

4 The Elements of Early African Civilization

Writing

Writing occurred in Kemet about the same time as the First Dynasty. It is believed that writing was invented around 3400 BCE in Kemet, about 300 years before we see a cuneiform system of writing on clay tablets in Mesopotamia, today's Iraq. In Kemet, writing was done on almost any type of surface, but the favorite was papyrus, a reed that grew in the Nile, now found far south of Egypt in Sudan. Immediately, writing served three purposes:

1. Recording of historical events;
2. Communication between the king, priests, and scribes;
3. Literary and instructional writings.

The mythical traditions of Kemet say that Tehuti was the father of writing. This was repeated so many times in ancient Kemet that it became an accepted explanation for the origin of writing.

Recent scholarship by German archeologist Günter Dreyer seems to substantiate the position that has been taken by Afrocentrist scholars since the 1950s that writing is an African, not a southwest Asian, creation. Dreyer, director of the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo, found writing on a group of small bone or ivory labels dating from 3300 to 3200 BCE. Since we understand writing to mean a symbolic representation of language, not pictures representing concrete objects, then we have the first indication of writing anywhere in the world right in Africa. What Dreyer found was labels attached to bags of linen and oil in the tomb of King Scorpion I in Egypt. The labels seemed to indicate the origin of the commodities. Like the symbolic systems of pictographs that preceded writing, the inscriptions contained symbols, but they were more than pictographs. Pictographs cannot be called true writing, but rather are drawings that represent specific words or objects. Thus a pictograph of a leg might stand for a leg, and that of a toe for a toe. Dreyer maintains that the labels he discovered and studied carry inscriptions with phonetic significance. That would make them a symbolic representation of language or true writing. Dreyer claims that studying the labels helped him to decipher even earlier inscriptions on pottery found in the same cemetery. These inscriptions, dating from 3400 to 3300, put ancient Egyptian writing at a date much earlier than anything anyone has found in Mesopotamia (Dreyer 1999).

Of course there are now scholars who believe that it is necessary to consider pictographs as systems that contained all the possibilities of information storage and therefore the ultimate origin of writing. In this case again, the idea of using markings to store information occurred on the continent of Africa before it happened anywhere else. The

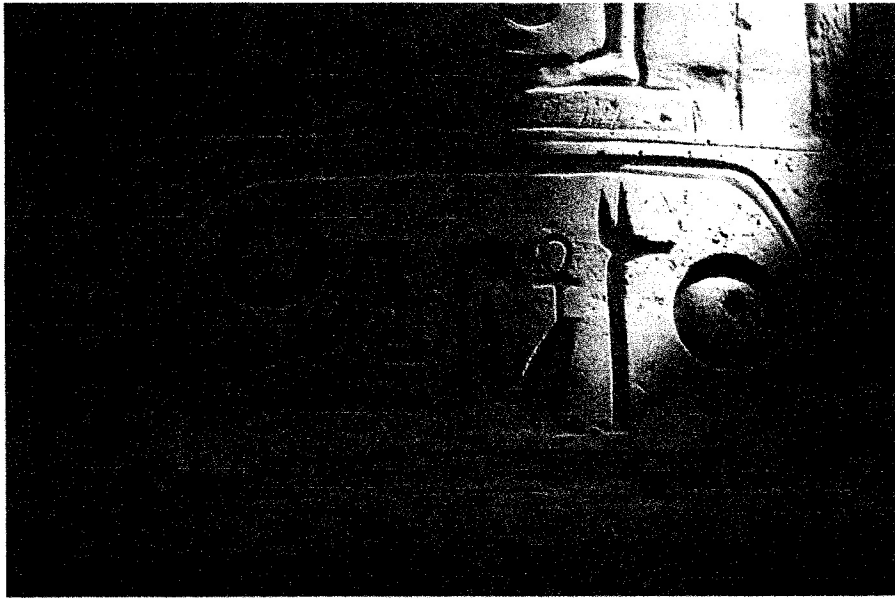


Figure 4.1 User-maat-re, Setep-n-Re, the Heru name of Ramses II, Eighteenth Dynasty

Source: © Molefi Kete Asante

interesting work done by Ayele Bekerie (1997) in his award-winning work on Ethiopia has revealed that the discussion of writing in Africa is even more complex than has been intimated in the work of various scholars.

The ancient people of Kemet attributed writing to the god Tehuti, who was the scribe and historian of the gods as well as the keeper of the calendar and the inventor of mathematics, art, and science. It was this deity who was also said to be responsible for the creation of speech and who had the power to transform speech into material objects. In some ways this may relate to the African belief, first observed in Kemet, that in order to achieve immortality one's name must be spoken or preserved forever.

The Classical Language of Kemet

The people of Kemet often called their language script "mdju netjer" (divine words). In more recent times, African scholars such as Mubabinge Bilolo and Molefi Kete Asante have used the term "ciKam" (the language of Kemet) to refer to the written script and the spoken language. Mdju netjer is seen as the description of the language, as one would say Zulu is "a poetic language," although such description would not be the name of the language. Those who use ciKam to name the language are following a convention found among many African language groups, especially the one thousand Bantu languages, where a certain prefix before the name of the people indicates language.

The early African theologian Clement of Alexandria may have been the first to apply the Greek *hieros* and *glypho* to make the term hieroglyphics meaning "sacred inscriptions." Since Clement lived from 150 to 215 CE, the language was ancient when he encountered it and called it in the ruling Greek language of the day, *hieroglyphos*. In fact, most authorities tend to accept Dreyer's estimate of 3400–3300 BCE for the age of the

written Kemetic language. This is comparable to the use of cuneiform, or wedge writing on clay, in Mesopotamia by the Sumerians that is said to have appeared in clay tablets two years later. Indeed, Ira Spar of the Metropolitan Museum of Art claims that:

Only a few examples of its use exist in the earliest stages of cuneiform from between 3200 and 3000 B.C. The consistent use of this type of phonetic writing only becomes apparent after 2600 B.C. It constitutes the beginning of a true writing system characterized by a complex combination of word-signs and phonograms—signs for vowels and syllables—that allowed the scribe to express ideas.

(Spar 2004)

Consequently, one can speak of the emergence of cuneiform around 2600 BCE, although there may have been pictures of animals and people wedged in clay prior to this time.

CiKam's last inscription was found on the gatepost of a vast temple at Philae in 596 CE. This temple dedicated to Auset was one of the last functioning temples in an increasingly Roman and Christian Egypt and its closing by Christians nailed shut the viable narratives of the long history of Kemet.

The Attempt to Erase the Language

Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I (379–395) gave a series of edicts beginning in 391 CE to make Egyptian religion illegal. Africans were not permitted to even walk through the sacred grounds of the temples. The temple at Philae (*Pa-jrk* in ancient Kemetic) was an outpost against the emperor's edicts because of its remoteness from the centers of populations and the fact that the Nile River surrounded its island. Harassed from the fourth century CE, the practitioners of Kemetic religion would suffer for nearly 200 years in conflict with the overlords. In Nubian territory, Philae gave the priests and scribes who still managed to work a refuge from the persecutions measured out to many other temple officials. In an earlier, more lenient period, Plotinus (204–270), an African philosopher often called a Neoplatonist but who was in his own right an original philosopher, could honor the history and culture of his ancestors without threat from the Romans and Byzantine leaders. However, by the time of his distant disciple Proclus (449–468 CE) who made a point of revering the ancient deities, including Auset, the worship at the temples was becoming more dangerous. Yet African nations further south, such as the Blemmyes and the Nobades, kept the ancient tradition of worshiping Auset. They also journeyed downstream to Philae to worship the deity and to walk the sacred grounds and pray at the shrines to Ausar, who was said to be buried in Philae as well as in Abydos.

By 425 CE, Eastern Orthodox Christians shakily coexisted in the temples with Egyptian traditionalists. A Christian bishop is known to have complained that the Nobades and Blemmyes from what is today Sudan came and went at will at the Auset Temple. When Emperor Marcion (450–457 CE) came to power, he renegotiated with the Blemmyes and Nobades to keep them from coming to the temple. I believe the "negotiation" was not a simple matter of give-and-take, but rather the Byzantium way of keeping "foreign" worshippers from packing the temple with votarists. The Blemmyes and Nobades had been among the most ardent followers of Auset, and on one occasion, had taken the image of Auset back to their country for two years.

When Justinian I became Byzantine emperor, the Temple of Auset, between 535 and 537 CE, was under enormous pressure. A general named Narses ransacked the temple in several raids, arresting priests and priestesses and destroying sacred items. The temple

was officially closed down in the sixth century during the reign of Justinian (527–565 CE). Philae was subsequently a seat of Orthodox Christianity, and was dominated by Christians who wanted to make an example of it. One can still see the ruins of churches inside the Philae temple. Byzantine rulers created adytions, inaccessible spaces in the sacred grounds, to prevent Egyptian worshippers from entering ancient parts of the temple area. These special places, holy of holies, were used as chapels for Auset and Auset, and later for Jesus.

There is a horrible story from the sixth-century Coptic book, *Life of Aaron*, that says the first Christian bishop of Philae, a man by the name of Apa Macedonius, entered the temple of Auset at Philae and slaughtered the living falcon kept in reverence by the Africans. He had visited the island of Philae and found that a Christian minority lived in the midst of worshippers of Auset, whereupon he went back to Alexandria, spoke to Archbishop Athanasius about the situation, and was immediately made Bishop of Philae. He returned to the island and the text says,

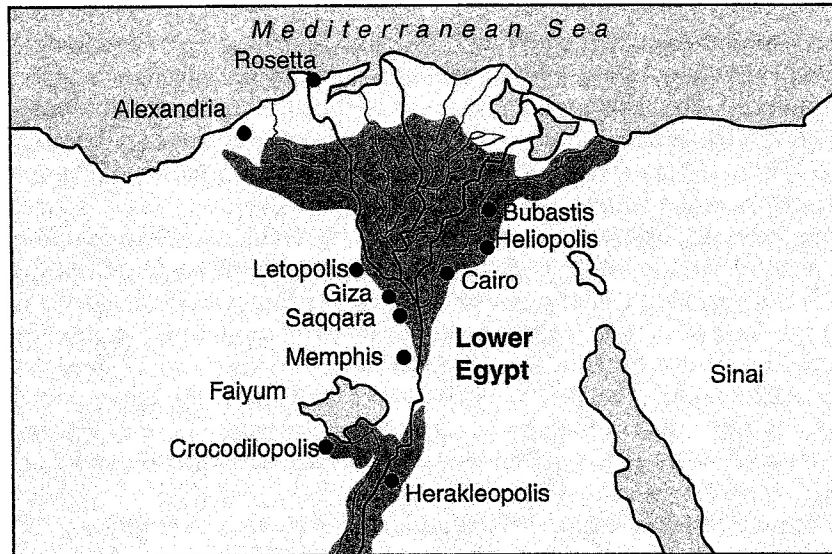
I saw them going into the temple to worship a bird they called the falcon, a symbol of Heru, inside a demonic cage. After I had spent some days among them, it happened that the priest left the city and went out on an errand, his two sons attended the temple in case someone should offer a sacrifice to the idol. I, Macedonius, went up to them decidedly and said, "I want to offer a sacrifice to God today." They said, "Come and offer it." After he had gone inside he ordered them to lay the wood upon the altar and light a fire beneath it. The two sons attended to the wood until it had become charred. Our father, Bishop Apa Macedonius made his way to the place where the demonic cage was. He took out the falcon, cut off its head, and threw it onto the blazing altar, and left the temple and went away.

(Dijkstra 2013)

Deciphering the Classical African Language

After the fall of Philae, the language of Kemet slowly lost its grip on the population and soon retreated into the liturgy of the Coptic Christian Church, the force that had created its decline in the first place. However, there are stories of two men by the name of Horapollo. The first, said to have lived under the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (408–450 CE), was a grammarian who wrote the book *Hieroglyphica*. This book is comprised of two sections containing 189 explanations of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Apparently a more colorful Horapollo appeared nearly 50 years prior to the close of the Auset Temple at Philae, around 565 CE, and tried to preserve as much of the language as he could. A devotee of the Egyptian religion and one of the last great priests at the Menouthis school outside Alexandria, this Horapollo lived under the reign of Byzantine Emperor Zeno (474–491 CE). History says that Horapollo had to flee his home because he was accused of plotting against the Christians. While he was absent from his temple dedicated to Auset and Ausar, it was destroyed. Horapollo was later captured and tortured, and then he converted to Christianity. The name Horapollo is a combination of Horus and Apollo.

When Arabs under General El As entered Egypt in 639 CE, they were met by the same conundrum as the Greeks and Romans: how to understand ciKam, the language of Kemet. Two Arab historians named Dhul-Nun al-Misri and Ibn Wahshiyya made attempts in the ninth and tenth centuries, respectively, to decipher the language of Kemet. Much later, in the 17th century, Athanasius Kircher made a good-faith attempt to decipher the language. There were other minor attempts, but the failure of these



Map 4.1 Rosetta Stone location

attempts can be assigned to the mistaken notion that the glyphs represented only ideas and not sounds.

It would not be until 1799 when the Rosetta Stone, a bilingual text written in two Egyptian scripts (hieroglyphics and demotic) and Greek, would be discovered by a French soldier on the Rosetta branch of the Nile, that progress would be made in deciphering the language. In fact, Silvestre de Sacy, Thomas Young, and Johan David Akerblad were among the earliest linguists to work on the Rosetta Stone. However, real progress was made when in 1822 Jean-Francois Champollion made a breakthrough in the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone. The first word that he deciphered was the name of CLEOPATRA. Later it occurred to him that Coptic, the liturgical language of the Egyptian Christian Church, could be helpful in understanding classical Egyptian.

Architecture

The earliest form of architecture was developed in Kemet, where the first masonry construction was the Saqqara Pyramid built by Imhotep for Per-aa Zoser in the Third Dynasty. The Saqqara site was not simply the step pyramid structure that was used as a burial chamber, but was also a huge complex of temples, including a funerary temple that still stands today.

The Sphinx is said by some to have been carved nearly 15,000 years ago. Others dispute this, saying that the stone sculpture dates from the time of the Per-aa Khafre. We know, of course, that it was not called "sphinx" by the ancient Kemetite people. The name "sphinx" derives from the Greek word *sphingo*, to strangle, based on the Greek sphinx's habit of strangling its victims. The name was subsequently applied to Egyptian sculptures by Greek travelers. They called this the Great Sphinx, although the construction of the "Great Sphinx" predates any in Greece. The people of Kemet called it Heru-em-akt, meaning Heru (Horus in Greek) of the Horizon; sometimes it was referred to as the Bw-Heru (Place of Heru) and also as RaHorakhty (Ra of Two Horizons).

The African people were the greatest builders of “sphinxes,” so much so that European scholars have categorized them by type: androsphinx (lion body with human head), ovisphinx (lion body with ram head), and hierocosphinx (lion body with hawk head). One can think of these sculptures, when they appear in front of temples like the great Karnak or Luxor temples, as protectors and guardians. Since the finding of the Great Sphinx by Napoleon’s army in 1798, hundreds of sphinxes have been dug out of the sands. The prodigious nature of the ancient Egyptian artists and artisans seemed unsurpassed by human hands.

One cannot overemphasize the grandeur of the architectural treasures of Kemet because nowhere in the world is there such a collection of ancient buildings. All of ancient Greece and Rome does not amount to the architectural inheritance of Kemet. Organizing a bureaucracy with the purpose of constructing large temples, tombs, and public buildings became one of the strengths of the Kemetic society. Temples like the massive Karnak temple at Waset and the tombs of the kings and queens in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens took enormous capabilities, and the Kemetic people mastered all of the required skills to produce the most perfect buildings of their day.

The Kemetic people were great stone builders. They built on a large scale, in relationship to gods, it seemed, and not in relation to humans. During the Third and Fourth Dynasties we see the construction of the giant pyramids, including the three principal pyramids at the Giza plateau: for Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure.

It is the pyramid (mr) built by Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty around the year 2560 BCE that we call the Great Pyramid, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The tradition of pyramid building started in ancient Kemet as a replacement for the *mastaba* or “platform” type of royal tomb. When several stacked mastabas were used, it was possible to create a step pyramid.



Figure 4.2 Avenue of Sphinxes, Luxor

Source: © Molefi Kete Asante

Khufu's pyramid took about 20 years to build. First, the site was prepared; blocks of stone were transported down the Nile and placed at the site. An outer casing (which cannot be seen now) was then used to smooth the surface. Although it is not known definitely how the blocks were put in place, many theories have been advanced. For example, one theory involves the construction of a straight or spiral ramp that was raised as the construction proceeded. This ramp, coated with mud and water, eased the displacement of the blocks, which were pushed (or pulled) into place. A second theory suggests that the blocks were placed using long levers with a short angled foot. Both of these theories are practical and could have worked. Of course, there are wilder theories such as "aliens from Mars" and levitation of stones by music.

Certainly, humans have wondered about the pyramids of Giza. They were referred to as "the Granaries of Joseph" and "the Mountains of Pharaoh." When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he was overwhelmed with pride when he made his famous quote: "Soldats! Du haut de ces Pyramides, 40 siècles nous contemplant" (Soldiers! From the top of these Pyramids, 40 centuries are looking at us).

Philosophy

Several factors led to the Kemetic origin of philosophy. In the first place, it was necessary to explain the challenges of the physical universe in terms that agreed with the spiritual ideas of the people. Second, it was important that the Per-aa received good solid information that was the result of reflection, not someone just providing an opinion. The Per-aa appreciated the priest, scribe, vizier, or philosopher who had given thought to the questions put before him. There were numerous philosophers, wisdom seekers, and teachers in ancient Kemet. It is impossible to mention all of the Kemetic philosophers, but it is necessary to refer to several of the most important ones.

Imhotep was the first philosopher to deal with the question of volume, time, the nature of illness, physical and mental disease, and immortality. He was the first philosopher in human history. He lived around 2700 BCE. As the first human being to be deified, that is, made a deity by his society, he stands at the very top of African and world philosophy, so great were his deeds. Imhotep, like the Greek Socrates who lived nearly 2200 years later, is known basically by what others said about him because his own writings are not extant.

Ptahhotep wrote around 2414 BCE and was known as the philosopher who wrote the first book on what it means to grow old. His treatise on aging was a deep reflection on the meaning of youth and age. He is considered the father of ethical doctrines.

Merikare wrote around 1990 BCE, on the value of speaking well and using common sense in human relationships.

Sehotipibre wrote around 1991 BCE. His concern was with allegiance to the king. He might be called a nationalist philosopher because he argued that loyalty to the king was the most important function of the citizen.

Amenemhat wrote around 1991 BCE and was called the first cynical philosopher because he warned his readers to be wary of those who called themselves friends.

Amenhotep, son of Hapu, was a priest, vizier, and philosopher during the Eighteenth Dynasty and was active around 1400 BCE. He was deified, becoming the second living human being in Africa to be made a deity by his community after his death. His wisdom was extraordinary and he was thought to have mastered all of the knowledge of the ancients.

Duauf was the philosopher who wrote about the love of books. He was the educational philosopher, one who cherished the idea of learning, and wrote around 1340 BCE that the young must learn to appreciate books.

Akhenaton was a religious philosopher, believing that the god Aton was the only god, the sole god. He changed the religious doctrine of Kemet and moved the capital city in order to practice his newly declared religion of the only god. He lived around 1300 BCE.

All of these Kemetic philosophers lived hundreds of years before the first Greek philosopher. Indeed, the first Greek philosopher was Thales of Miletus, who studied in Kemet. He lived around 600 BCE.

The Emergence of Mathematics

The first books of mathematics are Kemetic books. No books on mathematical propositions existed in the world before the African books produced in the Nile Valley, now called the Rhind Papyrus. Like the Ebers Papyrus in medicine, the Rhind Papyrus is a document that introduces to the world Kemetic mathematics and science. At a time before the emergence of any civilization with a scientific bent outside of Africa, this society, the Kemetic culture, gave the world mathematics and also geometry. To a large extent this was necessary because of the annual flooding of the Nile, which wiped out the boundaries between farmers; some system had to be devised to make it possible to establish or reestablish whose land ended where when the floods had receded. The Egyptians claimed, as reported by Herodotus, that Tehuti was responsible for creating geometry, but that was probably because it was such an ancient science that no one remembered when it was created.

The Abundance of Deities

Kemet was full of deities. In some sense, it was the prototypical African society with divinities appearing in every aspect of human life. In fact, everything was a deity, was related to a deity, or had the potential of being a deity. A deity is something that is or has been made into a god. Even *Nun*, chaos, the primordial waste of water in which all life was immanent, was a deity. Nun was guarded by four frog- and serpent-headed deities. It was from this watery substance that Atum, the god of creation, arose. He was represented as a bearded old man, sometimes with the head of a frog, a beetle, or a serpent. He was often called "the complete one."

Atum, Ra, Ptah, and Amen were all names of the creator deity. It is said that Atum as the creator brought into existence Shu, air, and Tefnut, moisture. In time Shu and Tefnut had children, who were Geb, the earth, and Nut, the sky. In turn, Geb and Nut brought into being Ausar, Auset, Seth, and Nebhet, two brothers and two sisters. The first four beings might be called celestial beings, or sky beings, and the last four, terrestrial or earth beings:

Celestial	Terrestrial
Shu	Ausar
Tefnut	Auset
Geb	Seth
Nut	Nebhet

The Legend of Ausar (Osiris)

The Kemetic people had maintained the legend of Ausar in their oral traditions, and there are a few fragments of the story in papyri. However, the best-recorded version of this legend is that from the early first-century Greek writer Plutarch. The story is told

that Seth and Ausar were entrusted with the rule of Kemet. During their care for the land, the part that was under Ausar prospered, while that under Seth declined and it was like waste land. This angered Seth, and because he was so enraged he decided to murder his brother. He tricked Ausar into climbing into a casket, which was then sealed and thrown into the Nile.

Ausar was mourned by Auset, his sister, who loved him. After a long search, she found his body and brought him back to Kemet. Then, assuming the form of a kite, she magically gave birth to her son, *Heru*, called Horus by the Greeks. However, all the time that Auset was protecting the corpse of Ausar, Seth was out looking for it. When he discovered the corpse he hacked the body into 14 parts and scattered them around Kemet.

Now Auset had to search again for the body of Ausar, she loved him so. She left her son, Heru, with her sister Nebhet and went out looking for Ausar. Indeed, she found the body in pieces. Where she collected a piece of his body she erected a shrine to his honor. Locate on a map of Egypt some of these sites: *Abydos*, *Biga Island*, *Philae*. Here were some of the sites where Auset found Ausar's body parts.

Ausar was restored to earthly life and appointed Lord of the Underworld and judge of the dead as well as the symbol of the resurrected life. Actually, he came to represent the practice of *mummification*, and with his green or black coloring he represented the regeneration of the earth. Ausar is restored on the earth; Seth is ultimately defeated by Heru, who inherits the throne of his father Ausar. The authority inherited by Heru meant that he had to avenge his father, symbolic of the eternal struggle between good and evil, between order and chaos. Thus, every king was the reincarnation of Heru in life and Ausar in death. Theophile Obenga, writing in *Pour une nouvelle histoire*, says "Le mythe osirien est peut-être le plus ancien mythe agraire de l'humanité" (Obenga 1980, p. 45). Agriculture was an ancient practice in Egypt and the cycle of life and death was familiar to every person.

The Eternal Mummification

Mummification was derived from knowing about the natural desiccation of corpses in pit burials in the dry desert sands. After cleaning and evisceration, that is, the removal of the organs, the corpse was dried with natron, a naturally occurring form of sodium carbonate. The organs were treated separately and preserved in special vessels known as canopic jars.

The process of mummification lasted for 70 days because there was a complex ritual that went along with it. The people did not just meet and wrap the body and then place it in a tomb. Certain ceremonies were necessary in order that the person should have eternal life. Just prior to burying the corpse, there was a massive funeral ceremony with dignitaries carefully scrutinizing the priestly activities surrounding the ritual of mummification. Then they had a special ritual called "Opening the Mouth." This involved touching the mouth and head of the corpse with special instruments to restore the senses.

Finally, inside the burial chamber, all types of food and drink were placed near the deceased so that he or she might have all that was needed in the afterlife. The deceased would even have a change of clothes and other essentials for someone going on a long journey. In case someone should destroy the food and the clothing, they were repeated by artists on the sides of the walls. Outside of the chamber a stele was erected to tell who the person was and the station in life, and to pronounce the person's good deeds.

The Kemetite society lasted a long time, more than 3,000 years, and during that time burials changed. In the beginning it was only the king who received a grand ritual

burial, as seen in the Old Kingdom pyramid burials. By the New Kingdom, royalty and nobles were given elaborate burials; this still remained out of reach of the majority of the people.

Of course, recent research has shown that many of the commoners in Kemet were also buried in their own tombs. The idea was that as the sun set in the world of the living, it was rising in the underworld. Everybody who died was really going to a place where he or she would continue to live. This was a democratizing of the rituals of death.

Since the afterlife was possible for any pure souls so long as they could provide the proper equipment and instruments for navigating the perilous realm of the underworld, it was open to all to declare themselves pure souls. However, the soul would have to survive the treacherous journey of the underworld to the judgment where Ausar presided. The heart was weighed against the feather of Maat to verify its lightness and purity. One could look forward to a peaceful afterlife in the Fields of Iaru, that is, the Elysian Fields.

There was nothing more important to the ancient Kemetic person than the afterlife. Some people say that these Africans were concerned with death. In fact, it was just the opposite. They were not concerned with death so much as they were deeply involved in the afterlife. Their obsession with life was for its infinite prolongation.

This was no easy task. It required the people to do lots of things to prepare the body for continuation of life after death. A person was made up of some important parts according to the Kemetic people. They included the body, the name, the spirit double, and the soul. Now mummification was the process that was used to prolong life.

The Idea of Maat

Maulana Karenga states that the starting point for any real discussion of the ethical ideals of ancient Egypt must be Maat (Karenga 2003, p. 5). In the minds of the ancient Kemetic people, Maat was the idea that it was necessary to possess order, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, and reciprocity as minima for holding back chaos in every aspect of life. How do you hold back chaos if it is not by advancing the idea of Maat? During every major period of Kemet's history, the idea was to establish a relationship with Maat. If the people maintained Maat they would be strong. If they lost Maat, they would be weak. This was a dictum that Africans understood.

D.T. Niane, the scholar who popularly introduced the world to the *Epic of Sundiata*, explained the Maatic concept when discussing the religious and political aspects of African culture faced with diversity by saying that "the traditional religion was able to remain a living force, pervading even the institutions and rituals of power at Koumbi as at Niani, and in Yatenga, Kanem and Mwenemutapa. But tolerance was the rule, enabling Mali and Ethiopia to mix a variety of peoples belonging to different religions" (Niane 1997, p. 262). It was this ability to accept diversity and difference that underscored the African society's desire for mutuality and communality from the dawn of human civilization.