



**FROM ANCIENT EGYPT TO BARACK OBAMA:  
LESSONS IN RIGHTEOUS LEADERSHIP**

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We are, by almost everyone's assessment, on the threshold of a new historical opening, marked first by the sure and certain coming occupation of the office of president and the White House by a Black man, an offspring of Africa, a representative of a people whose history is the beginning of humanity and human civilization, encompasses the savage horror and inhumanity of the Holocaust of enslavement, and rises in defiant reaffirmation of our Africanness and social justice tradition in the Sixties. Secondly, this watershed, so eagerly awaited and worked for, is also defined by the imagining of a vision of a new way forward, a vision of possibility, promise and hope concerning how society should function, human beings relate and human history unfold. And Barack Hussein Obama is the man we and history have chosen to lead us as we collectively and cooperatively lift ourselves out of the depths of decline, social disintegration and despair in which former "would-be" leaders have left this country.

It is important at the outset to understand that this will not be an easy walk or untroubled way upwards and onward. But the quality of the vision and our commitment to it is indispensable. And it must be understood that there is no substitute for a vision which is conceived and constructed by constant discovery and recovery, by looking forward *and* backward, and which looks for and pursues the limitless possibilities of the future and draws from the wealth of wisdom and experience of the past. We are often taught not to appreciate our past, not even the immediate and modern, let alone the ancient. And yet we are taught to value others' past and even see it as sacred

and to honor it for its insight and ancientness. We, of course, must reject this irrational "reasoning", for indeed, there is no history more sacred or significant than our own, and no people more chosen, elect or endowed with more dignity and divinity. And there is no history or culture more ancient or richer in resources for understanding human life and constructing good and meaningful ways to live and share it.

So, whenever I wish or need to think deep about anything, I turn to my own cultural texts—ancient and modern—and ask what does our culture offer to ground, guide and address this question. And one of the most important questions before us is how to define and support the development of a model of leadership and governance that aids us in repairing, renewing and remaking this country and contributing meaningfully to a similar process and practice in the world. This means, then, dialoging with African culture—continental and diasporan, ancient and modern, in shaping our concept and practice of governance, leadership and living good and meaningful lives.

A correct reading of our history in Africa or this country shows a constant conception of leadership as a moral vocation of dedication, discipline, sacrifice and service. The literature from ancient Egypt or the modern USA, from Ptahhotep and Rekhmira to Frederick Douglass, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, and Martin L. King, all bear witness to this understanding and approach. As a beginning point, no ancient source is richer in insight and instructive guidance than the classical African civilization of ancient Egypt or Kemet. Certainly, its insight and instructions on

Maatian (moral) leadership and governance seem appropriate at this hour of historical transition and hoped-for transcendence. Of particular value here is the instruction given to the prime minister by the pharaoh on his appointment to office as the chief political and judicial officer of Kemet. The text is passed on to us by the Prime Minister Rekhmira of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the dynasty that drove out Western Asian invaders and gave the world the first recorded narrative of liberation and a defining paradigm of the cooperative and complementary struggle of African men and women to achieve this.

The text is essentially about justice and the central role it plays in defining and determining the quality of governance, leadership and life in the land. It builds on the Book of Khunanpu which says “the true balancing of the land lies in doing justice”. The text begins with the Pharaoh Djehutymes III (Thutmoses III), telling Rekhmira “to be rightfully attentive to the office” and to “be vigilant concerning all done in it”. For rightfully used, this high office “is the bulwark and buttress of the whole land”, but misused it becomes a threat to the land. One only has to look back at the chaos, incompetence, corruption and institutionalized callousness of the Bush administration to see the importance of this instruction. Indeed, not only must Obama be vigilant and rightfully attentive to the functioning of his office, we must be vigilant also in a supportive and creatively challenging way, for there’s so much to do. And others will be watching for weaknesses, mistakes and missteps to seize

on and use to indict and discredit both him and us.

Rekhmira is also advised that leadership of a country is not easy, “it is not sweet, it is bitter as gall”. For it is difficult, tension-filled, taxing and often thankless. But as he is constantly told, it is about doing justice and protecting and promoting it in the world. Moreover, Rekhmira is instructed to show no favor to the powerful and treat no one as inferior. Rather “regard one you know like one you don’t know and one near you like one from afar”. Also, Pharaoh Djehutymes III warns Rekhmira against being like a PM named Kheti “who disadvantaged his own people for the sake of others, for fear of being falsely called partial”. For “that is in excess of justice”.

Furthermore, the Maatian leader is to speak truth, judge justly, listen carefully and considerately to the people, do everything within the framework of the legal, just and right, respect the rights of the people, and cultivate respect by doing justice. Indeed, the Pharaoh says, “You will succeed in the performance of your office by doing justice” in the world. “Doing justice is what is wanted” and indeed required. And this too Rekhmira is told to remember, “He who does justice for all the people, he indeed is the (leader of the land)”. And for us, now, anything less than such a clear and uncompromising commitment to justice for all the people is more symbol than substance and an unworthy response to this awesome invitation that history and our hard and relentless struggle have handed us.

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