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AKH
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Ach
Akh

The notion of akh, often translated as (effective) spirit, pointed toward many different meanings, such as the identity of the transfigured dead as well as that of living persons who acted efficaciously for (or on behalf of) their masters. The akh belonged to cardinal terms of ancient Egyptian religion and hence is often found in Egyptian religious texts, as well as in other textual and iconographic sources. Its basic meaning was related to effectiveness and reciprocal relationship that crossed the borderlines between different spheres.

أشار مفهوم الـ (akh) بمصر القديم والذي عادةً ما يترجم بالروح (الفعالة)، نحو معاني مختلفة ، مثل هوية المتوفي وهوية الأحياء اللذين تصرفوا بشكل فعال عن أسيادهم أو نيابةً عنهم. ينتمي مصطلح (akh) إلى المصطلحات الأساسية للديانة المصرية القديمة، وبالتالي كثيراً ما يظهر بالنصوص الدينية وغيرها بالإضافة إلى المصادر النصية والمناظر. يتعلق المعنى الأساسي لهذا المصطلح بفعالية (akh) وتبادلية العلاقة ما بين (akh) وعالم الأحياء التي عبرت الحدود ما بين المجالات الأدمية والإلهية، وما بين عالم الأحياء وعالم الموتى.

The *akh* is included among religious terms connected to the Egyptian conception of human and divine beings, their status, roles, and mutual relationships. Since it was linked to a wide range of ideas and beliefs at the core of ancient Egyptian religion, this term and its derivatives occur regularly in Egyptian religious texts, as well as in textual and iconographic sources of other character.

Although the *akh*—like the words *ka* and *ba*—lacks an exact counterpart in any modern language, it has often been translated as “spirit” (e.g., Assmann 2001: 17; Smith 2009: 4), leaving aside the impossibility to find exact counterparts for words in different languages. The Egyptian term, however, pointed toward many different but interconnected meanings, for instance, the ideas of the transfigured, efficacious, glorious, or blessed dead. The

term *akh* also had to do with the notions of being an intermediary between the living and the divine (see below). The core meaning of *akh* had to do with the idea of “effectiveness” (Friedman 1981, 1982, 2001) and mutual relationship or dependence that crossed the borderlines between the human and divine spheres, and between the world of the living and the realm of the dead (Assmann 2001: 36 - 37, 440 - 444).

The Egyptians used a representation of the northern bald ibis (*Geronticus eremita*; Janák 2011, 2013) for the hieroglyphic sign “*akh*” (G 25). The bird (as well as its ancient images) is easily recognizable by the shape of its body, posture, shorter legs, long curved bill, and a typical crest covering the back of the head. Although there are many aspects of this bird’s nature that must have had impact on the mind of the Egyptians—such as the glittering colors

on its wings (Kuentz 1920: 185 - 188) or its call and greeting display (Dautheville 1922; Pegoraro 1996: 39)—the main factor in holding the bird in particular esteem and relating it to the concept of the *akb* was its habitat, since the northern bald ibis used to dwell on rocky cliffs that stretched out along the eastern bank of the Nile (Janák 2011). It was the region that the Egyptians called the *akhet*, and considered the region of sunrise, rebirth, and resurrection. Therefore, these birds were connected with powers and beings believed to dwell within or behind the region of the horizon.

Although recent research has shown that no primary link probably existed between the word *ꜥḥ* (*akb*) and the term *jꜥḥw* (*jakbu*) meaning “light, radiance, or glow” (Jansen-Winkeln 1996: 205 - 208), the *akb* was often connected with solar light and stellar brilliance (Friedman 1981, 1986: 99, 2001: 8), or even with the light-based creative power (Englund 1978; Friedman 1982: 145). K. Jansen-Winkeln has put forward the idea that the original notion of the *akb* and of its derivatives was linked to the mysterious, invisible power and efficacy of the sun at the horizon (e.g., *akhet*) during the dawn and the dusk when the light was visible although its source remained hidden (Jansen-Winkeln 1996).

Gods, Akbu, and Men

The Egyptians divided the cogitative beings of the world into different types or categories with regard to the degree of their power and authority. This concept occurred for the first time in Middle Kingdom texts and remained in use until the Roman Period. The division of the categories of beings appears also in the Coffin Texts and the *Book of the Dead* (Gee 2009: 7 - 8), as well as in hymns (Assmann 1999: 120), ritual (Derchain 1965: 1*) or educational texts, and onomastica (Gardiner 1947: 13 - 14*).

The highest position among the beings was held by the gods (*ntrw*) and the lowest was reserved for human beings (*rmt*; occasionally subdivided into *pꜥt*, *rhyt*, and *ḥnmmt*), or rather

the living (*ꜥnhw tp tꜥ*). The boundary sphere between the human and divine worlds was believed to be operated by semi-divine entities or beings with super-natural status and power, such as the demons (Lucarelli 2010) and the blessed and the damned dead (the *ꜥḥw* and the *mwtw*), and by the supreme intermediary, the king. Royal annals or king-lists, which sometimes record divine dynasties and rule of the *akbu* prior to the historical or at least legendary rulers, witness a very similar concept of hierarchy (Gardiner 1959; Redford 1986: 11 - 13; Žabkar 1968: 6 - 7, 15 - 23).

Becoming the Akb

As to the role of the *akb* among other terms relating to composites, parts, or manifestations of human and divine beings (Gee 2009; Koch 1984; Loprieno 2003), unlike the body, the *ka*, the shadow, it was never believed to represent part of the composition of a human entity. The Egyptians considered their blessed, efficient, and influential dead (i.e., the *akbu*) as “living,” that is, as “resurrected.” According to Egyptian ideas on life, death, and resurrection, a person did not *have* an *akb*, he or she had to *become* one. Moreover, this posthumous status was not reached automatically. Human beings had to be admitted and become transfigured or elevated into this new state. The dead became blessed or effective *akbu* only after mummification and proper burial rites were performed on them and after they had passed through obstacles of death and the trials of the underworld. Thus, only a person who lived according to the order of *maat*, who benefited from rituals or spells called the *sakbu*—those which “cause one to become an *akb*” (Friedman 2001: 7) or the “*akb*-ifiers” (Allen 1994: 27)—and was subsequently buried, could be glorified or become transfigured into an *akb*. Late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period offering formulae attest the idea that a person was made *akb* by the lector priest and the embalmer (Barta 1968: 61). After reaching this status, the dead were revived and raised to a new plane of existence (Smith 2009: 4). The positive status of the mighty and transfigured

akhu was mirrored by a negative concept of the *mutu* who represented those who remained dead, i.e., the damned.

From a cosmological point of view, the horizon (e.g., *akhet*) played a very important role in the process of becoming an *akh*. Although it mainly represented the junction of cosmic realms (the earth, the sky, and the netherworld), the horizon was a region in itself (Leprohon 1994). The *akhet* was believed to be the place of sunrise, hence the place of birth, renewal, and resurrection, and, moreover, it was considered a region where divine and super-human beings dwelt and from whence they could venture forth (Allen 1989: 17 - 21; Friedman 1981: 68 - 69; Jansen-Winkeln 1996: 203 - 205). Thus, the horizon represented the very place of “birth” or “creation” of the *akhu* (Allen 1994: 27; Hays 2009: 209 - 212; Pyramid Text §§ 152, 350, 585, 621, 636, 1046, 1261). In the *Book of the Dead*, the blessed dead were denoted as “those who dwell in the horizon” (Chapters 15 and 105).

Besides the above-mentioned moral and ritual prerequisites, one’s intellectual power and knowledge as well as his or her social status might have been important factors in reaching the *akh*-status (Loprieno 2003: 212 - 213). In a parallel to the world of the gods and human beings, a certain hierarchy and stratification existed even within the society of the *akhu*. Thus, the (deceased) king or Horus represented “the head of the *akhu*” (Pyramid Text §§ 833, 858, 869, 899, 903, 1724, 1899, 1913 - 1914, 2096, 2103) or was considered the first of the *akhu*, the “*akh akhu*” (Luft 2008).

The Role and Power of the Akh

When a dead person’s journey to the afterlife had successfully finished and he/she was justified, transfigured into an *akh*, and resurrected, the person became a mighty and mysterious entity, which participated in the divine sphere of existence and yet still had some influence upon the world of the living. The *akhu* guarded their tombs where they promised to punish intruders on the one hand

and be inclinable to those who presented them with offerings on the other (Demarée 1983: 203 - 213). But they also interacted with the living by means of superhuman powers and abilities: they could help in cases when human abilities were insufficient, as evidenced by the so-called Letters to the Dead (Demarée 1983: 213 - 218; Gardiner and Sethe 1928; O’Donoghue 1999; Verhoeven 2003; Wentz 1990), and acted as mediators who could intercede on behalf of the living with the gods or other *akhu* (Baines 1991: 151 - 161).

Although the *akhu* had reached the afterlife existence, they still needed the living, since it was the latter who performed rituals, carried out the embalming and funerary requirements, and provided their dead ancestors with offerings (Friedman 1981: 137 - 138). Sustaining the needs of the *akhu* is attested by a ceremony called “the feeding the *akh*” with the glorified deceased depicted in front of food offerings in the 4th and 5th Dynasty tombs at Giza (Junker 1934: 62). This ceremony was later incorporated into the Opening of the Mouth ritual (Otto 1960: 153). Later still, Ani in his *Teachings* reminds his audience that one should appease the *akh* with everything he desires, since that spirit is capable of doing all kinds of evil things (Loprieno 2003: 215; Quack 1994: 142 - 143).

As for the above-mentioned “feeding of the *akh*” scene, some scholars have connected it to depictions attested on Early Dynastic cylinder seals (James 1974: pl. XIV, no. 8; Kaplony 1963: pl. 111, no. 595) where the *šps*-noble is represented seated opposite a head-turned *akh*-bird with an offering table in between them (Friedman 1985: 86), and by doing so, traced the feeding of the *akh* ritual back to early periods of Egyptian history. Such interpretation is, however, still uncertain, as is the identification of the bird on these seals, since the depicted animal does not bear the main characteristic features of the northern bald ibis (Janák 2011), and it thus would represent an unprecedented way of imaging this bird, unique both in Egyptian script and art.

The *akhu* and the living represented co-dependent communities, and their mutual relationships and cooperation formed one of the pillars of ancient Egyptian religion. And it was precisely the bilateral *akb*-efficient, reciprocal actions (Friedman 1981, 1986: 99) of both categories of beings, which crossed the threshold of death and the border of this and the next world. In this funerary context, the living son was efficacious and serviceable for/on behalf of his father, as much as the father was *akb*-efficient and beneficial for/on behalf of his son (Coffin Texts VII, 109), besides being an *akb* himself. The son gained this status by providing his father with burial and offerings, as well as by assuming the father's earthly position and authority, and the latter by legitimizing the son's heritage and authority as well as by supporting and protecting him from the afterlife (Assmann 2001: 442 - 443; Friedman 1981: 6 - 7, 185 - 187).

This type of a mutual efficacy between father and son found its mythological model in the relationship between Osiris and Horus (Assmann 2001: 66 - 68; Friedman 1981: 82 - 93). As early as in the Pyramid Texts (PT §§ 584 - 585, 612, 636, 648, 1712, 2264), Osiris is said to have become an *akb* (blessed, justified, glorified, resurrected, mighty, etc.) through the deeds of his son Horus; in the same way, Horus was believed to have become *akb*-effective and was legitimized by his father Osiris. A similar idea is attested also in the *Book of the Dead* Chapter 173 where Horus comes to Osiris to revive him with the embrace (of his *ka*), that is, to make him an *akb* (Friedman 1986: 101).

From the Old Kingdom onwards, the term *akb* often received an adjectival qualification within mortuary texts and tomb inscriptions. Thus, the *akb* could be *mnḥ* (proficient, potent), *šps* (noble, venerable), but mainly *jkṛ* (excellent, competent) and *ḫr* (equipped) (Demarée 1983: 189 - 278; Friedman 1985; Kloth 2002; 116 - 119; Shalomi-Hen 2006: 124). These expressions should describe the status and the power of the *akb* that were based on undergoing proper rituals, having

proper tomb equipment and cult, and knowing proper spells or magic (Friedman 2001: 8). Moreover, they should also draw attention towards his ability to act effectively for/on behalf of the living, since the *akhu* were both efficacious/helpful and influential. The efficacious power or competency of the *akb* was not restricted only to the above-mentioned bilateral, reciprocal relationship between two agents, mainly father and son, Horus and Osiris: it also covered a trilateral relationship where the *akb* functioned as a mediator, intercessor, or messenger between the living and higher super-human authorities, other *akhu*, and the gods. Using a word-play or pun as the Egyptians often did, we can say that a blessed, glorified deceased was believed to operate as an “*akbtaché*” of a divine authority among the living, who could intercede on behalf of his or her worshippers.

From the Old to the Middle Kingdom, the living (both direct descendants of the deceased and the passers-by) could turn to the *akhu* in their tombs with offerings and spoken pleas (Baines 1991: 151 - 161; Demarée 1983: 198 - 237), or even with requests written in “letters” (Baines 1987: 87; O’Donoghue 1999; Verhoeven 2003; Wentz 1990). From the New Kingdom onwards, however, different media in this type of ancestor worship or private cult are attested (Stevens 2009): these include the so-called anthropoid ancestor busts (Exell 2008; Friedman 1985) and mainly the *šḥ ḫr n R^c* (*akb jqr en Ra*) stelae (Demarée 1983). The latter artifacts (attested from the late 18th Dynasty to the 20th Dynasty) showed the deceased person seated, usually with a lotus flower at his or her nose, and denoted him or her as an excellent *akb*, who is in a close relationship to the sun-god Ra and who can thus operate for/on behalf of him and intercede for/on behalf of worshippers. The *akb* was believed to have similar qualities and dispose with similar powers that have much later been ascribed also to angels in Greek magical papyri (Gee 2009: 9 - 12), ghosts in Coptic literature (Adams 2007: 17 - 18), and the saints in Christianity.

However, the *akh*-effectiveness and its reciprocal relationship were not restricted to the sphere of the afterlife and to the mutual relationship between the living and the dead (Friedman 1982: 145 - 146). Also the living of all social levels could become *akh*-effective on behalf of a higher earthly authority, or they could perform *akhw*-deeds for somebody (Friedman 1981: 1 - 13). Thus, kings, officials, and townsmen could act with *akh*-effectiveness on behalf of their gods, kings, lords, or one another (Friedman 1982: 146, 2001: 7). The efficacious power of the *akh* was again connected both to the reciprocal relationship between father and son and to the trilateral relationship with the *akh* acting responsibly on behalf of a superior authority and helpfully for his petitioners.

The Akh-Relationship in the Amarna Period

Recent research has shown that the above-mentioned *ꜥh ꜥkr n Rꜥ* stelae probably had their direct precursors in the so-called “Family-stelae” of the Amarna Period that have been interpreted as media of religious practice rooted in ancestral worship with the king Akhenaten and his wife as Aten’s direct intermediators towards the people (Fitzenreiter 2008). Thus, the king was truly operating according to the proclamation of his new name, that is, as an (or rather the only) *akh en Aten*. Not only did he claim that he was *akh*-effective for/on behalf of his father Aten in the same way his divine father was *akh* for him (Friedman 1986: 99 - 102; Sandman 1938: 56, 59, 91), but he himself became a direct object of cult as Aten’s only intermediary, messenger, and image.

The importance of this concept is also strengthened by the fact that in the Amarna tombs we lack the former notion of the glorified and effective deceased (*akh*). The deceased are intentionally denoted almost exclusively as the righteous (*mꜣꜥtjw*) or favored ones (*hꜣsyw*) there (Sandman 1938). The expression *akh* and the hieroglyphic sign of *akh* itself occur mainly within the name of the king or with regards to the relation between the king and the god. Other

attestations speak about the earthly “*akh*-effective” and “serviceable” power of scribes and priests (Sandman 1938: 77, 83) or about the *akh*-effectiveness of the deceased officials to their lord, the king (Friedman 1986: 99; Sandman 1938: 60, 91, 98 - 99). Similar *akh*-effective relationships of officials towards the king are attested, for example, in Parennefer’s Theban tomb (TT 188; Sandman 1938: 141) or within an offering formula found in a private house in el-Amarna (Sandman 1938: 170). A unique phrase was discovered among inscriptions in the tomb of Aye at el-Amarna: “You are first among the king’s companions, while similarly you are the first in front of the *akhw*” (Murnane 1994: 119; Sandman 1938: 100). W. J. Murnane translates the last term as “illuminated spirits,” however, in the light of the above-mentioned evidence on the *akh* reciprocity and relationship, we may assume that the expression was not endowed with its earlier mortuary meaning, but that it referred to Aye’s earthly position and his role as the highest official. Thus, priests and officials of the Amarna Period acted as *akhw* for/on behalf of the king, who himself operated and interceded as the *akh* of the supreme authority of Aten (Friedman 1986: 99 - 102). The same officials, however, did not receive the status and function that was assigned to the glorified deceased prior to the historical period in question. They did not become the *akhw* who would act on behalf of gods and intercede on behalf of the petitioners, since this position was already occupied by the god’s sole earthly image, emissary, and intermediary, the king, as the sole *akh* of Aten.

Akhw Power in Ritual and Magic

Besides the plural form *akhw*, a similar term (*akhw* as an abstract) is attested in Egyptian sources. It referred to *akh*-effective deeds (Friedman 1981: 1 - 13), creative power of words, or ritual and magical spells (Assmann 1984: 108 - 112; Ritner 1993: 33 - 34). It also covered the aspects of secret knowledge and magical power of “invisible efficacy” (Friedman 1981: 241 - 254; Jansen-Winkel 1996: 209 - 212; Ritner 1993: 30 - 34) possessed and operated by the gods, the

deceased and magicians, or present in magical and medicinal texts (Otto 1975: 51).

As was already mentioned above, the deceased were both respected and venerated for the *akb*-efficacious help they offered, but they were also feared for their power and for revenge they might bring. In this respect, the term *akb* referred not only to the deceased individual but also to his powers and potential manifestation. Usually, the living asked these mighty, effective, and influential deceased for

help by cultic means (see above). However, in several attested cases, we read about the summoning of an *akb*-spirits to work for a magician or to speak to him, and there is also evidence for repelling of malevolent *akbu* and exorcisms, as in the case of the famous Bentresh Stela (Loprieno 2003: 214 - 215). These ideas on the nature, power, and function of the *akb* survived even within Coptic words, particularly the *jkb* (demon; Crum 1939: 89; Ritner 1993: 30).

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