Reinterpretations of the ANKHX symbol: Emblem of a Master Teacher

By Asar Imhotep

Abstract: In this paper we will reexamine the core meaning of the ANKH symbol which has been given the definition of life in mainstream Egyptological literature. We will attempt to expand this definition in hopes to bring about clarity of its many meanings and its applications that have eluded researchers who have looked outside of Africa in an attempt to accurately convey its possible implications. We will also explore alternative linguistic renderings of the term which may further enhance our knowledge of what is possibly being conveyed by the ancient Nile Valley sages.

In this essay we will look at possible alternative interpretations of the ancient Nile Valley symbol known in modern Egyptological literature as the ANKH (onkh – Coptic). The popular definitions of ANKH are as follows:

\[ \text{ ank } \rightarrow \text{ life } \]

\[ \text{ ank } \rightarrow \text{ live, life, be alive } \]
Although some of the definitions are clear, the inspiration behind the symbol of the ANKH has eluded historians for decades. Some of the more popular interpretations of the symbol used to represent life are 1) that it is a combination of a womb and phallus together to represent the union of masculine and feminine energy; 2) it is an early representation of the cross most popular in the religion of Christianity known as the Crux Ansata (handled cross); and 3) that it is a representation of a messob table used to serve food in Ethiopia.

That last interpretation is not well known in the United States and deserves further explanation. In a vast majority of African cosmological myths, all life comes from an egg. This is definitely the case among the Dogon and the ancient Egyptian cosmology. In the Amarigna and Tigrigna languages of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the word *enqalal* means “egg.” The hieroglyph used to represent the phonetic sound of KH can also represent the k, q and g sounds. As we can see the ANKH and ENQ are phonetically similar. With that said, the word (verb) meaning to motivate or to give life in Amarigna is ANÄQAQA. Informants tell me that the ANKH (anäqaqa) in their tradition is really a messob table with an egg (enqalal) on top of it. Here are a few pictures of a messob table:

![Messob tables](image)

---

1 See *Amarigna and Tigrigna Qal Hieroglyphs for Beginners: Perfect for travelers to Egypt and students of ancient Gebts* (2009) AncientGebts.org Press by Legasse Allyn
For the Ethiopians, the ANKH symbol is possibly a messob table with its top off and an egg on top of it. It is kind of like the hotep (hutuapo –Bantu, adaba – Yoruba) symbol that has a cake on top of a floor mat. As Ethiopia in ancient times was a major trading station for central east Africa and the upper Nile Valley, their symbolic associations often deal with commercial interests. At the same time we can assume they are used metaphysically as well. Just as an egg incubates/produces life, life is maintained by the consumption of food (as an egg is a food staple).

This is just one interpretation. However, given the evidence that is to be presented below, I am not convinced that we can look into the Amarigna language for the ultimate etymology of this term or for the origins of the ANKH symbol. This appears more of a conceptual variation more so than a cognate as it seems the term cannot be broken down into KA(A) which is the true root of ANKH.

The ANKH symbol is predynastic and as my informants from various areas of the Kongo will attest, the ANKH symbol is a creation of the early Twa people of central Africa. For the West and Central Africans, the ANKH symbol is more in alignment with the common interpretations of life and man (humanity) attested to in mainstream Egyptology material. What I want to add to this discourse is the notion that the ANKH symbol is not only a symbol for man and life, but is also a symbol for an initiated MASTER or PRIEST.

To fully address this subject matter requires a separate volume in of itself. I will not explore the more in depth aspects of this discussion here as this is just a preliminary essay. I will reserve a full treatment for an upcoming work titled *The Ena, The Ancestors and the Papyrus of Ani* scheduled to be released in 2010. To understand the connection between the ANKH symbol and a master teacher, one has to be familiar with the African concept of the *Four Moments of the Sun*. I take this name from Robert F. Thompson’s book *The Four Moments of the Sun* as the original concept is known by many names across the continent of Africa.

In short, African people are generally not of the belief that our existence ends when we die. From my research, the overwhelming contention is that the spirit has a pre-human existence, it descends to earth to have experiences, the body then dies and the spirit continues to have an experience in another realm...
before coming back to earth to have more human experiences. In essence they speak of life being a cycle of change: of living-dying-living. African people have encapsulated this philosophy within a diagram that we call the “four moments of the sun.” It is called this because African people symbolically associate the human being as a living packet of energy: a miniature sun. The birth of a child is seen as the rising of a living sun and death as the setting of a living sun. We find in the Egyptian this same conceptualization in the Mdw Ntr script:

\[ \text{KHI(y)} \rightarrow \text{[KIAU/KHA?]}. \]

\[ \text{Babe i.e., “the rising sun”} \]

\[ \text{Budge 525a} \]

The sun apparently travels around the earth in a 360 degree circular path. They usually however mark four cardinal points of interest in this diagram: one sun at each cardinal direction (north, south, east and west), with each position of the sun representing a certain key stage of development. These stages of development are not relegated to human beings as this represents the life cycle of all living or created things. The most complete work on this subject is Dr. Kimbwandende kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau’s 2001 book titled *African Cosmology of the Bantu Kongo*. An in depth treatment of this aspect of the subject is beyond the scope of this essay and I leave it up to the reader to read the source material in their own time. For now please observe the following graph called the *Dikenga* among the Bakongo of Central Africa\(^2\) that represents perpetual change [*dingo-dingo*] among the Ba-Ntu people:

\( \quad \)

---

A human being is a rising and setting sun around the world.

B – The birth (butuka) of a child is the rising of a living sun in the community
F – The death (fwa) of a human being is the setting of a living sun in the community
N – The upper world (ku nseke) or the physical world
M – The lower world or spiritual world (ku mpemba)
K – Kalunga, the invisible wall between the physical and spiritual world

< Living Sun (human being)  < Burning Coal of Community (BAKAYA)
In the Kongo each demarcation is called a “V.” A more elaborate graphical interpretation of the Kongo Dikenga dia Dingo-Dingo is provided below:

![Dikenga Cosmogram](image)

The most important stage that concerns us here is V-3 (Vanga) which represents the Tukula (red colored) sun of maturity, leadership and creativity. The word Vanga derives from an archaic Bantu verb ghanga which means to do, to perform. It is where we get the term NGANGA which means a master, a knower, a doer, a specialist, etc. In Bantu languages one can often turn a verb into a noun by means of affixation. In this case the letter -n- is a contraction of the word ENIE or ENYIE which means “one who, a possessor, that which.” In the case of the Kikongo term N-GANGA it is a statement simply saying “one who does” or “one who performs.” This Vee is the most critical in life as it represents the stage of creativity and great deeds or tukula stage of the root verb kula which means to mature or master.

What is implied by this term is that an nganga is someone who is highly knowledgeable, highly respected and also a community leader who has put in work to enhance the lives of the community and to maintain balance (to make sure the community waves aren’t shaken) of village life. An nganga is a master, a doer and a specialist in a community of doers. Dr. Fu-Kiau expounds on this subject and stage of development more fully in his African Cosmology of the Bantu Kongo. He informs us that:

This Vee, the third, is a reversed pyramid. It occupies the position of verticality [kitombayulu], the direction of gods, power and leadership. People, institutions, societies and nations as well, enter and exist in this zone successfully, only if they stand on their own feet. One enters and stands up inside this Vee to become a doer/master [nganga], to oneself first before becoming an nganga to the community (…) To stand “well” inside this scaling Vee is to be able not only to master our lives, but to better know
ourselves and our relationship positions with the rest of the universe as a whole. (Fu-Kiau, 2001:140-1)(emphasis mine)

An nganga is an initiated master. The word for initiation and the word nganga are similar in morphology. The word ghanda means initiation. It is similar to the word ghanga which means to perform or to do which becomes nganga: a master, a doer, specialist, community leader. This directly informs our discussion in many ways. The first is linguistically which we will discuss further below. The second is iconographically as Dr. Fu-Kiau plainly informs us that:

This power figure, the leader/priest [nganga], who stands powerfully at the center of the community issues [mambu], became the Egyptian ankh or symbol for life. Of course, among Bantu people, an nganga stands “vertically,” and powerfully inside the community “Vee” [telama lwimbanganga mu kanda], as the symbol of active life in the community. (Fu-Kiau, 2001:131-2) (emphasis mine)

As we can see in the account from Fu-Kiau, the ANKH symbol, in the Kongo context, means more than simply life: it represents an active life of a master; thus ghanga (to do, to perform). It is my contention that the actual pronunciation of the word ANKH is actually closer to the pronunciation of the word for life and man in the Bantu and the Akan languages: NKWA. At the heart of the word NKWA or ANKH is the word KA or KAA which in the Egyptian and Niger-Congo languages mean fuel, power, life, to have life, be, have being, spirit, energy, be burning and more. In my publication The Bakala of North America: The Living Suns of Vitality, I argue the following in regards to our term NKWA that directly informs our discussion here:

Fire in African philosophy represents not only life, but the soul of a human being. This is why KAA or KALA also means MAN or LIVING PERSON. KAA is the root of KWA which in the Niger-Congo languages means MAN, PERSON, LIFE. When you put the prefix N to KWA you have NKWA meaning LIFE in the Niger-Congo languages.
The N prefix is a Bantu formative morpheme, interchangeable with the MU morpheme, that means “that which” or “he who.” It denotes “something pertaining to.” It may derive from a word that is present in Kiswahili ENYI or ENIE which defines ‘possessing’ or ‘having’ or “being in a state or condition.” There is a similar adjective in Kiswahili ENYEWE or ENIEWE and is used to express identity or uniqueness and used to express the personality of a person. The N prefix may simply be a contraction of ENYI/ENIE.

WA is a passive suffix which indicates that the subject is being acted upon by an agent. It can also be rendered as UA or WE and expresses identity or distinctiveness. A major feature of Bantu is its ability to turn verbs into nouns by way of affixation. So KAA would be in this sense a verb meaning TO LIVE. KAA + WA → KWA would mean TO BE ALIVE. N (ENYI?) + KAA + WA → NKWA would mean HE WHO HAS LIFE (fire) or the POSSESSOR OF LIFE. NKWA is more than likely the correct way to say the ancient Egyptian word ANKH (an- in Coptic, -ong- in Duala which means LIFE, LIVING or PERSON (see below). We have a similar rendering of the term in Igbo but does not have the intrusive k sound. Our term in Igbo is ONWE (the self) which is a contraction of two words ONYE NWE which means the possessor, or own lordship. The Igbo sees a given human being as ONWE YA: a lord unto himself.

NKWA

Ancient Egyptian ankhu = man
Budge 124B

As mentioned earlier, the kh sound can also be a k, q or g sound. It is my contention that the heart of ANKH is really KA. K and G are often interchangeable. Thus the K in the Egyptian could also be rendered G which would render our term NK→ NG. What we would have in the Bantu languages is a case of reduplication. NGANGA is really NGA-NGA. It is sometimes found in the form NGAA or GA. Often words are reduplicated to add a change in emphasis. For example, in Yoruba (Niger-Congo in general) the word BA means expansive power or male energy. From this root we get BABA (father), BABAGBA or BABA BABA (grandfather). Another example is DA which means to create. DADA is the Spirit of Vegetation in liturgical Ifá (Yoruba spiritual system). Repeating the word DA (create) suggests recreation or the power of vegetation to continuously go through the process of birth, growth, death and rebirth. So in the case of NGANGA, the root is GA which is reduplicated to refer to someone one who does the work. Remember K and G is often interchangeable. So it is no surprise that we find in the Egyptian:

BAKAA

To work, to labor, to toil, to serve, to do service, to pay tribute
Budge 206b

---

The word KA is found in the Hausa root (t-r-k-) tiraka, and the Yoruba talaka (t-l-k-) which means “poor, working class.” These are variations on the same theme. The root is found in Semitic l’k “to work, to labor” (see Hebrew mala’kah “occupation, work”) and l’k “send” (see Hebrew mal’ak “messenger – hence angel). This initial l- is lost in Hausa aiki “work” and aika “to send.”

The word KA is also a term for authority which also adds credence to our interpretation. Observe the following (Imhotep 2009):

kaka (God) → Egyptian
kaka Yetu (description of God as primary ancestor) → Luvale-Bantu
nkaka → (family head) - Kikongo
ka → (greater, superior) - Igbo
kaananke → (leader, leadership) - Soninke
NKWA mavanga → (mature leadership) - Kikongo
nkwiki → (coal fighter, metaphor for leader - see Fu-Kiau 2001:27) - Kikongo
nkani → (a judge) - Kongo, Loango and Tio (see Kleiman 2003:155)
kumu-ambuku → (owner of the village) - Mitsogho
tunka → chief, leader - Soninke
tunke → master, chief - Soninke

As we can see in the Egyptian, by reduplicating the term KA we get a term that represents God. The word KA, again, means power, energy, spirit, man and life and by doubling the term we add greater emphasis on these concepts to reflect the magnitude of the Supreme Being. Here is our term KA reduplicated in the Mdw Ntr script:

KAKA

Ancient Egyptian = God
Luvale Bantu = ancestor, elder, God
Luvale-Bantu = KAKA (YETU) – our god (yetu = our)
Kiswahili = an elder relative, elder brother

It should be noted that the determinative above of the seated man with beard that is often rendered solely as a sign of a deity. In actuality, it represents any person of authority or of high rank including ancestors. Odunyoye (1996:73) notes that among the Yoruba, “The idea of the wisdom of the
elders is *igbon* “chin,” where the beard grows, the beard being a sign of age and of mature wisdom. Hence Hebrew *zaken* is ‘old’ and *zakan* is ‘beard’ and ‘chin’. Thus why you will find in the Yoruba:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoruba</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ewú l ogbó</em></td>
<td>“Grey hairs signify age”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Irungbôn l’ àgbà</em></td>
<td>“Beards signify elderliness”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we can kind of get a sense as to the meaning behind the beards in the “deity” determinatives in the ancient Egyptian writing script. It is clear that it is a sign of a *wise man* or *master*. We will discover that the Western practice of trying to interpret everything when it comes to Africa “religiously” leads to gross misinterpretations of the data.

Our interpretation of the ANKH to mean NGANGA, in relation to master teachers, elders, etc., is supported by the Bantu cognates mentioned above which extend the term KAKA to elders and ancestors. So given what has been discussed so far, we can reinterpret the Egyptian symbol for *life* given as ANKH to be NKWA or NGANGA:

**NGANGA**

\[ \text{ankh} = \text{life personified, the name of a god} \]

reinterpretation = a master, doer, a true knower, a specialist, teacher, priest, healer, a power figure

Budge 125A

The Bantu cosmology, symbolized in the Dikenga cosmogram above is going to be key in interpreting some other concepts below. It is this cosmogram, and its corresponding symbolisms, that help us to accurately interpret certain poses in Egyptian reliefs. The following is an excerpt from an online article I wrote titled *Posture and Meaning: Interpreting Egyptian Art Through a Kongo Cultural Lens*. In this article we analyze certain poses and their meanings in the culture of the Kongo and compare them to Egyptian motifs in hopes to better understand the meaning behind Egyptian postures. A key pose of the Kongo that is important to the topic of the current article under examination is the **Crossroads Pose**:

**The Crossroads Pose**

The crossroads pose, with right hand up to heaven and left hand parallel to the horizon line, characterizes the *niombo* figure. The *niombo* of the Kongo would be equivalent to the *orisha* of the Yoruba, or the *neters* of the Egyptians. This gesture is found in Kongo, Cameroon and Nigeria and has made its way to Haiti via *vodun*. The right hand up and left hand down recalls the anthropomorphic reading of the hand-guards of the *mbele a lulendo* (knife of authority), the royal swords of execution in ancient Kongo. In Kongo this gesture, on swords and *niombo*, marked the boundaries between two worlds (upper and lower worlds).

---

We see this pose on another version of the nkondi figure. We will also observe that the ancient Egyptian Bes is also in this position.

Nkondi (Kongo) with crossroads pose

Unknown Kongo artist and ritual expert, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola, Nkisi nkondi power figure, about 1890, wood and mixed media. Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W’18 Fund, the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall Fund, the William B. Jaffe Memorial Fund, the William S. Rubin Fund, the Julia L. Whittier Fund and through gifts by exchange; 996.22.30233. On view in the exhibition Art That Lives?
This pose relates to the cosmogram mentioned earlier and could signify in the Egyptian the meeting place between the ancestral realm and the manifest realm. Remember that an nganga has the insight to ‘see’ what goes on in the community. That is another way of saying that he has the eyes of the ancestors. The nganga is the link between the living and the dead and this pose informs the wisdom seeker that this person in fact has the wisdom, insight, ability and authority to operate in both the realm of the living and the dead: that he is indeed the link between the realms.

Now examine the following predynastic Egyptian image with the same pose:
To further substantiate our interpretation of ANKH to mean a MASTER, PRIEST, etc., we will have to side track a moment to another Egyptian term that is often not accurately translated: PR (per = house). The following extract is also from Imhotep (2009) and I will quote it at length as this directly informs our discussion. This particular excerpt discusses the term pharaoh, which derives from the Egyptian pr aa which means great house, and its spread across Africa. We note the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egyptian</th>
<th>Walaf</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per-aa = Pharaoh</td>
<td>Fari = Supreme King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paour = the Chief</td>
<td>Fara = officer in charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-our = the King</td>
<td>Fara leku = keeper of harem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-ouro = king (Coptic)</td>
<td>Bur = king (b &gt; p)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the kiKami language, the term PR-AA not only referred to the Supreme King, but to administrators as well. In the Mande language of Mali and Upper Guinea, we find the same terms as we do in Wolof: Fari, Farima, Farma all designating political functions. In Songhai we have Faran and in Hausa we have Fara (Diop 1991:168-9). Among the Amarigna speakers of Eritrea and Ethiopia the term is Biro which is usually interpreted as office. This term means the same thing from West to East to South East Africa as demonstrated above. So we have a direct correlation in name and in function in ancient Egyptian and the rest of Black African societies.

Ancient Egyptian pr-aa = house, seat of government, pharaoh, palace

It must be said, however, that the term fara, fari, faro, etc., is not just a title of political office: it represents a secret society. In other words, the secret society is the political office. No matter where you go in Africa, a king is an initiated priest. You cannot hold “office” in traditional African societies unless you have been initiated. This practice is no different in ancient Egypt. The fari represent those initiated persons who belong to the society of initiated priests. Evidence of this is still kept alive in West Africa in Liberia among many ethnic groups. Please observe the following:
(b > p > f is a common sound shift)

**Pora** → *the great secret society of men* (Mande, Vai, Gola, De, Kpelle, Kissi, Gbande, Belle, Loma, Mano, Gio Ge, Bassa, Kru, Mende, Kono, Temne, Lokko, Krim, Limba)

**Beri** (in Sierra Leone) → *ibid*, sometimes called **poro**.

These organizations operate from a very Afrocentric perspective. They understand that you cannot govern this society without first being initiated into its history, philosophy, spiritual nuances and social norms. Dr. Fu-Kiau informs us that in the Kongo this concept is called being able to “tie and untie knotty ropes” (Fu-Kiau 2001, 2007). You can’t begin to interpret and understand why we do what we do unless you have been initiated into this organization/wisdom center which has been created to maintain the integrity of a body of knowledge on how to effectively govern our society and handle power without abusing it (Imhotep 2008:87-95).

This same organization made its way into the United States as a result of slavery. Among the Gullah of South Carolina the secret society became known as **beri, berimo** and **poro** all meaning “the great secret society of men.” In essence, we literally had ‘pharaohs’ who became enslaved in the United States. Due to the restrictions of slavery and segregation, these societies were reorganized into burial societies and insurance companies to take care of the sick and dying and to cover the cost of funerals (Halloway 2005:204, 216).

So here we posit that the *pr-aa* was not simply a political office, but a wisdom center (misnomered secret society) or an organization of leaders in African societies. It was/is a society that trains and initiates leaders. Remember earlier in our discussion it was mentioned that an **nganga** is an initiated master and community leader. We see that in the ancient Nile Valley the ANKH (**nganga**) followed the same milieu.

**BIRO/FARI/PORO NGANGA**

\[ \text{pr ankh} = \text{house of life (the name of a college of priests)} \]

\[ \text{reinterpretation} = \text{(secret) society [wisdom center for] of masters (priests)} \]

Budge 124B

It is becoming clear that there is more to *life* in the Egyptian and general African context. But what does it mean to live fully in the African context? Fu-Kiau has already informed us that the ANKH symbol in the Kongo represents the active *life* of a specialist in the community. We find a similar connotation among the Akan of Ghana, where the term ANKH is pronounced NKWA. Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi in
his essay The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology supports this expanded African concept of living in the Akan tradition. He states:

As one critically examines the prayers of the Akan in the traditional religious setting, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the overriding concern is the enjoyment of nkwa (life). This is not life in abstraction but rather life in its concrete and fullest manifestations. It means the enjoyment of long life, vitality, vigour, and health; it means life of happiness and felicity. Nkwa also includes the enjoyment of ahonyade, (possessions; prosperity), that is, wealth, riches, and substance, including children. Nkwa also embodies asomdwei, that is, a life of peace and tranquility, and life free from perturbation.

For those of you familiar with ancient Egyptian texts, you will immediately recognize the bolded text in the cited passage above as it matches, word for word, the following salutation given to the king in ancient times:

NKWA, WAJU, SIMBA

Ancient Egyptian ankh, udja, snb = life, prosperity and health
reinterpretation = life, vitality and blessings
Budge 124B

These are the wishes appended to the name of the king and bestowed upon honored persons by the Netchers. I think that a few of the words above are in need of a reinterpretation. We have already discussed the word ANKH. The next word up for revision is the word wdja which is commonly rendered to mean prosperity. I think that this term does, on one level mean prosperity, but that this definition is in fact an extended definition. The clue is the glyph that makes up the term: an active flame on raised earth or a heap of coals. It is argued that Egyptian belongs to the Afro-Asiatic languages in which the Semitic is one of its branches. When we look at the term WAJU or WAJO in a few of these languages, then the term becomes clearer. In Ethiopic the term WAJU or WAJO means to heal or recover health. WAJO also refers to a person who roasts and distributes meat at ceremonial meals. A dialectical variant is pronounced WAYA which means heat, warmth; wayyaa, recovering from illness. WAYU means fire-brand. In the Yindin language the word WAJU means to burn or cook. Among the Kuku Yalanji of Australia WAJU also means to burn (not related to Afro-Asiatic).

The word snb (seneb) should be properly rendered SIMBA. In the Egyptian, the water sign used to represent the letter /n/ sound can actually be rendered as /m/.

---

6 Let the Ancestors Speak: Removing the Veil of Mysticism from Medu Netcher (1995:68). JOM International INC., by Ankh Mi Ra
8 See Allyn (ibid).
healthy. In the Shona-Bantu the word simba means a force, be healthy, be strong, and powerful. Dr. Fu-Kiau however gives us a more refined set of definitions for the term. Simba also means to hold up, to keep, to bless, to treasure, to touch and to retain. In the context of the salutations given above, it is my belief that the word UDJA (waja) is the word referring to being healthy as wdja deals with healing and vitality (thus the use of the flame symbol); and that SNB (simba) actually refers to being blessed and having prosperity. Although this phrase is written with separate glyphs, Budge (124B) in one rendering only uses the word ANKH to mean life, strength and health. This would correlate with the Akan NKWA which means life, vigour, health and vitality.

All of this to say that for the African life is simply not reduced in meaning to just having a heart beat. It is an active life full of vigor, great health, vitality and service to the community. An NKWA (ankh, ong, onkh, nganga, kaka) is a human being who is initiated into the secrets of vitality that uses their wisdom for the betterment of the community by means of service. Dr. Kykosa Kajangu in his unpublished PhD dissertation title Beyond the Colonial Gaze: Reconstructing African Wisdom Traditions (2005) provides insight into the character of an elder who in our case would be the nganga (ankh) or which is sometimes called in the Bantu the Bakoles or Bakulu. The elders or living libraries in a community of memory are people who are...  

… [M]otivated actors who construct symbolic worlds in which people live and die in Africa. These builders of symbolic worlds manage the destinies of African wisdom traditions. These sages exhibit the following characteristics. First, they have learned to the highest degree the secrets for knowing life and the strategies for stemming the tide of its challenges. It is this reservoir of knowledge that enables elders to be effective teachers. Second, they embody the teachings of centers of wisdom. They have developed countless strategies or teachable viewpoints to take people to places where they have never dared to go. Third, they have proven track records of success in taking direct responsibility for the development of the youth in their community of memory. (emphasis mine)

Dr. Kajangu adds an important element to this discussion that I think we can add to our expanding definition of ANKH; that is ANKH just isn’t life itself, but the obtainment of the highest degree of the knowledge of life and the strategies necessary to tower over the one thousand and one of its challenges. Dr. Fu-Kiau wouldn’t find any disagreement with Dr. Kajangu’s assessment of the role and characteristics of an elder (the nganga). It is these characteristics that make the living worthy of deification after death by the community. Remember that the term “god” commonly rendered in the Egyptological literature actually refers to initiated priests, elders, ancestors and the divine aspects of nature. In regards to the nganga Dr. Fu-Kiau (2001:78) instructs us concerning a responsible leader in that:

Political and diplomatic missions were akin to deification for those who knew how to handle the people’s responsibility. Coming back from an important and successful mission for my community, a simbi kia nsi, literally, holder of the country’s equilibrium, a wise man took my hands, spit on them, and said: “If you season the policy of people and the community correctly, you are deified” [Watwisa mungwa ye nungu mu kinzozi kia

---

9 Simba Simbi: Hold up that which holds you up. (2006:1) Dorrance Publishing, Inc.
“n’kangu ye kanda, zambusu.” This Kongo proverb shows us that only obedience to the people’s will makes people heroes and gods and not otherwise for the red carpet is not requested, it is earned [nkwal’a luzitu ka yilombwanga ko].

If a community member was in fact a doer (nganga-a performer of service to the community) then he would be deified among the people. It is the learned and skilled sage who can bring balance to the country, who knows life to the highest degree and how to successfully meet its challenges that are worthy of the name nganga and can truly say that they have in fact lived in every sense of the word.

It should be noted that the ankh symbol is not exclusive to the Nile Valley and the Kongo. It is a sign that means life all over Africa, especially in South Africa among the Zulu and the Khoi Khoi. Among the Zulu this symbol is known as “the knot of eternal life” or “the knot of eternity.” It should also be noted that the sign in ancient Egyptian symbolism is represented by a knotted rope which modern Egyptologists mistakenly refer to as a ‘sandal’. The ankh symbol is used among the Khoi-san as an amulet for healing. It also represents for the Khoi Khoi a symbol for the supreme Creator which they call Heitsie-Ibib. Among the Zulu the symbol is associated with a story that states the Supreme Being’s son lost his leg in a battle with a dragon (some say a crocodile) and they call the sign Mlenze-munye which means “the one legged one.” When Christian missionaries came into South Africa wearing the cross on their necks, the natives thought that the Christians were wearing the Zulu sign for their God the “one legged one” that dies and is born again forever and ever.

The Dogon of Mali represents the universe with an image called aduno kine which means, “the life of the world.” As we can see below, it resembles the ankh symbol with minor variations. This sign is given two meanings that are in line with our above meanings for NKWA or ANKH. The first meaning is ‘humanity’ and the celestial placenta (the upper ellipse). The second meaning is the earthly placenta (the open ellipse). The cross in the center represents the four cardinal points.¹⁰

![Aduno Kine](image)

Dogon symbol for the “life of the world”

Among the Akan of Ghana, the ANKH symbol has gone through a unique transformation that many people would look over if they are not symbolically literate in African iconography. The ANKH symbol has morphed into a figure known as the AKUABA fertility “doll.”

![Asante akua'ba doll](image)

The legend of the origination of the Akua'ba doll comes from the story of a woman named "Akua" (many variations of the name are found as there are many variations of the spelling of "akua'ba") who could not get pregnant and went to a local diviner or priest and commissioned the carving of a small wooden doll. She carried and cared for the doll as if it
were her own child, feeding it, bathing it and so on. Soon the people in the village started calling it "Akua" "ba" - meaning "Akua's child", since "ba" meant child. She soon became pregnant and her daughter grew up with the doll.

_The legend and tradition still live on today..._

If an Akan/Asante woman had difficulty conceiving she would be encouraged to visit a local shrine accompanied by a senior woman in her family. There she might purchase a figure such as this, which would be placed for a period on the altar, later to be reclaimed by the woman along with certain medicines. The sculpture was then carried, fed, bathed, and otherwise cared for by the woman as if it was a living baby. It was thought that in doing this the woman would have a better chance to have a healthy and beautiful baby. Once the woman conceived and had a successful delivery, she would return the figure to the shrine as a form of offering. If the child died, the akua’ba might be kept by the woman as a memorial.

The Akuaba “dolls” are fertility figures and we know that these motifs are used to bring forth life as the story attest above. One will notice the phonetic similarity to the word ANKH/NKWA (AKUA). W and U are interchangeable so NKWA can be rendered NKUA; and when we say AKUA’BA we are saying “to bring forth the life of a child.” One will also recognize the similarity in shape with the Egyptian ANKH symbol. There is another version of the Egyptian ANKH that is actually three symbols super imposed on each other: the ankh, was scepter and the djed pillar. What’s important for us in this segment is the association of the djed pillar with the ankh. It is believed that the djed pillar represents the vertebrae of Wsr (Asar) and that when it is super imposed on the ankh that it reinforces the notion that the ANKH is a human being and the djed is the spinal column of man.

Compare the super composition ANKH with the back of the AKUA’BA figure from Ghana. Notice the “djed” pillar super imposed on the figure from Ghana. Coincidence?

---

It should be noted that several authors demonstrate that Black African people were in Greece before and during the formative stages of, and contributed important concepts in the development of Greek civilization [Obenga (1992), Campbell-Dunn (2008, 2006), Bernal (1987, 2005), Diop (1991), Van Sertima (1983)]. So it is no surprise when we find images like these in the ancient Mediterranean on the island of Cyprus$^{12}$:

---

ADDENDUM:

After writing my initial findings in regards to the ANKH symbol and our reinterpretations, I later spoke with Dr. Mubabinge Bilolo and he led me to a book he had edited with Nsapo Kalamba titled *Renaissance of the Negro-African Theology. Essays in Honor of Professor Bimwenyi-Kweshi* (2009). In this work, using comparative linguistics between the ancient Egyptian and the Tshiluba-Bantu language (ciLuba), he confirmed everything in our original thesis and expands our discourse. In the ciLuba language *Bw-Anga* means “medicine” and is used for the protection of “life” for the increase of “health” [BuKole-bwa-Moyo]. We’ve already mentioned that NGANGA refers to a healer in Kikongo. In the book *Biblical Revelation* by Buana Kibongi pg 57, he notes, “[T]he nganga, by fighting against illness, contributed to the development of medicine.” We see this -g-n-/n-g- root (by way of metathesis) in Yoruba as *oogun* “medicine, juju.” It is reflected in Hausa as *magani* (ma-gani) “medicine.”

Therefore in ciLuba the power of life is a title of one who cures, who calms the suffering [mw-anga, Nga-Nga, CyAnga, Sangula, Sangala, Sangalasha, Sangaja, Sungila]. All of these terms have the -ng- root, which is really -g-. It is the same root in the word *Sangoma* “healer, priest” among the Zulu [Credo Mutwa comes to mind].

We add to this revised essay the ciLuba language equivalents to better understand the varying connotations of the ancient Egyptian word ANKH that back-up our initial investigation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-Sanga</th>
<th>to cross, join together, gather, mix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ di-/ma-Sanga</td>
<td>crossroads, confluence, junction, joint, node</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ma-Sang(u,o)</td>
<td>interval between the shoulders; junction point of two shoulders or two arms = nTangani/diTung (U, A) - a-mapa/makaya/mapwapwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ mu-/mi-Sangu</td>
<td>time, period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ muSangu</td>
<td>congenital defect, pathology of birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ sangisha</td>
<td>to make gather, join together, mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Sangila, diSangila, Cisangilu</td>
<td>Gathering, reunion, meet, communion, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ sangala</td>
<td>to be delighted, to be happy, to be in good health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ sangalala</td>
<td>to recover (health, vitality/strength joy, the calm one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sàngalala</td>
<td>to be full with joy, good fortune, to be completely happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
-sàngaja to cure
-sàngalaja to cure, return health
Sangasanga Joy
Sangesha To welcome
  ➢ Mu-Sangelo good fortune, success, happiness, joy

The $S$-NG- root also corresponds to $\dot{S}$-$H$- and the words can also mean:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shinga/Singa/Jinga</th>
<th>To bind, thread, roll up, knot, encircle, tie with a wire; to braid/weave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ MuShinga/ka-Nzinga</td>
<td>Newborn with the umbilical cord rolled up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ muJinga</td>
<td>Cord, reel; braided rope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muJinga</td>
<td>Invocation ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nshinga</td>
<td>Neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinga/Shinga</td>
<td>To wish, desire, prefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ MuShinga/Ka-Zinga</td>
<td>Child’s desire, wishes, expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ MuShinga</td>
<td>Price, value, dignity = bunema</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sanga is a synonym or variant of:

| Sanka                        | Be happy, rejoice, have joy, to be delighted |
| Disanka                      | Happiness, joy, pleasure |
| Sankila                      | To be delighted for |
| Sankisha                     | To please, make happy, rejoice |
| tunka                        | Be happy, happy, joyful, dance of joy, rejoice, merry, exalter |

But $S$-NG- $< \dot{S}$-$H$- is also the opposite of Sanga or Sangala

| Sunga                        | To hang; to strangle by tightening the throat or the neck (nshingu) |
| diSunga                      | To hang itself |
| Sunga                        | To separate (of the combatants), appeaser, to reconcile, pacify |
| Sunga                        | To choose, elect |
| ➢ kansunga-nsunga            | Partiality, bias |
| Sungula                      | To choose, select; to prefer; elected |
| -sungidila                   | To deliver, protect from; to save |
| sungidila                    | To separate, deliver, defend against, to help |

This is very instructive. Apart from the connotation of *health* or *life force*, there is a predominance of the concepts of “joy, happiness, rejoicing, etc.” This correlates perfectly with the Akan and ancient Egyptian notions of NKWA (*nkwa, waju, simba*).

You will also recall our assertion that the ANKH ⚜ symbol is a simplified human body with the base as the spinal cord, and the bar as the shoulders or arms spread out. So it is no surprise that our -ng-root is in the word *muSangu(o)* “interval between the shoulders; junction point of two shoulders or two arms.” *Nshinga* means “neck.” You will often see the ANKH symbol as a tied/knotted rope. In ciLuba we have *Shinga* “To bind, thread, roll up, knot, encircle, tie with a wire; to braid/weave.” A variant of this term is *muJinga* which means “Cord, reel; braided rope.”
There are varying terms that correlate with the many meanings of the -g/-ng- root: Nanga “has love, charity, solidarity.” Nenga “at the duration, with the durable movement, without end [in other words, eternal]. BwAnga “medicine, means of protection, support of health.” NgaNga “doctor.” Mungi “heart.” Nke/Nko “solid, fort” [in other words, protection].

I argue elsewhere\(^1\) that the cross symbol typically associated with the Christian crucified savior is none other than the ANKH symbol and it is a sign of Yeshua (Jesus) who essentially is a deified ancestor who was a master teacher: an NGANGA. So it is no surprise that in ciLuba we find Sungula “to choose, select; to prefer, elected” as Yeshua was the “chosen one” of God to bear the sins of mankind according to the Hebrews. From that word we get Sungila which means “to deliver, protect from, to save.” Is not Yeshua the “savior” of mankind? The deliverer? From there we have Sungidila “to separate, deliver, defend against, to help.” Could Yeshua been originally from the Kongo? Nigeria/Cameroon?

Black Jesus

I also argue that Yeshua (Jesus) is none other than the Egyptian deity SHU and the Yoruba deity ESU (pronounced eshu). Esu of the Yoruba system of Ifa is the “bridge” between heaven and earth. Shu of Egypt is also the bridge between heaven and earth as air (shu) separates the earth (Geb) and outerspace (Nut). All prayers and sacrifices MUST go through Esu or they will not reach the Creator. In order to get to outer space you HAVE to go through SHU. Doesn’t this sound familiar? Esu’s symbol is the “crossroads” and this is very important in regards to this discussion.

We’ve mentioned previously about the significance of the “crossroads” pose in the Kongo and its relation to the ancient Egyptian motifs. What I’d like to make known is another pose from the Kongo that is related to the crossroads pose, but has a different connotation. This pose is called Tuluwa Lwa Luumbu.

In the book *Africanisms in American Culture* edited by Joseph Holloway, Kongo scholar Robert Farris Thompson (2005:295) describes the pose as such:

*A second gesture, *tuluwa lwa luumbu*, **arms crossed on the chest to symbolize self-encirclement in silence, retains its strong symbolic wordlessness** in some North American black communities. In 1980 I saw a black man on the New Haven city green cross his arms before his chest to end a conversation. This sign signaled that he had no more to say. Stewart has seen the same emblem of negation among the Gullah of South Caroline, “used in slightly combative situations, where a person, crossing arms on chest, is not arguing, per se, but wishes to communicate that he definitely doe not like what is being laid on him.” The luumbu gesture survives, clearly and distinctly, among certain African Cuban populations in the Caribbean. Lydia Cabrera has seen a Kongo ritual expert (*nganga*) in Havana **cross his arms thus, signaling hauteur and reserve**. The same gesture, with contrasting Yoruba and Kongo meanings, appears in a strongly Kongo-Flavored folk dance, *rumba yambu.*” Once again, an aspect of the culture of the Bakongo is echoed by patterns of dance and music in the black New World. [emphasis mine]

It is important to note that the pose correlates to having reserve and silence. These are both characteristics of a wise person. This appears to be a wide spread African concept. Among the Amazulu the sign used for silence (a finger over an open mouth, think of how you say *shhh* in a library), is the same symbol for the word wisdom (see all, say little).  

We find the *luumbu* pose among the deceased Egyptian priests and “deities” which I interpret as ancestors. When we see an Egyptian statue or relief with the person’s arms crossed, that means at the time this motif was created, the person was deceased. The same meaning applies most times if you see the feet together. Observe the following image.

MUNTU KATAPA (Mentuhotep III) with arms crossed.

---

(He is the one) whose heart is informed about these things which would be otherwise ignored, the one who is clear-sighted when he is deep into a problem, …who penetrates ancient writings…who is sensible enough to unravel complications, who is really wise…(from the inscription of Antef, 12th Dynasty; Middle Kingdom, 11th and 12th dynasties 2052-1778 BCE).

As we can see MUNTU KATAPA is a Master Teacher, an NGANGA sitting in the pose of a worshipful Master. By this pose he is reminding us to use reserve, that the teachings of this temple are to remain hidden and to keep quiet. Talking less and observing more is a prerequisite for self-mastery.

We also see this pose associated with IWAJU-ORI (Wsir, Osiris). Often times the arms crossed is symbolized by an X on the chest of Osiris. All of this is symbolic of a person who has completed his journey around the dingo-dingo wheel of “life.”

Painting from the Tomb of Rameses I, Valley of the Kings, West Thebes, in Egypt.
The story of Yeshua is none other than an ancient story of Esu which was carried out of Egypt by the Chaldeans who entered Canaan and later became the Hebrews. The story of Jesus is about a master teacher who was murdered for his revolutionary character and charges against the Roman state. The story of his crucifixion tells of Jesus’ “ancestralization” and his subsequent mumification as he was wrapped in “white linen” cloth. More details will be revealed in the upcoming publication The Ena, The Ancestors, and the Papyrus of Ani; but for now we will briefly deal with another connection.

Author D.M. Murdock in her book Christ in Egypt: The Horus Jesus Connection posits that Jesus is associated with the Egyptian deity Hrw (Cheru, Zulu, Horus). We have already posited that Yeshua (Jesus) is a later form of Egyptian SHU and the Yoruba ESU (Ayeshu in the Akan). In Greek Yeshua is rendered IESOUS or IASOUS. In Arabic it is ISSA. A title associated with the Egyptian Hrw is IUSA. Gerald Massey rendered the meaning “the coming son” from Egyptian iy, iw, ii, jj, jw or jwj meaning “to come;” and sa, or za meaning “son.” I find this to be folk etymology. I find the 4th century archbishop of Jerusalem St. Cyril’s rendering to be more plausible for the definition of Jesus.

St. Cyril posits the meaning of the Greek IESOUS to mean “healer.” We have already posited that Jesus is an NGANGA priest and one of the titles is that of a healer: which we know Jesus did a lot healing according to the Biblical myth. He posits that the term derives from the Greek word IASOMAI meaning “to heal.” Arthur Drews15 states, “Epiphanius (Haeres, c, XXIX) clearly perceived this connection when he translated the name Jesus ‘healer’ or ‘physician’(curator, therapeutes).”

I argue that the name IESOUS is built off the consonantal root -s- in the Yoruba word ESU. The root -s- in esu is the same root for ase which is typically used to mean, “the power to bring things into

---

existence through sound” in liturgical Ifa. In Yoruba aṣẹ means “order” or a ṣẹ “it will happen.” Its cognate in Hebrew is siwwah “command.” In the Amarigna language it is ez “command.” In the ancient Egyptian its cognate is s3 “ordain, order.” As Oduyoye (1996:53) notes:

The concept of aṣẹ in Yoruba prayers can be seen from the concept of afose “the act of uttering in such a way that the words have unfailing effect.” The power of afose is thought to be possessed by some men who have potent powers to bless or to curse irrevocably. **Such men are medicine men, the priest-herbalists whose blessings are sought during religious festivals and whose curses are feared.** [emphasis mine]

This quote accurately describes a priest, an NGANGA, medicine man, a healer. It is common knowledge that in African tradition healing is not only done with physical concoctions and instruments, but are aided by spoken words (spells). This is a common practice and it is believed that all efforts will render impotent results if not accompanied by the right words. Sound is the agent/force used to activate the potential of the invisible world (orun) and make it manifest in the physical (aiye). Is this not a major characteristic of Yeshua (Jesus, Iesous)? Are we not to call on his name to be healed (Acts 4:10, Mk 9:38-39)?

The word *Esu* and *Ase* are built on the “Afroasiatic” root *swh.* Observe the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Yoruba</th>
<th>Mende</th>
<th>Tiv</th>
<th>Nupe</th>
<th>Chu-chewa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To come to pass</td>
<td>swh</td>
<td>se</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To command</td>
<td>siwwah</td>
<td>Se (ekpe)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To cause to come to pass</td>
<td>Saw (imp.s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A command, authority</td>
<td>mi-sewah</td>
<td>ase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The power to cause to happen</td>
<td>ase</td>
<td>tsav</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>magic</td>
<td></td>
<td>sawa</td>
<td>tsav</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>witchcraft</td>
<td></td>
<td>tsav</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ma-sawe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruler</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Etsu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The angel who holds God’s staff of authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Yoruba cosmogony, *Esu* is the force that carries one’s prayers to the right forces (Orisas). He uses the power of *ase* to make it happen. Yeshua plays the same role as intermediary between man and the Creator and he too uses the power of the word to get things done. By contemporary standards Jesus would be known as a Vodou priest, Babalawo, Hogon or a Sangoma. A Babalawo is someone who has mastered and knows how to harness his own *ase* to heal and bring balance to a community. Remember also that the ciLuba word NeNga means “without end” and in this case, in relation to our comparison with Esu/Jesus, would speak to their promise of “eternal life” (ankh, nkwa, nga). Either way it goes, the cross associated with Jesus is a sign that he is a wise master, a healer, one who can command the forces of nature to bring blessings. These are ancient ancient concepts that predate the Hebrew myths by thousands of years. Only when we engage Africa deeply can we gain understanding of the ancient Egyptian symbols
and its deep underlying messages. The philosophy behind the Biblical narrative becomes clearer as well with a thorough engagement with Africa. Plain and simple, all African symbols are mnemonic devices that remind the wisdom seeker of how he/she’s supposed to act.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented iconographic, cultural and linguistic evidence that supports our view for a reevaluation of the ANKH symbol and its associated meanings. We have confirmed that the ANKH is a symbol not only of life in the physical sense, but a life of service, of vitalism, of health and healing, of wisdom, infinite love, solidarity, eternal life, power and authority. The ANKH symbol is also a sign of a master teacher: an nganga or nkaka. It is a creative synthesis of terms which betrays the limited Egyptologists notion of ANKH simply meaning “life” or “person.” Africa explains clearly the conceptual elasticity of this term and symbolism and it holistically reminds us of our obligations as leaders on earth and how to evaluate a leader in the community.

One will notice in Egyptian reliefs that only persons of high rank or royalty within the Egyptian society were shown receiving or holding the ANKH symbol (priests, gods, administrators, etc.). These members all belonged to or have gone through the pr-ankh (fari-nganga): society/school of initiated masters. This reaffirms the notion that the ANKH was not only a concept but a title or rank within Egyptian society.

The ANKH symbol is a reminder of how we are supposed to act and our responsibilities as leaders and teachers of our communities. It reminds us that mastering the art of being human, by knowing life to the highest degree will equip us with the tools (our bags of wisdom) to tower over life’s one thousand and one challenges. It is no wonder why the ANKH symbol was used as a key for locked doors in ancient Gebts (Egypt). It is telling us something in symbolic code: that the key to a full and successful life is good character and service (ka-t, bakaa, ghanga) to your community. It is good character and service that will continually open doors of opportunity for you in life. When you have mastered yourself, then you can stand powerfully (vertically) as a pillar in your community. Good character leads to health, vitality, prosperity and abundant blessings and this, my friend, is living (ankhw).

Ancestrally,

Asar Imhotep

http://www.asarimhotep.com
Selected Bibliography


____ (2009).


