

The Ancient Art and Burial Practices in the Service of Mental Health (Images of the Soul in Ancient Egyptian Culture)

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A B S T R A C T

The article raises the question of what constituted images of the human soul in Ancient Egypt. To answer it, the author considers, on the one hand, the image of man in the first two cultures (Archaic and the culture of the Ancient Kingdoms) and on the other hand, the understanding of art at that time. Four interpretations of the soul in Ancient Egypt are analyzed (the ordinary one during life and four after death - "Ba", "Ka", "shadow" and "Akh"). It is shown that from a theoretical point of view (in cultural studies and semiotics), these interpretations can be understood as objectifications of schemes created to resolve problematic situations in certain anthropopractices, some of which we would today classify as practical psychology. A reconstruction of these problematic situations and anthropopractices is proposed. It is concluded that man and art were understood in the Ancient world completely differently than in the Modern era and that ancient art helped man cope with his problems, including the fear of death.

Keywords: Anthropopractice, Man, Soul, Schemes; Problematic Situations; Culture; Language; Artistic Ontology; Interpretation

The pyramids of pharaohs and tombs of the Ancient Egyptian elite contain picturesque and sculptural images of the patrons, their relatives, servants, houses, economic activities, as well as burial rituals; we would now retrospectively classify them as the first realization in the history of European culture (the culture of the "Ancient Kingdoms") of art and practical psychology. The questions, however, are: was this art as we understand it today and can burial practices be likened to practical psychology? Let us postpone these questions for now and first characterize the factual side of the matter, namely, the representation of man by himself at that time. Specifically, this representation

was expressed by the word "soul," which originated from the previous, archaic culture.

The meaning and senses of the soul were different, varying across different countries, among different ancient peoples and in different periods, but in theoretical cultural studies, invariant meanings of this representation can be reconstructed¹. The soul was understood as life (whoever had a soul was alive), it did not die and lived in a "house" (the body of a person, animal or in a natural element - sun, wind, fire, river, etc.), from which it could fly out like a bird from a nest (in dreams, illness), but, while the person lived, returned there. After a person's death, the soul left

its house forever and moved to another world - a burial site, the land of ancestors, a temporary dwelling (among the Khanty and Mansi, this is the “itterma,” a wooden idol 60-80 cm tall), the Tree of Life (depicted precisely as a tree, on whose branches souls rested in the form of birds).

In the culture of the Ancient Kingdoms, souls give way to gods, to whom souls are now subordinate. Specifically, in Ancient Egypt, the main god is the sun god “Ra,” and for the dead - Osiris (the god of the underworld, where souls went after death). A god could also take life, but like a king by his command; however, his main characteristics were different: governing man, maintaining order in the world, protection in a broad sense (from bad souls and foreign gods). We are accustomed to thinking that each person has one soul and if two or more, it is a pathology², but, judging by historical data, ancient man thought differently (**Figure 1**). Again, reconstruction in theoretical cultural studies allows us to assert that every Egyptian believed he had five souls: an ordinary one during life and four after death - “Ka,” “Ba,” “Shadow,” “Akh”.

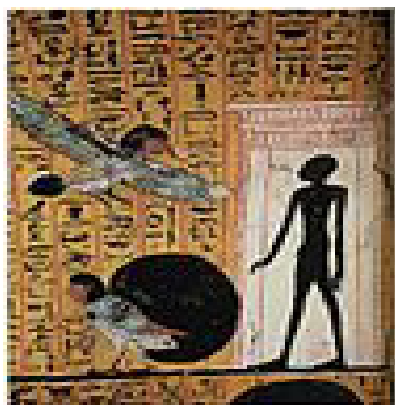


Figure 1: Ba and Shadow. Theban Tomb of Irynfer TT290.

On the wall of this tomb, the Ba soul is drawn as a bird with a human head; it seems to be meeting the shadow of the deceased entering the burial. Often Ba is depicted in tombs with an erect phallus, strongly reminiscent of petroglyphs used by ancient man to explain how the groom transfers the soul of the future child into the mother's body (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2: Neolithic. Tiu, North Africa.

Comparing such petroglyphs with Egyptian images of Ba allows us to suggest that Ba is a modification of the archaic soul in Egyptian culture. The sense of this cultural transit is clear: in the subsequent culture (of the Ancient Kingdoms) it was also necessary to understand where the child's soul in the mother's body came from, how it got there. The groom, shooting his sperm at his bride, transferred the child's soul into the mother's body; he, as a hunter, killing an animal, transferred the animal's soul to the land of death or to a burial. It turned out that the groom and the hunter were one and the same person; consequently, marital relations were identified in archaic culture with hunting, for which there is much evidence.

It is more difficult to understand the function of the shadow. It was also escorted to the kingdom of death and offered gifts. Since in Osiris's kingdom the shadow was pursued by demon souls (“devourers of shadows”), one can think that the shadow-soul was offered to the demons as a sacrifice (better let them eat the person's shadow than his immortal Ka soul) (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3: Statue of the Ka of Pharaoh Hor.

Egyptologist Andrey Olegovich Bolshakov in the book “Man and his Double.” Looking at the pharaoh, his courtiers, possessing power quite comparable to the power of the Egyptian king, although he was considered the living sun god Ra, also began to dream of continuing life after death. In response, the priests developed a scenario to realize this dream: for services to Egypt (which could always be found for representatives of the elite), the priests asked the gods to create a second soul for the patron – Ka, which was placed in the picturesque and sculptural images of the petitioner (for this, masters and artists, often over many years and for a lot of money, created these images beforehand). Gradually, an esoteric practice of creating a second soul developed, the so-called ritual of “Opening the Mouth and Eyes.” The priest touched the eyes and mouth of the patron's images with a chisel (a burin or a rod), asked the gods to create a second soul, uttering a text of mythological character, as, for example, is carved on one stele: “The face of so-and-so is opened, that he may see the beauty of the god, during his good procession, when he goes in peace to his palace of joy... The face of so-and-so is opened, that he may see Osiris, when he becomes justified in the presence of the two Enneads of gods, when he is at peace in his palace, his heart is satisfied forever³”. From that moment, the patron had a second soul, Ka, which lived on in his images even after his death, although the first one went to Osiris's kingdom.

The setting of the “Opening the Mouth and Eyes” rite can be partly understood by examining the pictorial narrative of the scribe Ani's send-off to Osiris's kingdom (**Figure 4**)⁴.

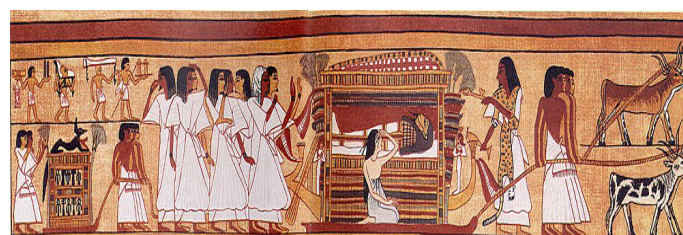


Figure 4: ...O you who admit flawless souls into the Hall of Osiris!

May you admit the flawless soul of the deceased scribe Ani, who has triumphed [in the Hall of Double Truth], to enter with you into the house of Osiris!

May he hear what you hear; may he see what you see; may he stand when you stand; may he sit as you sit! (Concept)

Now, what is Akh? One interpretation of this soul is as follows: Akh is immortal, born after a person's death from the fusion of Ba and Ka, goes to the sky to join the gods. The sky goddess instructs the deceased so-and-so: "Find your place in the heavens, / Among the stars, / For you are the Lone Star, the companion of Hu! You will look down upon Osiris, as he commands the spirits... / You are not among them, you must not be among them!" (Ibid.) This text suggests that the Akh soul belongs only to the chosen ones ("You are not among them"), perhaps the first esotericists who identified themselves with the gods.

How can these facts be interpreted theoretically? I propose a semiotic explanation: the souls of the Egyptian man and what we take for works of Egyptian art are objectifications in the culture of the Ancient Kingdoms of "semiotic schemes" that allow understanding certain "anthropopractices." The general functions of a scheme are as follows. A scheme allows resolving "problematic situations," ensures understanding of what is happening, sets a new vision and reality, as well as the possibility of new action⁵. A simple example is the scheme of the Moscow Metro.

As a concept, the "scheme" known to everyone as a graphic image with explanatory text is a scheme only in the case of a special reconstruction. Namely, it is necessary to restore the "problematic situation" whose resolution forced the invention of this scheme, the "reality" set by this scheme, the "new actions" that this scheme allows to construct. In this case, the problematic situation for the designers was the need to organize passenger flows in the metro and help an individual visitor navigate it (enter and exit at the right stations, make transfers, build routes, etc.). The reality of the metro, set by this scheme, is not a construction and complex technical device, but a spatial structure of station entrances and exits, routes, transfers. The metro scheme allows the visitor to navigate and use the metro. In other words, the "scheme of Moscow metro lines" by itself is a scheme in the ordinary sense, i.e., a conventional simplified image of a complex phenomenon, while the graphic image with explanatory text, included in the reconstruction where the problematic situation, reality and new actions are restored, is a scheme as a semiotic concept that allows understanding the essence of the phenomenon that interested the researcher.

Accordingly, for Ka, the problematic situation was the desire of representatives of the ancient Egyptian elite to live forever and in the same status. The concept of Ka, developed by the priests, plus the images of the patron created by Egyptian masters and artists - these are schemes (narratives) setting a new understanding and vision (a new reality) - the Ka soul. The rituals of giving birth to Ka, feeding it, communicating with it - are new actions.

Bolshakov shows that light, as well as food, were the two main conditions for the afterlife of Ka. That is why sacrifices (mainly food) had to be brought to Ka and lighting of burial chambers ensured. Thus, the life and well-being of Ka depended

entirely on the living. The representation of Ka, Bolshakov asserts, is closely connected not only with images (statues and wall reliefs and drawings) but also with a person's name. "The image of a person is almost always accompanied by his name and titles, clarifying the identity of the depicted, as if being a component part of the name <...> the image is clarified by the name, the name is supplemented by the image." Semantically, Ka is a root word with a wide variety of words - name, light, illumination, reproduction, pregnancy, work, food, gardener, sorcery, thought, god.

For Ba, problematic situations can be considered the desire to understand what death, illness, dreams, rock images of people and animals and later souls of natural and social phenomena represent (Rozin, 2019). For example, Australian aborigines drew the soul of the wind as a spiral (obviously, similar to how a whirlwind twists dust into a spiral) and many primitive peoples invented a narrative to explain an eclipse, in which the eclipse was explained by an attack on the luminary by a giant predator. "In the Tupi language," writes E. Tylor, "a solar eclipse is expressed by the words: 'the jaguar has eaten the sun.' The full meaning of this phrase is still shown by some tribes by shooting flaming arrows to drive away the fierce beast from its prey⁶". Here the spiral and the narrative of the jaguar attack are schemes. Above we gave a graphic scheme explaining where the mother gets the child's soul from.

The problematic situation for the shadow was probably the desire to protect Ka in Osiris's kingdom from demons and for Akh - to assert oneself as chosen (an esotericist).

It is worth noting that the schemes do not depend on each other; accordingly, the souls were also understood as independent. It is difficult to say what relations the Egyptians established between them; in any case, not holistic and not systemic (holistic discourse was invented by Plato in antiquity and systemic - only in modern times). At best, relations of management and power were established between the souls, which was characteristic of the social life of the ancient world. But I think it was often more convenient to consider a person's souls as independent, which opened up greater possibilities. By the way, by introducing the unconscious and asserting that it is independent of consciousness, Z. Freud rediscovered the same strategy.

What was characteristic of the problematic situations and schemes of ancient art? First, an example - the depiction of a pharaoh as a lion; on its chest we see the pharaoh's name, indicated by a cartouche (an oval in which the king's name was inscribed)⁷ (**Figure 5**).

A modern viewer would decide that the Egyptian artist worked in the genre of symbolic art, so the sculpture is a symbol of the pharaoh's might (strong as a lion, king of beasts, essentially, of course, of people). But a man of Ancient Egypt saw something else - before him was the soul of the pharaoh in the form of a lion. Let me explain. The point is that man of the culture of the Ancient Kingdoms in the field of art inherits the vision of the previous, archaic culture. In the latter, as I show, works were understood very peculiarly - images of people and animals were understood as evoking the corresponding souls, which can be understood by recalling the soul scheme. Indeed, people and animals are visible, but they are not physically present, obviously these are souls. In this case, it is clear that to evoke a soul, for example, of a person,

one needs to draw him or make his sculpture. And to send the soul back, the created image needs to be damaged, destroyed, which was practiced for many thousands of years. For example, if the transgressions of a deceased official were revealed, the pharaoh ordered the destruction of his Ka images in the tomb. So, within this conceptualization, what did the Egyptian see in the lion-pharaoh? Before him appeared simultaneously the lion and the king's soul as a single living being. Not a symbol, not an image, but a lion-pharaoh; this is difficult for us to understand, but I think for ancient man it was a relatively ordinary matter (it is no accident that people in trouble hugged sculptures of gods and called upon them for help).



Figure 5: Pharaoh's Might Sculpture.

Conclusion

Now we can return to the questions posed above: can we speak of art in Ancient Egypt and also liken the considered practices to practical psychology? Naturally, no. Art in our understanding had not yet taken shape and its content was different. Yes, the Egyptian artist used painting, sculpture, architecture and music when creating his works, believing that souls should not lose anything of what they have. He created some schemes so that the soul had the correct form, colour and appearance, others - matter and corporeality, third - a proper house, fourth - the correct sound. To omit something meant to harm the soul and anger the gods. In this respect, the ancient artist was, of course, more responsible and fearful than the modern one.

Of course, it is also difficult to speak of psychological practice, since the concept of psychology would take shape almost three millennia later. However, in function – helping to overcome various phobias – ancient burial practices and art resembled psychological assistance and therapy.

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