A REEVALUATION OF THE NAME AKHENATEN AND ATEN

By Asar Imhotep (June 17, 2012)

This is a preliminary essay that takes a second look at the meaning of the name for the famous 18th Dynasty nsw bjt (king) Akhenaten (formally Amenhotep IV) of ancient Egypt. The orthodox definition of the name of ḫn-n-Jtn¹ (Akhenaten) is usually given as "The living spirit of Aten." Aten was the name of the sun-disk, or put another way, the name focuses on the shape of the sun. I think the definition given by orthodox Egyptology is not wholly accurate. Egyptology tends to not translate names or put the names in a context that makes sense. In this essay we will use a different methodology from orthodox Egyptology and that is to examine cognates in other African languages to try to ascertain the intended meaning of the name ḫn-n-Jtn. I think the ciLuba and kiKongo languages of the Congo would be a good starting point and could provide us with a better understanding and vocalization of the name.

¹ The initial /j/ in Jtn is to be understood more as an /i/ sound. This /i/, however, in many translations of the name is given as /a/; thus Aten.
As stated before, Akhenaten was formally known as Amenhotep IV and during his fifth year in office he changed his name for reasons unknown. He changed most of his names in year five with the exception of his throne name. His full names are below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Horus name</th>
<th>Amenhotep IV</th>
<th>Akhenaten</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kanakht-qai-Shulli</td>
<td></td>
<td>Meryaten</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nebty name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wer-nesut-em-ipet-swt</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wer-nesut-em-Akhetaten</td>
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<td>Golden Horus name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wetjes-khau-em-lunu-Shenay</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wetjes-ren-en-Aten</td>
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<td>Prenomen</td>
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<td>Neferkheperure-waenre</td>
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<td>Neferkheperure-waenre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nomen</td>
<td>Amenhotep Netjer-Heqa-Waset</td>
<td>Akhenaten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The name is believed to consist of $\text{\textit{Ah}} + n + \text{\textit{Jtn}}$. It is my contention, however, that the $n$- was probably attached to $\text{\textit{Jtn}}$ to be read something like $\text{nJtn}$, but that has yet to be proven. Let's deal with the first word, $\text{\textit{Ah}}$.

$\text{\textit{Ah}}$ "spirit, successful, right, be beneficial, useful, profitable, glorious one, good, beneficial, advantageous, fame, worthy of, devoted to, to please"

$\text{\textit{Ahw}}$ "benefactions, good, excellent things, glorifications, ability, mastery"

$\text{\textit{Ahw}}$ "sunlight, radiance"

$\text{\textit{Ahw}}$ "power (of god), magic, magical words, useful knowledge, master"

The /\textit{h}/ glyph is really an /\textit{l}/ sound. This gives us a consonantal skeleton of $l-\text{\textit{h}}$. The /\textit{h}/ sound in Egyptian corresponds to ciLuba /k/ or /g/. Cognates in ciLuba for our Egyptian term are:

-\textit{-lenga} "beautiful, good, to improve, be good, be beautiful, be advantageous, be at peace, be sure"

-\textit{-lengele} "good, nice, pleasant, beautiful, useful, advantageous, course"
cilengà "fine clothes, ornament, adornment, jewel, finery"
-lèngama "abound, be abundant"
lengàlengà "very many, very large amount, overflowing"
bulenga "beauty, goodness, quality,"
-à-a Bulenga "saint, holy"
ntungù "gratuity, benefit, bonus, advantage, reward, compensation, payment”

The /k/ sound has been nasalized and weakened to /g/. The ciLuba terms above are synonymous with bwîmpè (Egyptian nfr):

bwîmpè(à) "beauty, goodness, approval/accreditation, elegance, excellence, kindness"

The word Jtn is often defined as "sun, sun disk." Jtn as the “sun” is cognate with Tirma (Nilo-Saharan) atunu “sun”; Efik-Ibibio (Niger-Congo) utin “sun”; Yoruba (Niger-Congo) tan “to light up, to spread rays”; Sumerian utu “sun,” šùn “star, to shine” (t>š). The word derives from the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sumerian</th>
<th>Bantu</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>laha “dry, shine etc”</td>
<td>tango “sun”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This aspect of the term derives from a root meaning “fire.” However, the Egyptian jtn also defines the “disk” of the sun, which is more a focus on the shape than the actual element of fire. As we can see from the Bantu entries above, the la/da root is often suffixed with -l, -n, -g or -k (Bantu tango “sun”; dang “to shine”; taku “day”; Acoli ceng “sun,” etc.). We would expect to see this suffix in regards to the shape of the sun as well. In ciLuba we have:

ntàngu "circle, field, discipline, domain, sector, sphere"
ciTangu "circle, circular, ring"
njingu "circle"
citungà “a large round basket” (sense evolution?)

2 The abbreviations used above mean the following: PWS = “Proto-Western-Sudanic”; PWN = “Proto-Western-Negritic”; CN = “Chari-Nile.” See Campbell-Dunn (2009b: 18) for sources.
Often the /l/ derives from /l/ which in ciLuba would give us: *lunga* "folding a thing onto itself and join, make ends meet"; "connect, link"; "weave, make chains." A circle is just a line/path that loops and connects. *Ntangu* and *lunga* are related concepts. The sibboleth form in Egyptian is *snh* "bind, fasten, entwine." An alternate form of *jin* "sun disk" (circle) would be *šnw* "circuit, circumference." It is also the word for "collar" which we know is "circular" and "connects" around the neck. *šnw* also means "enclosure" and "cartouche" (*šnj* "encircle"). This circular path in the Kongo is cosmologically connected to creation and the life “cycle” and is known as *diKenga*.

![Dikenga Cosmogram](image)

The above cosmogram depicts the (perceived) path travelled by the sun which is imitative of the life cycle in general. As a result of this traveling, the process and path of movement is associated with the Kongo conceptualizations of *time*. The process of time as a series of events in Kikongo is *dingo-dingo*. The word for “events” is *dunga*. The general word for “time” is *ntangu*. This word finds its roots in the word -*tanga* which means “to count, put in order, accumulate, go into steps, go back and forth.” This same verb translates into “read or to dance.” The plural is *matanga* and is a dance ceremony held in connection with the final funeral rites of a community leader. When the Africans were brought into the new world they brought this ceremony with them and it became *matanza* in Cuba and *tango* in Latin America.

Another word for “time” in Kikongo is *tandu* from the root *tanda* “to mark, set in a line, or to cast.” A third term is *kolo* which is linked to the verb *kola* which expresses a state of being, a level of strength at a given period of time. One would express the concept of “hour” as *lo, lokula,* and *ndo*. I argue that all of
these terms are cognate and variations of the following words in Egyptian: \( rr \) “time”; \( rk \) “time” (of ancients, kings); \( tr \) “time, season, fated time, moment”; \( 3r \) “time, moment, instant, end, period (of time)”; \( k\text{nw} \) “long time”; \( nri \) “time, return of the year”; \( nri \) “periodically”; \( nw \) “time, for a while”; \( nwt \) “time, moment, hour”;

\( h\text{nw} \) "time, lifetime" \( \{z = 1; \) Kikongo kolo “time”\]; \( w\text{i} \) "far (from), long ago, for a long time past, distant, far (away)"; \( 3w \) "long" (of space, time); \( 3\text{w}t \) "length" (of space, time); \( j\text{nw} \) "number, counting, census, numbering, each, every, every time that"; \( h\text{n-t}y \) "the two sides (of time), the two ends (of time), continually, eternity"; \( h\text{n}t \) "space (of time), lifetime"; \( h\text{n}/h\text{ntw} \) "first (in time), before, earlier"; \( w\text{s}3 \) "free time, remaining time."

The root is \(-r\) (-\( l-\)) and deals with “length, height, distance” (ciLuba \(-\text{le}(a) \) “length, long, tall, above”) with various prefixes, some which have gone through their own morphological changes. Time is measured by counting intervals of “length.” One counts a duration of time by “connecting” smaller intervals in sequence. In Africa, however, time isn’t simply a linear series of events, but “circular.” This ‘cyclality’ is symbolically represented by perceived motion of the sun and it is within this tradition, I argue, which is behind the connection of \( j\text{tn} \) and “sun disk” (circle). It probably denoted “time” and “seasons.” \( j\text{tn} \) would then be related to: \( j\text{rnw} \) “schoenus”, measure of length”; \( t\text{nw} \) “number, grow up, mature” (measure of time); \( n\text{ti} \) "plinth, pedestal, towering” (underlying theme of "length, above, grow").

A word for “circle around, round, be oval” is \( sj\text{n} \) (\( \times ? \)). Often you will see words where the morphemes are reversed in Egyptian which provide a different shade of meaning. The word \( n\text{tn} \) "cycle" (of the sun) may be relevant here [\( j\text{-tn} <> n\text{-tn} \)].

With Africans being a poetic people, they wouldn’t evoke the spirit of the Divine for which the sun is its totem by simply acknowledging the shape of the sun. The idea of “circle” relates to something more fundamental. Here I argue that \( j\text{tn}-\text{lunga}/n\text{tàngu} \) means "complete, entire, all encompassing, fulfilled, wholeness, perfection" (ciLuba \( ka\text{sèle}(a) \) "complete"). This is exactly the case among the Bakongo who call the Divine (Nzambi) Kalunga "the completely complete being all by himself." Ka-Lunga is the Kongo equivalent to Egyptian Jtn.

Dr. Kimbwandende kia Bunseki Fu-Kia, in his work Self-healing Power and Therapy (2003: 114), notes that Kalunga is the “one-who-is-complete-by-[it]self, the all-in-all.” Kalunga is the presence of complete power/energy that gave birth to moyo “life” (Egyptian \( j\text{b} \) “heart”), and to lualungunu “universe.” For the Bantu people, it is the source of universal power that made things happen in the past, makes things happen today, and above all, will make things happen tomorrow. In Fu-Kia’s other work, African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo (2001: 19), he notes that Kalunga is a “fire-force” which emerged within the mbungi (the emptiness/nothingness) and became the source of life. In ciLuba this is reflected as -kàllenga “frying, roasting.” This would definitely correlate to \( j\text{tn} \) being the sun, the great fire in the sky.

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3 This Egyptian word \( rr \) “time, season” is cognate with ciLuba \( leelù(ò)=lèelù(ò) \) "now"; \( dyà leelù(ò), dyà kààleelù(ò) \) "this time"; \( leelù(ò) \) wa ndaâyà "today"; \( leelù(ò) \) wa baaleelù(ò) "this very day"; \( -d\text{-a } b\text{wena leelù(ò)} \) <bukwà leelù(ò)> "current generation"; \( b\text{een}a leelù(ò) \) "people today"; ileelwija "actualization, update."

4 The primordial “substance” of ancient Egyptian cosmology is called \( n\text{w} \) or \( n\text{nn} \). Most translate this as “waters” because of a similarly spelled word \( n\text{w} \) “water.” Here we suggest that \( nw \) is just a variant of our \(-r\) root dealing with “distance” and "time." In ciLuba we have \( m\text{ene} \) “true (absolute) being”; Munene “grand, great” (\( <\text{nene} \); \( n\text{nu}u \) “eternal” (also “old, ancient”); nene, nan “pure limitless expanse”). The \( n\text{nn} \) in Egyptian, then, is a word for “time” from the root \( nw \) “time, for a while.” The form \( n\text{nn} \) (\( <\text{rr} \)) is a reduplication done for emphasis to denote “eternity” (ciLuba \( n\text{nuu} \) “eternal”).

5 12, 000 royal cubits

6 The Egyptian terms \( s\text{s}w \) "large round disk"; \( sw \) "sun"; \( sr\text{w} \) "turn round" may be of interest here as well.

7 I argue that this notion of “yesterday, today and tomorrow” could geographically be represented by a circle. See Fu-Kiau (2001, 2003) for examples.

8 It should be noted that kalunga can also refer to “water” and the “ocean” in particular.
With *Ka-Lunga* being the “all-in-all,” this also confirms that the (circular) “sun-disk” is a metaphor for completeness, perfection and more so eternity. A reflex in ciLuba is –*kàlanga* “coating, coat, be coated” (in essence “be covered completely”).

Variations of the kiKongo name *Ka-Lunga* would be *Ka-Tunga, Ka-Dunga* (Bantu *tango* “sun”; *dang* “to shine”). Among the Amazulu the Divine is known as *Itongo*. In Yoruba-land the *Ṣàńgo* and we get *Ṣàńgo* who is the god of lightning and thunder, but as E. Bólájí Idowu states in his work *Olodumare* (1994: 93) *Ṣàńgo* was a “solar” deity in times past. *Ṣàńgo* is named for his “brilliant whiteness” (Egyptian *jt* “shine, light, illuminate”). In the Sudan *Ṣàńgo* among the Dinka is known as *Deng* “the god of thunder, lightning and rain” (in other words the “heavens” that expands and covers all things).

Based on compared African religious frameworks that are similar to Egyptian, I interpret images of the sun used to represent the Divine also as metaphors for “sight, revelation, and unveiling.” This is supported by the fact that many African traditions, including the ancient Egyptian, see the sun as God’s “eye.” With that said we have in ciLuba:

- *ntankù* "watch, show, demonstrate"

In Egyptian this is reflected as *tnḥ* "to look, to observe"; "to wink, to blink." *Jtn*, then, would be the one who “watches over us, protects us, and monitors our progress, who keeps a watchful eye.” There is a possibility that *Jtn* could also be an alternative form of the word for “father.” In this case we have the possibility of in ciLuba:

- *shàànyì* "my father" (<*shà* "father") [Egyptian *jt/wtt/wttw* "father, begetter"; *t>s*]

These forms can give us a variety of possible vocalizations for the name Akhenaten. Thus far we have the following:

- Lenga-Ntàngu
- ciLenga-ciTangu
- Bulenga-Njingu
- Bulenga-nTanku
- Lenga-Shàànyì
- Bulenga-nTangu (Kalunga)

I would go with something like the following:

\[\text{BuLenga-Ntankà: "The Holy One who shows (demonstrates, displays) beauty, goodness, quality, excellence"; or "The manifestation of beauty, goodness, quality, excellence"}\]

or

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10 See my forthcoming publication titled *Dyalusha-Dya-Cikam* (2012).
"Bulenga-Ntàngu | Lengele-Ntàngu | Kàlanga-Kàlanga (Kàlanga KànTanga(u)/KaTanga(u))"
"Complete goodness, beauty, excellence" : “The splendid, the glorious full and whole” : "Infinite goodness, splendor, brilliance, beauty" : “The one who has the wholeness of splendor,” “The lord clothed in glorious light.”

or

"Lenga-n-Shàànyì: "My Father adorned in glorious light/beauty.""

"Lèngama-Shàànyì: "Father of excellence, abundance, flourishing."

"Ntungù-Ntàngu “Rewards, benefits, blessings that come full circle”; “Infinite blessings”;

Factoring in the -n- ("to, for, to (persons), in, upon, of, because, belongs to, against, the) of ḫ-n-Jtn, we have possible meanings of "worthy of splendor"; "adorned in glory"; "mastery of wisdom" or "adorned in his elegance/excellence/brilliance." If we take jtn to mean “circle, complete, perfection,” then we interpret the name as “The glory in his perfection”; “Perfect in his radiance”; “Beautiful in his perfection”; “The quality of wholeness/perfection”; “Abound in Eternity”; “[I] abound/flourish because [of] Jtn” (The eternal, complete power/energy that gave birth to moyo/life); “Overflowing (basking?) in [His] radiance/warmth?”

There are many possibilities to consider and as we can see, these names are multi-layered. I think these renderings are more accurate than "The living spirit of Aten" which doesn’t attempt to define Aten. I look forward to your feedback.

Jtn = Aten = Atunu = Itongo = Sango = Ntàngu = Katanga = Kalunga = Ntankù
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