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The ba-bird, one aspect of the ancient Egyptian concept of the soul

**T**he idea of soul is central in the narrative of ancient Egyptians especially as it relates to the idea of eternal life, a familiar and constant concept in their discourse.<sup>1</sup> Consequently we must understand how the ancient Africans in Egypt explained the human person in order to fully appreciate their idea of the human soul. For contemporary people it would seem quite complex because of the various dimensions of the person. Humans were not just body, soul, and spirit, but intricately more complicated in the light of the philosophy of eternal life. Thus, the Egyptians saw the human as comprising various components beyond physical

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## The Idea of the Soul in Ancient Egypt

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attributes. Words such as *ib*, *ren*, *ba*, *ka*, and *sheuti* were used to describe the most spiritual parts of the human being. The *khat*, or body, was simply the human physical form, and although it was considered important it was only significant because it housed the more spiritual parts of the human being.

There were two governing concerns for the ancient Egyptians: (1) how does one assure *ankh neheh*, eternal life? And (2) what is the nature of the human being in the physical world? A physical lifetime spent seeking to determine the answers to these questions was the beginning of true knowledge for the Egyptian people. Since physical life was merely the passage through which one came into eternal life it was the necessary stage for preparation for life everlasting. To assure that one would live forever it was necessary to perform all the proper duties that would place the person in the right orientation toward eternity. Humans arose in the mornings and went to bed in the evenings with the idea of establishing all the necessary rituals, monuments, ceremonies, and relationships that would insure that one would live forever. Thus, all ethics could be seen as an ethics pointing to the preservation of the person's energy. How one related to children, friends, and confidantes was one factor in how long one would live in eternity. If you wanted your name to be spoken, your *ka* to live, and your *ba* to be able to return to your physical body, the mummy, then you would have to make the correct preparations for this to occur. It was not automatic when one died; it had to be made definite by acting to insure it.

People have always asked themselves questions about the nature of their being. What are the components of the human? What happens after death to the body? Is there an aspect of the human being that lives after the *khat* is dead? These



questions may appear as concerns about death but they are really concerns about life. Ancient Africans believed that it was possible to insure eternal life or life everlasting by protecting the various parts of the human being. Of course, this would depend upon both the person seeking eternal life and those who were responsible for conducting the proper rituals for the deceased. In most cases, the person's children handled the affairs necessary to protect the soul of the person who was deceased. To protect the person's soul, in its various manifestations, meant that all aspects of the deceased had to be protected such as the *ib*, *ren*, *sheuti*, *ba*, *ka*, and *akh*.<sup>2</sup>

#### The *ib*

The *ib* was the metaphysical aspect of a person's physical heart thought to be created by one small drop of blood taken from the mother's heart at conception. Thus, every child received the *ib* from the mother at conception. *ib*, as a word, was associated with the metaphysical aspect of the physical heart but it was often used in the *ciKam*, the language of Kemet, to refer to the physical heart itself.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was meaningful to the human throughout life and was the key to the narrative of the afterlife since the *ib* would be weighed at death by the god Anubis. Because the *ib* survived death it would be the "blackbox" that could give evidence for or against its possessor during the weighing of the heart process. At the moment of the examination of the deceased the heart, the *ib*, which represented the seat of emotions, behavior, and thoughts, was placed on the scale of Maat and weighted against the feather of Maat. If the heart were lighter than the feather, this was good; but if the heart were heavier than the feather of Maat, the monster Ammit would consume the heart because it would mean that the *ib* was too weighed



down with bad thoughts, ideas, concepts, behavior, and wrong deeds to move toward eternity. Consequently, I have come to see the *ib* as the doorway to eternity. One could not gain access to everlasting life except through the goodness or lightness of the *ib*, heart.

### The *Ren*

Another aspect of the human being was one's name. It is clear that naming is essential to human societies and the ancient Egyptians felt the same need to name their children as we do in contemporary society. Of course, they believed that the name would also live forever if it were protected and by protecting the name, conserving and preserving the name, and keeping the name from harm one could gain eternal life. However, it was also thought that to insure protection of one's soul it would be necessary to have several names so that if an enemy wanted to destroy you or to punish you the enemy would not be able to completely wipe you out if he did not know all your names. An enemy might scratch your name out in one place or might erase one of your names but so long as you had another name in perhaps a safer place you will not be destroyed. This is probably the origin of our belief that having a good name is essential to one's life. Among the Egyptians a "good name" was not simply a name that was well-spoken but one that was well-spoken and also well-protected. This is why the *peraa*s, pharaohs in Hebrew, spent so much time trying to protect their tombs. One always started the mortuary temple prior to death to oversee the protection of the name, the body, and the *ba*. In fact, the *ren*, name, was given when a child was born and as long as the name was spoken the person could live. Knowing this to be a fact ancient Africans in Egypt tried to put their names everywhere and to have their names spoken by



various people after their deaths. Protecting the name and speaking the name was a theme in the *Book of Breathings* written to help insure that the name would survive. The idea was to surround the name with a *shenu*, a magical rope, to protect it.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, many people had their names destroyed on temples and tombs. But the greater the number of places the name appears the more likely the name will be spoken. Since the name represents a part of the divine it survives so long as it is known, spoke, or recited. Of course, having more than one name was also an aspect of concealing one's total identity. It was as if the deceased played a game with the living to see how well the name could be protected. Grave robbers and those who had no interest in eternal life, but in their own wealth, often appeared to vandalize tombs and to "steal" the names and the materials that were to accompany the deceased into the eternal life. Even tombs hidden in the hot, dusty, and forbidden Valley of the Kings, on the western side of the Nile, were discovered, plundered, and left to the elements by grave robbers.

### The *Sheuti*

The ancient Egyptians believed that each person possessed a *sheuti*, shadow, and that this *sheuti* was always present. Since it was not different from the person and always with the person it was a part of that person's being. One's *sheuti* belonged to no one else but to its own owner. Using their own reasoning the Egyptians saw that the shadow or *sheuti* was always black and so they painted the *sheuti* on the walls of tombs as a black figure smaller than the actual size of the person. The argument could be made that the *sheuti* was such a concrete phenomenon that it could be contained in a small box as a way to protect it from the enemies of the person. As one did not



want his or her name destroyed, you did not want your *sheuti* damaged, mishandled or destroyed either.

### **The *Ka***

The ancient Egyptians knew when a person had died because he or she had lost their vital essence. This loss of essence was the loss of *ka* from the body but not the end of life although we would say the person was deceased. At this point the *ka* had left the body. However, this idea is closely related to the Western notion of *soul*. It refers to "spirit" and it is often related to the idea of the second image of the person, the person's double. Therefore, even after the person had deceased the *ka* could remain active so long as it had food, oils, and incense. *Ka*, as the double of the personality of a man or woman, could be any place. This was not necessary the body, but the spirit, so to speak. In fact the *ka* could actually separate itself from or unite itself with the body. It could also move freely from place to place and return to its body. When a person died the living had to make sure that the *ka* was taken care of so that the dead person could have eternal life. Thus, offerings of meats and oils, or cakes and wines were made available to the *ka*. So long as the *ka* was pleased, pleased, taken care of, then the person who was the owner of the *ka* could be satisfied. Actually when tombs were built many of the offerings were painted on the wall to insure that the *ka* would have a constant supply of oils, meats, and cakes. The special rooms in the tombs where the *ka* was worshipped, because in effect, the *ka* was a part of divinity, having been given to humanity when humans were created. According to the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts* when the almighty Ra, Ptah, Amen, had created Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Ausar and Auset, Neb-het and Set, the divinity put his arms around them so that his *ka* might be in them.

### **The *Ba***



However it was the *ba* that was referred to as the soul. It had eternal existence after death. While the *ba* is closely associated to the *ka*, the personality double, it is also related to the *ib*, the heart, a key constituent of the human. The *ba* was illustrated as a hawk with a face of a human often wearing a beard. After death the *ba* was believed to visit its body in the tomb. Graves were constructed so that the *ba* could find its way through the narrow passages in the pits. At the pyramids of Meroe in Nubia openings were left in the stones covering the top of the pyramids so that the *ba* might enter them. This same pattern can be seen in some of the Egyptian pyramids. A ledge for standing on the pyramids was also placed below each opening so that the *ba* could have a place to rest and from which to enter the tomb. The *ba*, that is, the soul was understood to be able to visit places the deceased love to visit and to do things the deceased enjoyed in life, like fishing, hunting, riding in chariots, sailing the Nile and so forth. The *ba* was an animating force, able to bring the deceased to his favorite hunting grounds and to visit the homes of special people. Because we are all unique the ancient Egyptians believed that the *ba* was an aspect of this uniqueness that would live so long as it could find the body of the deceased. So it was essential that the body be protected because there was no life, no eternal life, without a body. Consequently, this philosophy was at the root of the idea of burying the dead. If there were no body, then the *ba* would have to wander around looking for a body. It was not thought of as some generic spirit or some disoriented soul but rather as a specific, focused force related to the body of the deceased. Conceived by the ancient philosophers as a bird flying out of the tomb in search of the *ka* the *ba* came into existence after death. As a human-headed bird, such was the representation, it was able to move back and forth between the places the deceased enjoyed in life and the body of the deceased. The *ba* is perhaps best thought of as the person himself! There



is no immaterial existence to the *ba*; it is directly connected to the material. In the West the idea of the psyche was used to describe the *ba* but the *ba* is not equivalent to soul in the West because of its connection to the deceased. In this regard the *Ba* is just one of the spheres of personal existence. While the *ba* comes into being when the body is dead it carries with it the idea of Ra uniting every night with Ausar as the *ba* returns to the mummy while spending the day engaged in life external to the tomb in a non-corporeal guise. In the *Book of the Coming forth by Day and the Going forth by Night*, called by the Germans, *Das Todenbuch*, the *ba* is seen visiting its body to which it presents the symbol referred to as *shen*, symbolic of eternal life. Finally the notion of eternal life, although singular in the sense that one person would seek to attain this status, was really about the union of all souls in the heavenly city, Anu Ionnu, a version of the terrestrial Ionnu, Greek called the city Heliopolis. While most Egyptians knew that eternal life would be hard to guarantee they nevertheless would put a piece of gold, if they had it, on the breast of the deceased's mummy to help guarantee the proper journey in the *neb ankh*, the lord of life, called by the Greeks, the sarcophagus, the flesh-eater.

Now the aim of this search for eternal life was to become an *akh*, a person of charisma, magical powers, after death. Throughout Africa this idea was translated into the notion of ancestor-hood, that is, the reverence for ancestors who because of their lives are able to affect situations, phenomena, and relationships on the earth among the living. Ancient Egyptians believed that the union in death of the *ba* and the *ka* helped to bring about *akh*. This idea of *akh* became the functional concept of the dead person as a ghostly intellect who could move at the will of the living to assist them in any capacity. Once the re-animation of the *akh* occurred with the re-unification of the *ba* and the *ka* the dead person was made into a living *akh*. Just as the ancestors would



later be called upon in various African beliefs to settle disputes, heal the sick, or relieve grief, the *akh* played a similar role because one could use the *akh* to bring good or to bring punishment. The deceased depended upon the living to make the correct rituals, to perform the right ceremonies, and to know what offerings were necessary. Therefore, the objective of the human is to hold back the chaos that comes when one is not prepared to live eternally. Creating the conditions for a truly everlasting future is the work of the physical lifetime. As the ancient Egyptians understood, a person did not want to die a second death by not preparing adequately although it was rumored that humans could return a million times.



The souls of Pe and Nekhen towing the royal bargue on a relief of Ramesses II's temple in Abydos.



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<sup>1</sup> See Molefi Kete Asante, *Ancient Egyptian Philosophers*. Chicago: AA Images, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Maulana Karenga, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Routledge, 2003; Willie Cannon-Brown, *Nefer: The Aesthetic Ideal in Classical Egypt*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Kemet is the name used by the ancient Africans; the word “Egypt” is the Greek name for Kemet.

<sup>4</sup> The French word commonly used is *cartouche*, but the ciKam word is *shenu*.