A000-Afr-Ghana-Ashante-Akua-Ba figure-early 20th c



Afr-Ghana-Ashante-Akua-Ba figure-early 20th c

Case No.: 6

**Accession No.**

**Formal Label:** Afr-Ghana-Ashante-Akua-Ba figure-early 20th c

**Display Description:**

***Akua-Ba*** are wooden ritual fertility figures from Ghana and nearby areas. The best known ***Akua-Ba*** are those of the Ashante people, whose ***Akua-Ba*** have large, disc-like heads. However, other related groups also use ***Akua-Ba***. One such group is the Lobi who migrated into southern Burkina Faso and later into Côte d'Ivoire where they took the tradition of the ***Akua-Ba*** with them because they were constantly under attack from the Guiriko and Kenedougou empires during the 19th century. Traditionally, ***Akua-Ba*** figures are carried on the back of women either hoping to conceive a child or to ensure the health of the child being carried. When not in active use, the ***Akua-Ba*** would be ritually washed and cared for.

**LC Classification:**

**Date or Time Horizon:** early 20th c

**Geographical Area:**

**Map:**

**GPS coordinates:**

**Cultural Affiliation: Ashante**

**Medium: wood**

**Dimensions: H** 26.77 inches

**Weight:** 2.25 pounds

**Condition:**

**Provenance:**

**Discussion:**

This important figure from the Asante in Ghana incorporates many ancient concepts that derive from the trans Saharan trade with Late Kingdom Egypt and specifically the trade city of Elephantine. The name "Akua" in the Twi language is the first name for all female children born on Wednesday. "Ba" in Twi means child, but it also is a cognate word with the Ancient Egyptian  (***bȝ*** , pronounced "ba," sign G 53, preceded by sign R7, "bowl for incense with smoke rising from it" (Gardiner 1957: 473, 501) from which it derives its essential meaning of "soul."

The Asante traded across trans-Saharan caravan routes that connected with the natron trade at Lake Chad where Egyptians from Elephantine were buyers in bulk. Natron is a white, crystalline hygroscopic mineral salt mixture of sodium carbonate decahydrate (Na2CO3**·**10H2O, soda ash) and about 17% sodium bicarbonate, NaHCO3) along with impurities (sodium chloride and sodium sulfate), which was essential to the mummification process (Lucas 1932). Expeditions in 2007-2008 to Jebel Uweinat in southwestern Libya have discovered the Egyptian trading route to Lake Chad where natron was procured, and where hieroglyphic inscriptions marked the presence of donkey caravans from Elephantine in Upper Egypt (Coffman 2008). Trails then connected with those along the Niger River to the Volta River region that then led to the Asante gold mines (now in modern west central Ghana). Gold and slaves were then traded back to Lake Chad and thence to Elephantine (cf. Folorunso 2003: 77-92, who is unaware of the Elephantine, Uweinat, Lake Chad, Niger River route). This connection of trade routes between the Asante and Egypt established the intellectual conduit whereby Egyptian philosophical and mythological ideas flowed into West Africa. We have evidence from an Elephantine palimpsest of one Ahiqar's "Account of Import and Export Duties", dated between 450-400 BCE, in which natron is mentioned as the only bulk commodity (Porten and Yardeni C3.7; 3:82-87; Boardman 2005: 219). The origins of this wooden *Akua'ba*  figurine is a result of a process of intercultural exchange that has lasted approximately 2500 years, since these figures are still being used today for the same purposes.

Furthermore, the philosophical underpinnings of this *Akua'ba*  figure derive from its Egyptian connections. The Egyptian philosophical idea of ***bȝ*** in addition to "soul" also connotes "uniqueness" of an individual being whether animate or inanimate. ***bȝ*** is anentity that is imperishable. ***bȝ*** is often depicted as a theriomorphic bird, with a human head and an avian body preceded by an incense bowl. This concept is very ancient, since it refers to the shamanic powers that were invoked in order to ascend like the smoke of incense to the upper realms where the  **(*kȝ,*** pronounced "ka,"sign D28, Gardiner 1957: 453) resided. ***kȝ***connotes "vital essence," that which distinguishes the difference between an energized or defunct being. For humans this change occurs with death when the ***kȝ*** leaves the body.

The *Akua'ba*  figure also incorporates the idea of procreation, and it resonates with the Egyptian belief that Khnum, the deity of Elephantine who was associated with the annual flooding of the Nile that brought with it silt, clay and water as sustainers of life, was envisioned to have created children from the Nile's clay on a potter's wheel and to have inserted them *into* their mothers' bodies. Today Asante women strap the *Akua'ba*  figure *on* their backs as though it were a baby in swaddling clothes, being held in place like an amulet to invoke, by sympathetic magic, the safe delivery of the fetus within. The *Akua'ba*  figure is an amulet that induces Khnum to place the fetus safely *in* the mother's womb.

The Egyptian idea of creation from clay by Khnum also has resonances with the Yahwist writers (Genesis 2–11, 12–16, 18–22, 24–34, 38, 49; Exodus 1–24, 32, 34; Numbers 11–12, 14, 20–25; and Judges 1) where bodies are created by Yhwh from clay. This suggests an ancient syncretism between Khnum and YHWH based on Yahwist texts derived from the time of David and Solomon (around 950 BCE) but preserved at Elephantine, the locus of Khnum's worship. In fact Khnum is given quasi Yahwistic titles such as *Divine Potter* and *Lord of created things from himself*. The temple of Yhwh at Elephantine, which was built between 650 CE and the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in 586 CE (Kerkeslager 1998:109), was situated in a syncretistic milieu that was culturally fluid: Elephantine Jews participated in local Egyptian festivals such as that of Khnum, since it was believed by Jews that Khnum was a living god who could be menacing at times and hence required appropriate devotions to appease him (Porten and Yardeni 1989-1999: A4.3.7). In addition to this Jewish observance of Khnum, Jewish *Masseboth* (aniconic cultic stones, either shaped or unshaped) were regarded as possessing the numen or spiritual power of deities that have been found *in situ* in the temple at Gezer (Schumacher 1908) in addition to those myriad stones that have been found in the landscape. These aniconic representations of the numinous were another link among the spirituality of the Elephantine Jews and Egyptians and the Ghanaian Asante. Looking eastward, one may add prominent aniconic cultures such as the Nabataeans whose aniconic cultic stones are found throughout modern Jordan (mainly at Petra), Syria and Israel (Patrich 1990) and the peoples of the Arabian peninsula, from whom all Muslims derive their worship of Allah in the aniconic stones of the Ka'aba in Mecca and all the others that were ordered to be destroyed by Muhammad but some of which have survived. This iconoclastic tradition condoned by the Prophet has continued to this day with the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban and the destruction of the eleventh century relics in Timbuktu by the AGIM including priceless manuscripts of that era, many of which have been saved.

A connection between Egyptian and Asante aniconism is suggested by the shape of the *Akua'ba*  figure. Its shape is a cylindrical body, two outstretched but rudimentary appendages, topped by a disk. A similar aniconic image is found in the Egyptian  ***'nh*** (pronounced "ankh," sign S34 Gardiner 1957: 508), which has a cylindrical body, two appendages, topped by a disk. Its meaning has been the object of speculation by many Egyptologists. E. A. Wallis Budge associated it with Isis as her emblem (Budge 1904: 210), while Gardiner associated it with the shape of a sandal strap (Gardiner 1957:508). Most recently, its origin has been associated with recondite bovine symbolism that was basic to Egyptian husbandry and the origin of Hathor. In this interpretation, ***'nh*** is a stylized image of a cross section of a bull's thoracic vertebrae. However, its placement at the fingertips of a deity of the afterlife in tomb settings suggests its function, that of conferring new life to the deceased as an act of conception. This interpretation of the Ankh provides further support for the Asante-Egyptian use of the *Akua'ba* -***'nh*** symbol as a procreative amulet.

However, there is an even more explicit image that correlates the with the *Akua'ba*. This is the image of a personified  (pronouced /dʒɛd/ and written "djed") which is symbolized as the (bovine) vertebrae of Osiris, god of the afterlife, in the form of a bull's sacrum plus three lumbar vertebrae plus the thoracic vertebrae, plus the cephalic ankh, plus the ka (bull's horn's) holding the sun disk. Thee are all bovine images because bovine husbandry was perceived as the nurturing basis of Egyptian civilization:

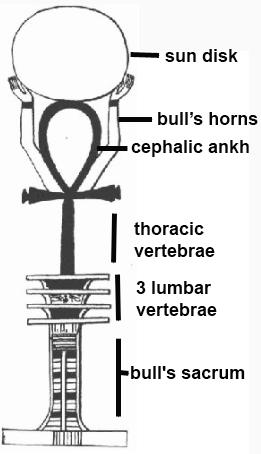


Fig. Personified *djed* pillar which is an aniconic representation of male bovine power of creation holding Re, the sun disk. From *Book of the Dead* *of Ani*, after Budge 1911, 1: 51.

The nightly union of Re and Osiris in New Kingdom religious texts embodied the sun's nightly form as a *djed* pillar representing Osiris as the bull holding up Re, the sun, hence Re was identified with the bull. Therefore, the Asante aniconism of the *Akua'ba*  figure derives its idea of procreation from an ancient Egyptian concept. This was incorporated into the Asante idea of procreation in which heredity is traced to both parents, but the blood succession (*Abusua*) derives from the mother's blood (*Mogya*) which mingles with the father's spirit (*Ntoro*), which is semen which has "a spirit or soul of its own and which is passed on after death, or is reincarnated in the child for the father's family." This spiritual power is believed by the Asante to be so "powerful that when a woman wishes to have a child she prays to her husband's *Ntorop* " (Meyerowitz 1951: 115-117), but (contra to Meyerowitz) the wife is in effect praying to power of the Sun in the form of the *Akua'ba*  figure itself which is reflected in the office of the Ashanti king, *Nyankopon*, who is considered to be the son of the Sun as was the Egyptian pharaoh.

Finally, the *Akua'ba*  figure houses the numinous ***bȝ,*** which is part of the soul but can survive only in a consecrated image (Segy 1963: 858). This aniconic symbol, therefore, links up with the aniconic traditions of both the Egyptian *djed* pillar and the Hebrew *Masseboth*. In the Asante figure, then, are links to two ancient aniconic traditions of Egypt and Israel that survive to this day in Ghana. This association of cultures and their ideas in the syncretistic environment of Ghana suggests that the peoples of West Africa were well-prepared to receive the teachings of "The Bible" through the efforts of missionaries from Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It may provide a fertile avenue of approach to exploring the reasons why Ghana has remained culturally integrated, while other countries in the region, such as northern Nigeria, have experienced cultural and religious clashes among these three religions of the "jealous god" whether he be YHWH, Allah or ‛. One answer to this clash of spiritualities may well be that the tradition of the aniconic image does less to challenge the fundamentalist interpreters of the Bible and the Qu'ran than do the branches of Christianity that stem from an iconic tradition (such as the Copts, Catholics and Protestants) in so far as a face is put on to the divinity.

References:

Boardman, J. 2005. [Review of ] K. Smolarikova, *Abusir VII: Greek imports in Egypt* (Prague: Charles University), *Ancient East and West*, 4(1):218-219.

Budge, E. A. W. 1904. *A Guide to the Third and Fourth Rooms of the British Museum*. London: British Museum.

Budge, E.A.W 1911. *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection.* London : Warner. 2v.

Coffman, R. J., Jr. 2008. Ancient trails and Egyptian natron trade: translations from Libyan inscriptions. Notes on a 2008 expedition.

Folorunso, C. A. 2003. Views of ancient Egypt from a west African perspective. In David O'Connor and Andrew Reid, eds., *Ancient Egypt in Africa* (London; UCL Press, Institute of Archaeology), pp. 77-92.

Gordon, A. H., Schwabe, C. W. 2004. *The Quick and the Dead: Biomedical Theory in Ancient Egypt First Edition.* Leiden : Brill.

Kerkeslager, Allen. 1998. Jewish pilgrimage and Jewish identity in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. In David Frankfurter, ed., *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World) Leiden: Brill), pp. 99-228.

Lucas, A. 1932. The use of natron in mummification, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 18(3-4):125-140.

Meyerowitz, E. 1951. *The sacred state of Akan*. London: Faber and Faber.

Patrich, Joseph. 1990. The formation of Nabatean art: prohibition of a graven image among the Nabateans. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University.

Porten, Bezalel and Yardeni, Ada. 1989-1999. *Textbook of Aramaic documents from ancient Egypt: newly copied, edited and translated into Hebrew and English* (4 vols.; [Jerusalem]: Hebrew University, Dept. of the History of the Jewish People; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns).

Schumacher, Gottlieb. 1908. *Tell el-mutesellim Bd. 1, Fundbericht. B, Tafeln*. Leipzig: Haupt [in Komm.]

Segy, Ladislas. 1963. The Ashanti *Akua'ba*  statues as archetype and the Egyptian Ankh: a theory of morphological assumptions, *Anthropos, Internationale Zeitschrift für Völker-und Sprachenkunde Sonderabdruck*, 58: 839-867).

**Appendix:**

Details of *Akua-Ba*

**