

DECIPHERING THE BA-BIRD

CURATED BY: Osaru Obaseki
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The British
Museum

Free entry
Room 3
Objects In Focus
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Deciphering Ba Bird

Existential questions about the meaning of the soul, mortality, immortality, and life after death have unfailingly been key ideas of humankind. While there are no definitive explanations for the purpose and function of the soul, death, and afterlife, ancient civilisations have developed their own belief systems to grapple with the unknown. Deserting the terrains of imagination, we now live with ready-made narratives.

On the banks of the Nile in ancient Egypt (c. 3100 BC –AD 30), the myth of the *Ba*-bird was created. The *Ba* is often depicted as a human-headed falcon or a saddle-billed stork with a sun disc on top of the head. The human head reflects the nature of the being it manifests – be it human or divine – while the bird's body betokens freedom of movement, transformation, and ability to wing into different cosmic realms. The inclusion of the sun disc was most likely a representation of *Ra*, the sun god of the ancient Egyptians and the one creator of every form of life.

The *Ba* is commonly interpreted as the ancient Egyptian concept of the 'soul.' This spirit is linked to the human body, but it can leave the body and return to it. Depicted as a bird with a human head, the *Ba* was thought to leave the body upon death and ascend to the sky.

In the Old Kingdom, the concept of the soul was made up of several parts: the *Ka*, *Ba*, *Akh* and more. The *Ka* refers to the soul that gives the body its life force, which leaves the body after death yet remains close to the corpse. In contrast, the *Akh* is a spirit that appears after death and reaches that rank of *Akh* through transcendence and transfiguration. Unlike the *Ka*, the *Ba* acquired its meaning after the end of the Old Kingdom. It can also take other forms, including the shape of the person themselves.

The notion of the *Ba* is also characterised by the beliefs of ancient Egyptian commoners and their hopes of overcoming death and reaching the afterlife. Through the late Old and Middle Kingdoms, the transformation of religious ideas and belief systems affected how the public perceived the soul and afterlife. This concept of *Ba* focused on various aspects that changed the perception of the manifestations of mysterious powers and forces, previously believed to be possessed only by the powerful and royals' dead.

The exhibition *Deciphering the Ba-Bird* presents an artistic interpretation of the ancient myth of the *Ba*. It showcases the *Ba*'s various interpretations and evolving meanings in a range of art forms in an attempt to reopen the door of the imaginary to the concept of the soul.

"Deciphering the Ba bird"



WORKING TECHNIQUE

This figure shows traces of chisel marks at different parts. It depicts a solar disc on its head, giving a singular character to the human face of the Ba bird.

ANIMAL FEATURES

This Ba bird figure portrays animal features in a very realistic way.



ANIMAL FEATURES

It gives a sense of the close relationship that ancient Egyptian society had with desert animals and their knowledge of the natural environment.



Ba bird

Museum Number: EA66683

H 10.3cm - L 6.5cm - W 2.90cm

Material: Unknown wood

Origin: Middle Egypt

Do you
love birds?

How about
meeting
a magical bird?

Our magical bird has:



A head just like us



A bird body



Sun disk that shines with yellow light

How about imagining someone
you love becoming our magical
bird and flying in joy.
Let's draw his/her
face here



Once upon a time, people from a
place named Egypt used to
believe that this magical bird
accompanied each person even if
they went far away, and never
left them alone. They thought
each person had their bird
forever.

The "ba,"



Let's ask our magical bird
to bring us things we want
from the sky
or from a far place.

What are you going
to ask the bird
to bring you?

Press Release

Deciphering the Ba-Bird Exhibition

**Three ITP participants from three
continents explore the meaning of
the ‘soul’ in a historical Object of
Egypt**

7 April 2022

Clore Centre, the British Museum

Supported by
The de Laszlo Foundation, the Altajir
Trust and the Aall Foundation

The British Museum announced the opening of its new exhibition ***Deciphering the Ba-Bird***, curated by three fellows of the International Training Programme.

The exhibition presents an artistic interpretation of the ancient myth of the *Ba-bird*, which was created in ancient Egypt (c. 3100 BC –AD 30). The *Ba* is often depicted as a human-headed falcon or a saddle-billed stork with a sun disc on top of the head. The *Ba* is commonly interpreted as the ancient Egyptian concept of the ‘soul’. This spirit is linked to the human body, but it can leave the body and return to it. Depicted as a bird with a human head, the *Ba* was thought to leave the body upon death and ascend to the sky.

The exhibition displays a collage that combines pictures and artistic representations of the *Ba-bird* from different angles and artwork offers a closer look at the parts of the mythical bird. The exhibition also presents an interactive flyer for kids to reimagine the bird and express their impressions of it.

Osaru Obaseki, an artist from Nigeria, says: “The exhibition on the wooden *Ba-bird* with its great teamwork opened my eyes to the depth of the Egyptian beliefs and mythology around life, death and the soul. This for me resonates for how the belief systems of people all over the world are interconnected, as well

as making reference to craftsmanship, what other renditions of the Ba bird looked like and the different mediums used.”

Mario Tuki, Artist and Collections Manager from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) Museum says: “Working with an object from a different cultural heritage allowed me to broaden my experience and understanding about world cultures and their relationship to their environment from a musicological perspective, through the example of the *Ba-Bird* mythological symbol from Egypt.”

Haneen Saleh, Media and Marketing officer at the Palestinian Museum says: "Reading about this myth and rethinking how to present it to the public - it is a new and different space to my museum work. I also see that the openness of the ancients to imagining the soul, death and after death, is one of the reasons why their civilisations are immortal."

This exhibition was produced under the supervision of Loretta Kilroe, Project Curator for Sudan and Nubia, Egypt and Sudan and Jennifer Turner, Project Curator for Egyptian Statues, Egypt and Sudan, and it is part of the presentations presented by the ITP fellows at the end of their training journey each year.

Notes to Editors

The International Training Programme (ITP) confirms the British Museum's commitment to working across London, the UK and abroad. In London, the Museum's staff and collection are made available to provide a platform for demonstrating best museum practice. Across the UK, partner museums allow fellows to experience regional organisations with strong community programmes for local audiences, and often with stronger relevance to the fellows' own museums and audiences. Through the ITP, the British Museum is committed to building a global network of colleagues crossing geographical and cultural boundaries. Working with ITP fellows provides a forum to disseminate current practice and to exchange knowledge and skills, thus helping to shape the museums of the future.

For further information

Contact the Communications team on

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