of the balance, while Ma'at would be put on the other, so as to evaluate the person's deeds according to his/her compliance with truth and justice (Maat). If the two scales of the balance were equal (which was usually the case); the person would be regarded as an honest person, and would be entitled to heaven. If not; his heart will be eaten by "Hamham" who eats the hearts of those who fail to make the two scales

of the balance equal, as the heart was a very important concept in the lives of ancient Egyptians.

Dr. Eldamaty continued his interesting lecture, explaining that ancient Egyptians thought there are six elements related to human existence. The first element is the body, which goes through mummification after death, so as to be maintained in a very good state that fits resurrection in the afterlife. The second element is the “name” that was very important in ancient Egypt, and had to be inscribed, either on a statue, or on the walls of the tomb. That’s why in some cases the enemies used to try to erase the deceased person’s name from the antiquity, which was considered as a very aggressive act. The third element is represented in the shadow, which is a proof of life. The tomb was regarded as the house of the shadow that was kept in the tomb until the deceased person starts to get out and move. The fourth is the heart, which is the center of deeds and intentions. While the fifth element is the Soul “Ba”, and the sixth is the person’s spiritual double, or the “Ka”. It is the unseen element that accompanies the human being throughout his/her life, and which stays alive after the person passes away. After death, a good person would obtain the eighth element, which is enlightenment.

Ma’at role expands to include standing in support of Ra and protect the world from chaos. Ancient Egyptians believed that without Ma’at, order in Egypt would have been threatened, and may collapse. Maat, the Goddess of truth, justice and universal order, was depicted as a lady with a feather on her head.

On her comment on the lecture, Professor Aliaa Rafea concluded that Ma’at was coined word and a symbolic expression that had multi underlying connotations. It was not a personified Goddess, rather it was related to a divine order. She related between Maat and humanconscience.

To elaborate, Professor Rafea also pointed that languages in general manifest to denote to certain meaning through words. Those words are symbols which acquire their meanings through communication. Ma’at is loaded with complex of meanings which cannot be reduced to one aspect. However, human communication transcends the dictionary meanings of words, there are certain aspects in human psyche which cognize some dimensions of our existence which are hard to put in words. The heart is mentioned in Qur’an as a tool of cognition, Ma’at is one of these principles which generate continuous meanings, and it is expressed through other wording in other civilizations. Egyptians have not lost Ma’at, but they experience it through justice, order, harmony, divinity and so on.

We should not be deceived by changing symbols and words to jump to the conclusion that we are cut off from our ancient heritage. The past is extending in the present and

directs the direction to the future, whether we know it or ignore. However be aware of these flow, bring us to understand more about ourselves.

Professor Rafea acknowledged the richness of Professor Eldamaty's lecture, and expressed her wishes to host him in the Human Foundation for more lectures.