

Cultural Studies Group of Dallas, PA*

Black Men Addressing Crime and Violence: The Maat Plan

The Cultural Studies Group at the State Correctional Institution at Dallas, Pennsylvania, recently conducted a scientific, yet passionate, workshop on the historical and contemporary factors that promote and perpetuate Black on Black crime and violence. Drawing on the results of our research and upon our experiences as Black men and prisoners, we present this decisive and comprehensive outline of a strategy aimed at addressing and solving this tragic problem of the African American community today. We call this strategy "The Maat Plan."

The word "Maat" as used here, symbolizes the Kemetan precursor to the Yin Yang concept of duality. The term Maat is used to engender the idea of balance. It has to do with understanding the duality of truth; the forces and counter forces of cosmic reality; the balance of opposites. It is used here as an ancient African concept that stresses the acceptance of collective responsibility as a coun-

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Hotep! (meaning "Peace, my brothers!") is what I say in opening the Cultural Awareness Group that meets once a week at Dallas. We study African American literature, listen to audio tapes of Black scholars, and watch video lectures by scholars and activists. We have more than sixty inmates involved in the program. At one of our sessions a brother said to me, "We who have committed crime should know how to solve it." This document was written by a committee and represents solutions that the brothers came up with. I join them in the hope that those who read this plan will put its ideas into practice. The survival of the Black male may depend on it.

terpoise to the tendency to blame others. Although we recognize the importance of locating and identifying the faults in the environment and addressing them, we believe that this needs to be balanced by finding and addressing flaws in our own strategies. We believe that when one is drifting off course it is far more practical to attempt to adjust the sails on one's boat than to attempt to change the direction of the wind!

Through the use of the Maat concept we hope to bring to mind the duality in life, and need for balance and harmony in all existence. Introspection is the practical precursor, and natural counterbalance to circumspection. As incarcerated Black men, we believe that in recent years enormous energy has been spent assessing and addressing the role that others have played in our descent. Although we do not wish to down-play that role, we believe that this type of discussion about the present crisis affecting young Black males, usually generates more heat than light.

The Maat concept recognizes that balance is necessary. We believe that in order to achieve balance, we as a community must develop and execute a plan of action for ourselves based on what we need and what we, in fact, are able and willing to do. This will balance our tendency to look for help from others as we have done so often in the past.

We pray that the eight point plan offered in this document developed over a period of several months in our Cultural Studies Group will aid us, and our families and friends who consider it, in achieving the balanced approach essential for reaching our individual and collective goals. We believe that it will help our brothers, especially our younger brothers—both those on the inside and those who are still outside of these walls.

Employment

Full and meaningful employment is required to raise the

quality and value of life in the Black community. The lure of crime is often irresistible when our youth measure the promise of immediate gratification against the reality of poverty and unemployment among adults writhing in the throes of misery and substance abuse. Furthermore, if the incentive to get an education is the promise of future employment, it logically follows that pervasive unemployment leads to a lack of respect for formal education and for those who represent it. Consequently, the violence and crime that plagues our communities has overflowed into the disrespected educational system, turning the learning environment into a battleground where students and teachers cannot help but be suspicious and distrustful of each other. The result is massive under-education and large scale unemployment among young Black men.

To begin to put the Black community back to work, we must employ entrepreneurial strategies wherein we organize locally for the purpose of employing ourselves and developing political strategies that we seek to implement nationally to create employment. Those industries that exploit our consumer status and yet refuse to employ us in respectable numbers and in respected positions, must be held accountable. They must be influenced to locate industries in the places where we live. They must provide jobs for us and decision-making positions that respect for our patronage warrants.

Only if our community members are employed will our communities be more economically and socially stable. In the past organizations like "Operation Push" used the boycott effectively to demonstrate the consumer power of the Black community to confront industries owned and operated by those outside of that community. However, the token appointments that we have traditionally settled for are not enough to compensate for the billions of dollars we spend. We need to change the focus of our objectives from appointments for a few, to having industries developed where we live that will provide jobs for the masses of the so-called underclass

that needs them most. This approach will not only provide jobs that can re-stabilize our family structure and community, but also make available to us those manufacturing skills and technologies required in an advanced society. Employment builds self-esteem and discipline. It raises the quality and value of our lives and that is the beginning of enabling us to appreciate, respect, and value the lives of others.

Self-Reliance

We realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands. We know that neither institutions nor friends can make a race stand up unless that race has under it the strength of its own foundation. Races, like individuals, must stand or fall by their own merit. To fully succeed they must practice the virtues of self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance, and economy.

The Black community in America is a community that possesses all the components of power and self-reliance, yet has failed to fulfill its promise because of its inability to organize its resources to promote and protect its own interests. If organized correctly we are perfectly capable of employing our own, enforcing order in our own communities, educating our own children and adults, endorsing and holding accountable our leaders, and controlling our own independent political party.

The power of organization is probably best exemplified by the current status of the Jewish community in this country. Despite even smaller numbers than the African American community, Jews manage to influence and, some would say, control many of the most influential institutions of this country. It is our conviction that the African American community has at least equal, if not greater potential in this respect. Fulfillment of this potential would enable us to enter into alliances with other communities, nationally and internationally, from a position of strength that demands respect.

If we were properly organized there are many things that we are victimized by today that would be within our power to prevent. For example, politicians who solicit our vote and then abandon our interests would do so not only at the peril of a lost election campaign, but at risk of the ruin of their whole careers! How? By the fact that Black people would not just be organized at election time, but organization would be an inseparable extension of our culture, and political solidarity would promote and enforce our interests full time.

Not until the Black community organizes and makes an effort to promote and defend its interests nationally, locally, and globally, will it cease being the door mat of free enterprise capitalism and America's favorite victim.

Community Awareness

Malcolm X stated that, "the Black community tends to confuse its methods with its objectives." The struggle is not for upward social mobility, civil rights, or more Black elected officials. These are all means toward the end of the human recognition that we all aspire to as human beings. However, when we lose sight of the ends, the methods or means, instead of being vehicles of empowerment and human recognition, become divisive forces that cause us to compete against each other for status and recognition. This competition has created divisions, antagonisms, and hostilities between members of our community who forget that we cannot achieve our objectives without each other.

We do not have the luxury of dividing Muslims from Christians, integrationists from nationalists, the young from the elderly, men from women, college educated from the uneducated, or prisoners from civilians. The awareness of community that engenders unity is a prerequisite to our survival and collective well-being in America. Moreover, to prevent divisions and self-defeating con-

flicts, we need to organize workshops locally to promote political and cultural education. We must initiate community awareness campaigns nationally, (perhaps utilizing our power in the entertainment industry), in order to raise the awareness of the Black community of our *common* objectives. This, in turn, will better help us to subordinate our trivial individual differences in pursuit of our common objectives.

Criminal Justice Reform

In "The Crisis of Black Sexual Politics," by Nathan and Julia Hare, statistics are presented that warn us that if the current rate continues, by the year 2000, seventy percent of all Black men will either be in prison, dead, or under the influence of alcohol and drug addiction. With seventy percent of our men missing in action, who will marry our daughters? Who will cement the character and provide the role models for our sons? How will we promote community struggle, stabilize the family, and propagate the race without our men?

Currently, more than 700,000 Black men are imprisoned throughout the United States. Twenty-three percent of the total Black male population between ages 20 and 29 is in jail—almost one in four! This intolerable situation demands that Black organizations and concerned members of our community reach out to these casualties of war and exercise a direct influence upon the way they return to our communities once they have been released from prison.

Many of these brothers are the victims of neglect and criminal circumstances in their environment. After being arrested they had less than adequate legal representation and little or no knowledge of the judicial process. Given these factors it is not surprising that statistics show that we are punished disproportionately in comparison to our Euro-American counterparts who come before the

courts with the same charges and similar arrest histories. The obvious injustice of this situation has led many prisoners, and social scientists as well, to the conclusion that though we are convicted of crimes, we are sentenced for being Black! The statistic that though we make up only twelve percent of the general population in this country, we are fifty percent of the prison population, stands as an undeniable support for this argument. The lynching that used to take place in the backwoods of Southern states is now being practiced through the judicial system of America. Any sincere effort, therefore, to redeem our communities must include a strategy of criminal justice reform to save our men from this institutionalized violence that is nothing less than a form of high tech lynching.

Alliance of Religious Organizations Toward Common Goals

The Religious Community has always been a morally stabilizing force within the Black community. It has been the platform from which we have launched some of our most effective movements and organizations, including the civil rights movement, the Nation of Islam, Deacons for Defense, SCLC, and many other organizations grounded in belief in God and religious activism.

The Black community today finds itself in a crisis as severe as any we have ever experienced, yet our Religious Community has failed to come together to provide the platform and leadership necessary to harness the community's collective will and mobilize the masses toward solutions.

The problems that we face today must be addressed not only from civic, social, and political perspectives, but from moral and spiritual insights as well. If the role of religion is indeed to bring people back to God (*re-legion*), then the religious community must recognize the role that an unjust society plays in keeping people from God, and the concomitant role that religious organizations must play in shaping the good society. The shaping of society into

a place where desirable behaviors are encouraged, supported, and rewarded, benefits the African American community in general and the Religious Community in particular. Therefore, we must realize the failure of churches and mosques to work together as a strategic and organized unit with the purpose of rehabilitating society, in light of all of the political, social and economic clout held today by organized religion, is a serious indictment of our resolve as a religious people.

Our prisons, hospitals, and street corners are filled with young brothers driven to crime, immorality, and self-destruction by social circumstances that an organized and determined religious community should and could have addressed. The fact that some of us have managed to minimize the negative affect of society in our lives, should be used as an example of God's compassion rather than as a club with which to beat down less fortunate brothers. There—in those prison cells or on those street corners, but for the grace of God, go each of us, and *will* go each of us and our children, unless we begin to truly demonstrate love for one another by moving out to protect and serve one another. Every church, mosque, synagogue, and religious family, must take responsibility for monitoring, parenting, advising, and protecting its community. The Religious Community, unified by oneness under God, must set the proper example by putting aside differences and working collectively, utilizing both the power of numbers and the power of God.

Accountability

Just as we applaud the efforts of those who sacrifice and display dedication to our struggle to uplift ourselves as a people, we must be equally swift and convincing in condemning those who betray us and attempt to undermine our efforts. Strategies must be devised to hold the middle class and professionals accountable to their community's efforts to heal and develop itself.

Obviously, we all make mistakes and none of us perfectly upholds his responsibility as a member of a struggling community. However, our scholars and experts have identified some behaviors that are so injurious to the welfare of our community that they must, when exposed, be considered crimes, and be responded to with just punishment.

The objective of this strategy would be for all members of the African community here in North America, to recognize our inter-connectedness and realize that we are family, even if it requires coercive sanctions to make that happen.

We can no longer afford to make excuses for incompetent and traitorous conduct. Misbehavior can be minimized by organizing workshops to raise the awareness of our entire community. Simultaneously, we have to organize "culture classes" to reinforce the standards of conduct and commitment that we expect from each other. All of us, especially our leaders, need to be held strictly accountable to the community.

Family Structures

We turn finally to Maat and the Black family. Considering that the family is the basic cornerstone institution of any people, traditional cultural values suggest that any effort to raise the quality of life and struggle of a people will have to put the family first. This is true also with the Maat Plan, yet for this reason we address the family last. It is the strategic foundation upon which everything else rests.

The Maat plan recognizes that the Black family's decimated state is the result of the overall neglect, deprivation, and economic alienation of the Black community. It will take, therefore, the combined effort of all of the previous strategies, as well as the support of all our institutions and organizations, to salvage the family, re-infusing it with its historic cultural value and placing it again at the cen-

ter of our culture and struggle.

The Maat Plan for re-establishing the family as our basic institution makes provision for Black male role models, by means of the extended family tradition, to be available to families that lack viable Black male role models. The same provision needs to be made for female role models where they are needed.

We will also have to develop programs of economic subsistence geared to the whole family and organized in a way that encourages collective work and responsibility, as well as family loyalty. As previously stated, the family is our primary and basic institution. Therefore, how we inter-relate with and view our responsibilities to people is more often than not determined by our experiences in the family. To put the people first, we must again put the family first!

Conclusion

We want to stress once again the need for a balanced approach, a MAAT approach. We view Black crime and violence as a problem in its own right, but also as a symptom of a greater problem. In seeking solutions we must address our own inconsistencies, as well as the negative influences of others. There are some people who are profiting from our misfortunes. We must analyze relationships between community members, social institutions, and governmental institutions in order to better understand who is helping and who is hindering us. Where conflicts of interests are found, we must address them.

The balance that we are seeking will come from lessening our excessive and misguided preoccupation with external influences, and concentrate more on our inner selves. *We must learn right, and then do right.* We must look to the God within us as the ultimate source of motivation, courage, knowledge, and strength. We must then move out to do God's work, realizing that as a means

to help us understand and change our environment, God gave us the ability to study and the power of prayer. And to help make prayer and study work, God gave us each other.

May God bless us all with the understanding necessary to acquire freedom and justice for Black men today and, in the days to come, for Black people everywhere.

Works Consulted By the Group and Recommended For Study

- Akbar, Na'im. *From Miseducation to Education*.
- Amen I, Ra Un Nefer. *Metu Neter and Africentric Spiritual Union*.
- Azibo. *Liberation Theology*.
- ben-Jochannan, Yosef. *Blackman of the Nile and His Family*.
- Carmichael, Stokely and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power*.
- Cleage, Albert. *The Black Messiah* and other works.
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*.
- Cross, Theodore. *The Black Power Imperative*.
- Diop, Cheikh Anta. *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*.
- Garvey, Marcus. *Philosophy and Opinions*.
- Hare, Nathan and Julia. *The Endangered Black Family*.
- King, Richard. *African Origin of Biological Psychiatry*.
- Kunjufu, Jawaanza. *Black Economics* and other works.
- Madhubuti, Haki. *From Plan to Planet, Black Men, Obsolete, Single, and Dangerous and Enemies: The Clash of Races*.
- Malcolm X. "The Ballot or the Bullet."
- Marable, Manning. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*.
- Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.
- Wilson, Amos. *Black on Black Violence*.
- Wright, Bruce. *Black Robes, White Justice*.