

A RITE OF PASSAGE

The Enigmatic *Tekenu* in Ancient Egyptian Funerary Ritual

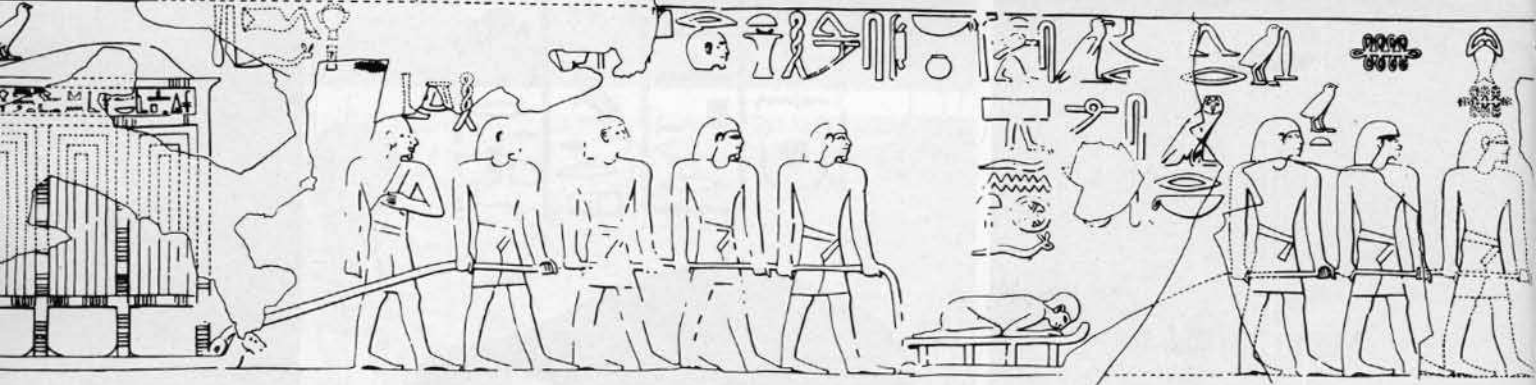
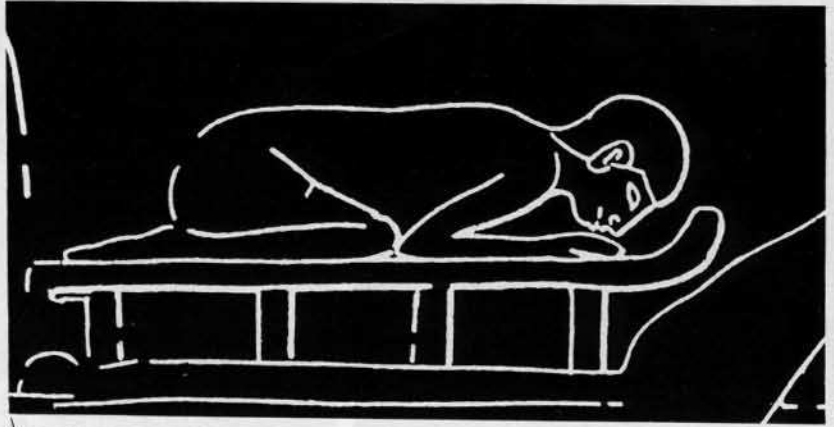
by Greg Reeder

WHEN SIR FLINDERS PETRIE uncovered evidence at Abydos for hundreds of subsidiary burials around the Tomb of King Djer, the question of human sacrifice was raised.¹ Even though this evidence for such a practice was meager compared to that in other ancient civilizations (Sumer, China,

Meso-America), the subject tainted many interpretations of certain rites performed during ancient Egyptian funeral ceremonies. The prime candidate for the sacrificial victim in such a nefarious ritual was the mysterious shrouded figure present in numerous tomb depictions of the interment rites, identified only as the *tekenu*. For instance, English Epigrapher Norman de Garis Davies, writing in 1913, could state: "...three men...drag on a sled a crouching man to whom this and other texts assign the name *tekenu*, which unfortunately conveys no meaning to us. This personage, in whom many see a human sacrifice, regularly plays a part in the full burial ceremonies, the various phases of which are commonly shown in tombs of this period [Eighteenth Dynasty]."²

If in the past Egyptologists were quick to see the specter of

BELOW, RIGHT & OPPOSITE, Representations of the *tekenu* in the Theban tomb of the fanbearer Montuhirkhepeshef from the time of Thutmose III (TT20): *Below*, the *tekenu* is represented as a fully revealed man lying in a fetal position on a sledge (enlargement at right) drawn by three men; *Opposite*, three registers depicting (top) the *tekenu* still on his sledge, (middle) the sacrifice of bulls and (bottom) a strange scene of two "Nubians" being garroted (left), with two other "Nubians" in a posture of obeisance (center) and a circular pit containing the *tekenu*'s sledge (which is shown being carried to the pit at far right).



human sacrifice in the writings on the wall, some modern scholars have been equally quick to dismiss the possibility of such. In his recent *Idea into Image* collection of essays, Swiss Egyptologist Eric Hornung sees in the *tekenu* not a real personage but rather merely a container for spare body parts. He notes that during the mummification process the embalmers saved everything that came out of the corpse or had been in contact with it. Select internal organs were embalmed and deposited in canopic jars, while other body tissues and matter were gathered up for separate burial. Hornung writes, "The body parts taken out of the corpse that were not placed in canopic jars were placed in an unusual-looking receptacle called a *tekenu*. The *tekenu* was transported on a sledge pulled by cattle [*sic*] in the funeral procession together with the coffin and case holding the canopic jars. Earlier scholarship contains less than convincing interpretations of the figure as a human sacrifice or as an echo of a prehistoric corpse in a contracted position. In my view

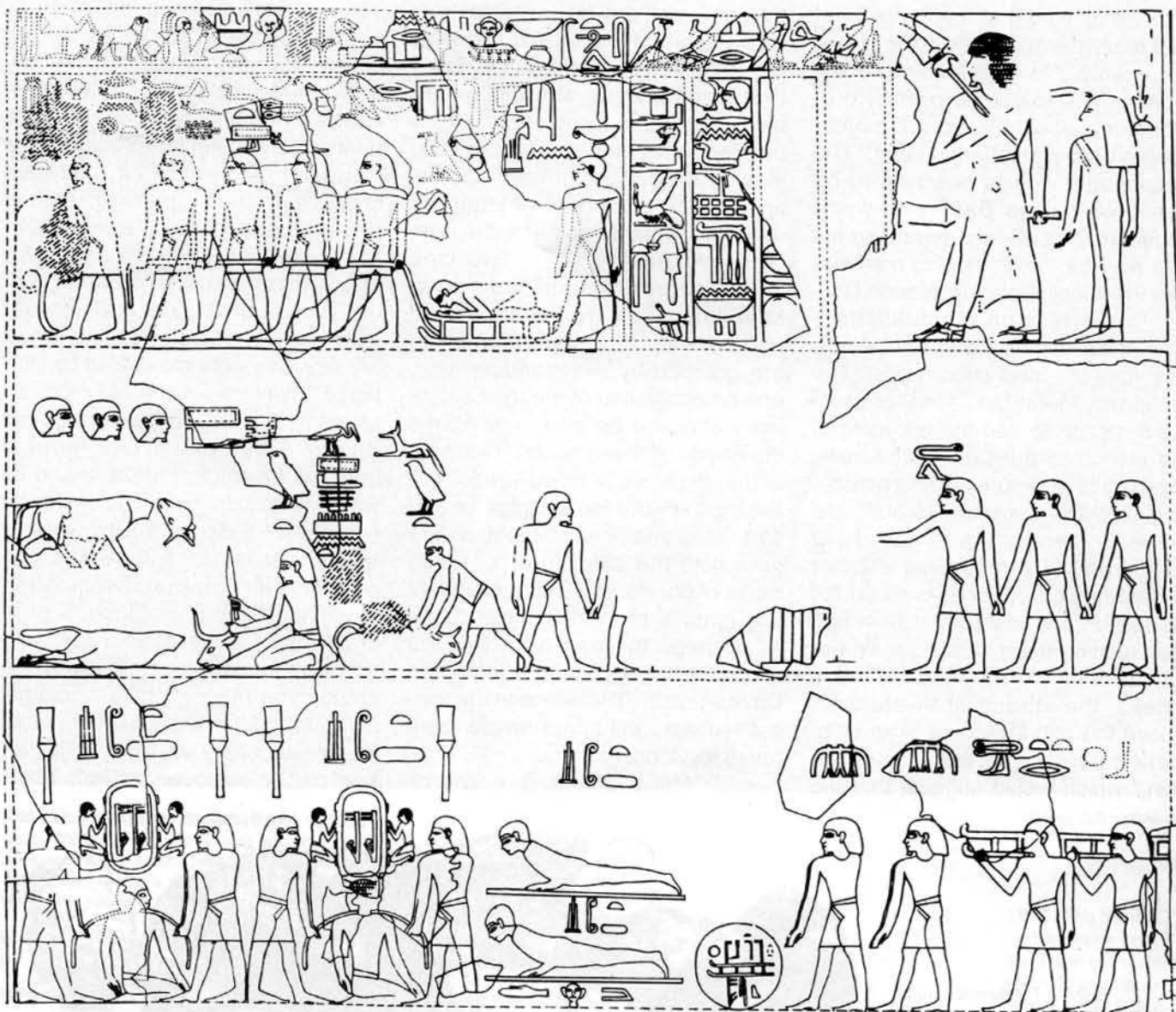
this formless entity should instead be understood as the sum total of all that the Egyptians could not mummify but still wished to include in the burial ritual so that it too might experience resurrection in the hereafter."³

Hornung's bag of spare body parts is a neat solution to the messy problem of ritual murder, but an examination of various representations of the *tekenu* raises more questions than his theory answers. Davies studied many of the tomb depictions of *tekenus* and classified them accordingly: In eleven cases the *tekenu* is "...muffled from head to foot in a black wrapper...." In seven cases he is "...shown in a kneeling posture, wrapped in a yellowish cloak, but with the head free. The hair is long, but the figure, including the face, is generally of an indefinite form and colour." In two cases the body is cloaked but the head and hand are free and in one case the body is "...free of all encumbrance, and to all appearance crouching voluntarily on the sled."⁴ It is with this last example that the rarest and most revealing portrayal of the

tekenu emerges.

The Eighteenth Dynasty (time of Thutmose III) Tomb of Montuhirkhepeshef (TT20) was discovered in the Theban necropolis by Gaston Maspero in 1882. In 1910 Davies found the site to be in ruinous condition and so — with a small grant from the Egypt Exploration Fund — he cleared the tomb, discovering many fragments of the wall decoration and restoring them to their proper places; he then copied the scenes.

Judging from his many credits, Montuhirkhepeshef was a very important individual, possibly with direct links to the royal family. He was "hereditary prince, real chancellor of the king, beloved by him, superintendent of priests, fanbearer, great one of the king of the south, magnate of the king of the north, son of the king, sole companion," etc., etc.⁵ The scenes decorating the walls of his tomb are quite unusual, even unique. The funeral procession is depicted on the south wall and is led by three men whose prominent size would seem to indicate that they are relatives of the



deceased. These individuals are followed by three (somewhat smaller) men who drag a sledge on which the *tekenu* lies. In this instance he is shown free of the shroud or skin which envelops him in depictions in other tombs. The three dragging the sledge are identified as "the guardian of Serket," "the guardian" and the "embalmer." Serket is the scorpion-goddess and her name originally meant "she who relieves the windpipe."⁶ In his commentary on the Tomb of Montuirkhepeshef, Davies noted that the sledge of the *tekenu* is represented archaically, as if seen "...from above and from the side simultaneously."⁷ Thus, in like manner, the *tekenu* is also shown from above, and therefore appears

to be crouching when he is actually in the fetal position of the contracted archaic burial. The three men dragging the *tekenu* call out to one another, "Come! Drag the *tekenu* that he may depart to his city."

Following the *tekenu* are four men accompanied by a *kheri-heb* priest, pulling a large shrine on a conventionally rendered sledge. The *kheri-heb* (lector priest) presided over the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony and his connection with the shrine depicted is explained in the superinscription, which says that the deceased has come to "see the *tekenu* being brought and the ointments [*merhef*] conducted to the top of the mountain" (that is, where the tomb is lo-

cated). Therefore, it would seem that the *tekenu* has some association with the shrine following him in the procession, which contains not the deceased's canopic jars but ointments or oils. These are very probably the seven holy oils used to perform the "Opening of the Mouth."⁸ Thus, it would appear that the key to the *tekenu*'s identification lies with his relationship to the "Opening of the Mouth" rite. Behind the *merhet* shrine walk seven men, at least two of whom are to be associated with the same ceremony, an *ami-as* and a *sem* or *smer* priest.⁹

The large shrine containing Montuirkhepeshef's sarcophagus is next depicted being pulled by three pairs of red oxen which were proba-

bly "...slaughtered at the tomb, if red was really the supposed color of Set, the enemy..."¹⁰ The whole procession moves toward a portrayal of Montuhirkhepeshef and his mother seated before an offering table. The deceased's wife is nowhere to be seen, which led Davies to wryly comment, "His silence regarding his wife may be a sign that his marriage was in his opinion a misalliance."¹¹

Further on Montuhirkhepeshef again appears with his mother. This time the inscription reads, "The fanbearer Montuhirkhepeshef coming in peace to see the dragging of the *tekenu* on the sled." Additionally the inscriptions "The *tekenu* enters," and "Lo! The *tekenu* sets out" also serve to identify the scene. Four men grasping a rope drag another representation of the *tekenu* on his sledge, in this instance with a fifth man leading them, holding a skin or animal hide in his hands. This is *meska*, the shroud of the *tekenu*. Above the fifth individual is an enigmatic reference to the "city of the skin," which would suggest that the

the same wall of TT20, an embalmer (*uf*) is seen cutting off the heads of red oxen (those which have pulled the sarcophagus sledge?); and below this ritual slaughter is a very problematical vignette. Davies remarked about it that it has "...all the appearance of a scene of torture or execution whether performed in reality or make-believe."¹² Two men identified as "Nubians" are seen kneeling, each with a thick cord about his neck, the ends of which are grasped by two standing men, one on either side of the man seemingly about to be garroted. Above the heads of these bound "Nubians" is the glyph for "fortified towns" encircling the word for "sculptor" or artisan. Two additional "Nubians" are shown to the side, in a prostrate mode of obeisance; and to their right is a circular pit containing a sledge — perhaps the one on which the *tekenu* was dragged to the tomb. As Davies notes, "The scene in the lowest register...will afford ample room for speculation."¹³

With this in mind, it may be

More mysterious burial pits are depicted in TT20. These are not unlike those mentioned by Hornung, where materials which had come in contact with the deceased's body during the embalming process were disposed of. From their indicated contents, it would appear that these pits were also receptacles for the animal sacrifices made during the funerary rites. Two such "pits" (of Middle Kingdom date) containing objects used in embalming and funerary activities were excavated by Herbert E. Winlock for the Metropolitan Museum in 1922, not far from Deir el Bahari. This "embalmers' refuse" from the funerals of Meketre and Ipi were found in small rock-hewn chambers close by the two men's tombs, just far enough away not to pollute their "eternal dwelling[s]." Meketre's deposit included "...piles of pots filled with rags and salt," and Ipi's was found to contain a wooden embalming platform plus "...cloths, salts, aromatic oils, sawdust...[and] countless pottery vessels." In his report on the discovery of Ipi's tomb,

After Rustafjaell, *The Light of Egypt*, 1909

Right, A Predynastic burial with the deceased interred in a contracted "fetal" position. It is possible that the "crouched" or "kneeling" depiction of the *tekenu* on his sledge — and also the *sem*-priest on his couch — is meant to recall this feature of Archaic funerary practice.



skin or shroud donned by the *tekenu* is not synonymous with him, that he is not the "bag" but the person within, "He who enters." Thus, the hide-shroud of the *tekenu* in some way facilitates his entering the "city of the skin," perhaps the next world. The *tekenu* is surely a principal actor in the funeral ceremonies, leading as he does the procession, with people calling out his progress on the way to the tomb.

In the next-lower register on

supposed that the bound "Nubians" are symbolic prisoners only, representing in this tomb depiction all the enemies Montuhirkhepeshef wished to control, "...to ensure the victory of the deceased over his potential enemies in this world and the next."¹⁴ The word "sculptors" within the "fortified towns" may very well be a reference to the sculptors who strike a statue of the deceased during the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony. More on that later.

Winlock writes that when the deceased's mummy was "...duly wrapped in its bandages, all that had touched it was gathered up religiously, for the possession of so much as a hair of his head by an enemy would provide the means of bewitching him."¹⁵

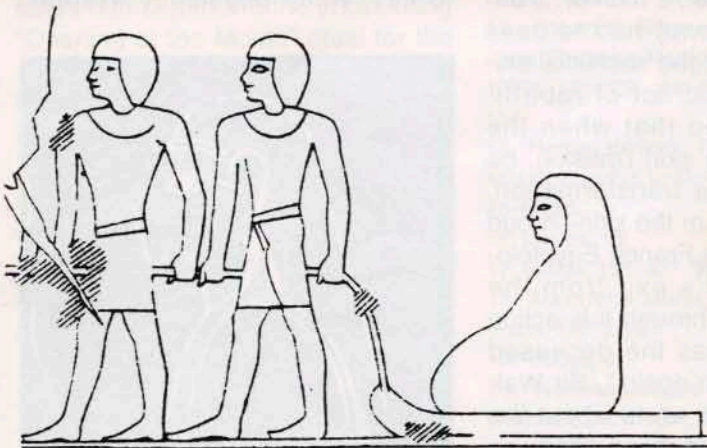
Additionally on these funerary pits: in the Tomb of Montuhirkhepeshef, men are shown digging these with one of the same instruments used to "open the mouth" of



Photo: G.B. Johnson

ABOVE, Relief representation in the 18th Dynasty Tomb of Renni at El Kab showing the *tekenu* as a shrouded man (face exposed) sitting upright (?) on a sledge pulled by two men (only one seen here).

the deceased. Their contents appear to consist mostly of the parts of sacrificed animals; but one with a wall around it (like the wall of a fortified town) is shown to contain just "black hair." The pit in the lower right of Davies's Scene Four in the Tomb of Montuhirkhepeshef is especially noteworthy in that it contains the fore leg of an oxen, a heart (ox?), hair (of the *tekenu*?) and a "skin," possibly the one in which the *tekenu* was wrapped. Davies wrote, "...this scene is of the highest importance, as showing that the human *tekenu* has been replaced by an animal victim."¹⁶ Other objects being consigned to the same pit are tabulated to the right: black eye-salve, incense, cloth, green eye-salve, natron, bread and drink. All of these materials were primary ingredients of the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony.¹⁷ Since they were employed



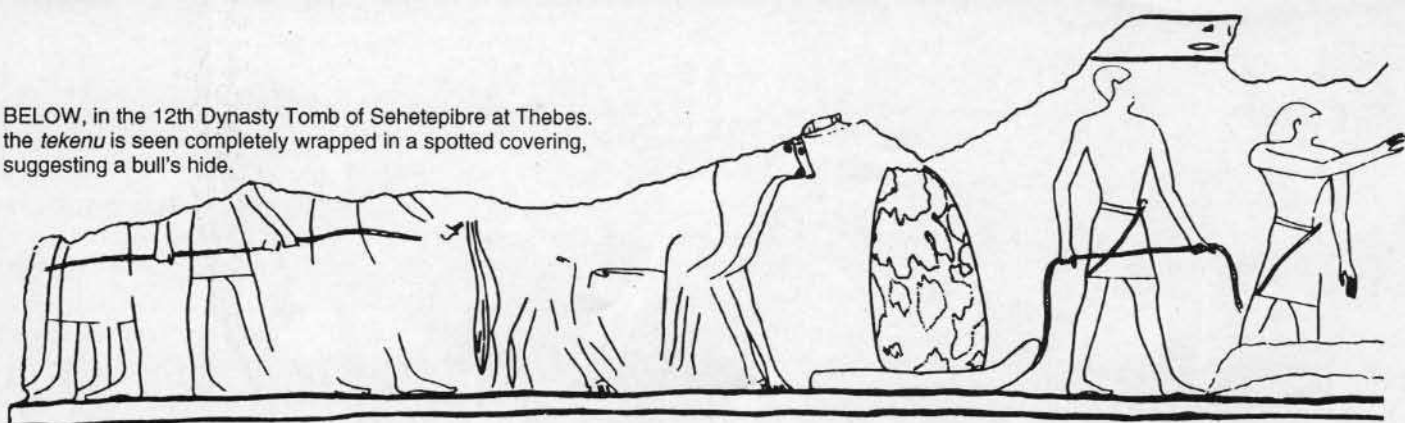
LEFT, The *tekenu* on his sledge from the Tomb of Puimere (second prophet of Amen, time of Thutmose III) at Thebes (TT39). As in Renni's El Kab tomb (above), the figure is completely enveloped in a shroud, except for his face, which is exposed.

in a ritual conducted at or inside the tomb, what was left over at the conclusion of the rites was very likely consigned to a burial pit following the funeral. Likewise, the function of the *tekenu* having been fulfilled during the same rituals, the skin or shroud which had enveloped him and the sledge on which he was transported would also have been disposed of in this burial pit. But what became of the *tekenu* himself, and who was the actor who performed this role? These questions

are still to be answered.

The only representation of the *tekenu* free of his shroud, the *meska*, is found in the Tomb of Montuhirkhepeshef. Other depictions of the *tekenu* and other opinions as to his nature will perhaps aid this inquiry. In the tombs of Tetaky (TT15) and Puimere (TT39) at Thebes, and Renni at El Kab, the *tekenu* is shown completely enclosed in his shroud, except for his head; while, in the well-known mid-Eighteenth Dynasty Tomb of Ramose at Thebes

BELOW, in the 12th Dynasty Tomb of Sehetepibre at Thebes. the *tekenu* is seen completely wrapped in a spotted covering, suggesting a bull's hide.



(TT55), he is totally enshrouded, manifesting only a sort of kidney-shaped bundle.

The classic treatment of the *tekenu* phenomenon was written by French Egyptologist Alexandre Moret and included in his *Mystères Égyptiens* of 1913. He believed that the funerary ritual involving the *tekenu* had its origin in the slaughtering of a human victim in order to redeem the deceased from death. In Moret's view these victims were often foreigners, such as Nubians, and were further associated with the god Set, enemy of Osiris. But in time an animal sacrifice came to be substituted for a human one and, in memory of the latter, a man or "mannequin" (the *tekenu*) had to pass through the skin of the sacrificial animal in a symbolic act of rebirth. Moret recognized that when the *tekenu* was in the skin (*meska*), he was undergoing a transformation. His emergence from the skin-shroud was likened by the French Egyptologist to an infant's exit from the womb; and thus, through this action by the *tekenu*, was the deceased automatically "born again." Sir Wallis Budge likewise wrote about the *meska* that by passing through "...the skin of a bull vicariously a man obtained the gift of new birth, either for himself or for the person he represented..."¹⁸ Moret also believed that the *tekenu* disappeared, finally, from depictions of funeral rites in New Kingdom tombs because his symbolic performance was replaced by a simplified ritual enacted by a *sem* priest,¹⁹ who, like the *tekenu*, was associated with the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony.

It is in the Tomb of Rekhmire (TT100) that answers begin to

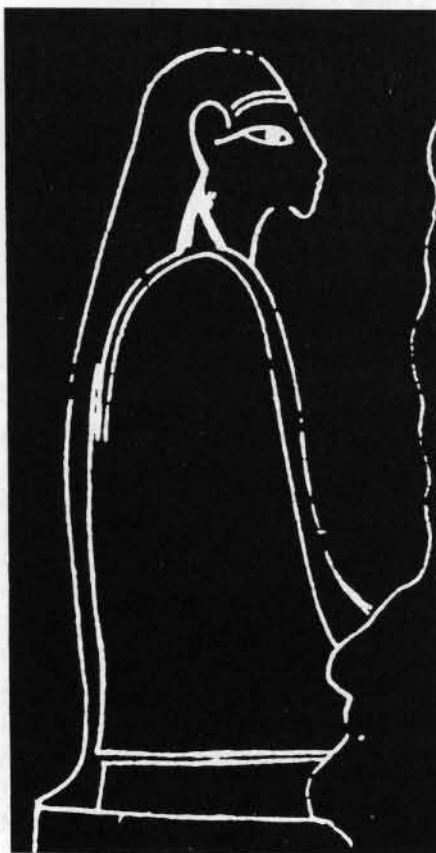
emerge regarding the role of the *tekenu*. On the south wall of the tomb's entry passage,²⁰ he is shown lying on a couch with only his head and hand exposed. Above him is written "Bringing to (?) the city of (?) the skin (*meska*) as a *tekenu*, one who lies under it (the skin?) in the pool of Khepera (perhaps "pool of transformation"?)."²¹ Budge believed that the *meska* was to be associated with the name of the Otherworld,²² so that the "city of the skin" may be understood as a reference to the deceased's destination in the Afterlife. Thus, when the *tekenu* reaches the "city of the skin" he is in the "pool of transformation" — that is to say, while physically wrapped

within the skin-shroud the *tekenu* is spiritually in a state of transformation, or undergoing a rebirth.

On the north wall of the entry passage of Rekhmire's tomb is an elaborate portrayal of the rites of the "Opening of the Mouth." Here a statue of the deceased is set upon a mound of sand, with ritual acts being performed before and directed at it — including purifications with water, fumigations with incense, presentation of magical oils and minerals, a symbolic striking of the statue, the ritual "opening" of the statue's mouth with various instruments, and bloody animal-sacrifices, all of these being done for the benefit of the deceased in the Hereafter.

Of these various ceremonies, the one relevant to this discussion involves a *sem* priest who is depicted wrapped in a horizontally striped shroud (or skin) which envelops his entire body, leaving only his head free. The *sem* kneels upon a low couch, exactly like the one the *tekenu* occupies in an earlier scene in this same tomb. (Allowing for the convention of Egyptian artistic representation, he may, in fact, be lying on this piece of furniture in a contracted position, rather than kneeling in an upright one.) Standing in front of the *sem* is the *ami-as* priest, who calls out, "My father, my father, my father, my father," to which the *sem* replies, "I have seen my father in all his manifestations."²³

This same scene is depicted in other New Kingdom tombs, as well. For instance, in the royal tomb of King Seti I the *sem* says to the *ami-as* priest, "One touched me when I was lying down asleep, one



LEFT, A shrouded *tekenu* with long hair, in the Tomb of Tetaky at Thebes (TT15).

roused me and I awoke." Thus, as interpreted by Budge, the *sem* in his enveloping shroud is first "asleep," during which state he sees his "father" (the deceased) in all of his many forms ("manifestations"), then he is awakened and reports his vision.²⁴

More recent scholarship has suggested that the *sem* priest was



Sem-priest in the Tomb of Rekhmire (TT100).

the earliest Egyptian magician, who "functioned by shamanistic dream-trance and adopted the leopard-skin dress for animal transformation in the spirit world." This was concluded by German Egyptologist Wolfgang Helck, after he had examined certain "archaic features" in the "Opening of the Mouth" ritual.²⁵ Thus, the so-called "sleep" of the *sem* was a state of dream-incubation or trance.

After being aroused by the *ami-as* priest, the *sem* donned the *qeni*,²⁶ an archaic reed-vest meant to protect him during the next rite. This was the act of "sculptors" or artisans striking a statue of the deceased, simulating thereby the murder of Osiris by Set, and perhaps with some association to the original carving of the statue. Following this ritual, the *sem* removed the *qeni* and draped himself with the skin of a leopard or panther. Wearing this

particular vestment of his priestly office, he continued the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremonies.

The possibility that the *sem* priest was a "shamanistic magician" helps explain many of the questions associated with the role of the *tekenu*. The latter would not, then, have been supplanted by the *sem*, as Moret believed, for the *sem* was the *tekenu* in an initial manifestation. Imitating the archaic burial by assuming a fetal position, he was variously enveloped (head/hands uncovered and covered) in a skin-shroud, and while so covered he entered, somehow, a deep, cataleptic, trance-like dream-state, his body thus seeming lifeless and formless, and even appearing as Hornung's "shapeless, sack-like, black mass."²⁷ While in this trance-condition, the *tekenu-sem* located the deceased in the spirit world and recognized him, following which he was awakened from his trance by the voice of the *ami-as* priest calling out. Thus, having visited the spirit world, the *sem* was imbued with powers which enabled him to perform the succeeding "Opening of the Mouth" ritual for the deceased. The *tekenu* was no more because he had been transformed into the *sem*.

Of course, this is only a possible explanation of the nature and role of the *tekenu*. It is based on the rather large assumption that some modern sense can be made of the various and varying depictions of the *tekenu*, plus the assumption that the ancients themselves understood or agreed upon who or what was being portrayed. Many questions remain unanswered. Were the representations of the *tekenu* in various funerary contexts merely artistic or theological conventions, their meanings being less important than the actual portrayals? The range of *tekenu* depictions — from fully realized men to nonanthropomorphic sack-like objects — may indicate that even the Egyptians were unsure of who/what they were dealing with. There is a tendency to view ancient Egyptian funerary practices as monolithic in

nature, when, in fact, competing theologies, priestly speculation and even simple artistic-preferences all contributed to rich and varied tomb decoration.²⁸ In the end, speculations like those presented here may not be much different than the speculations of the ancients. One man's bag may very well have been another man's shaman.

Notes

1. Michael A. Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs* (New York, 1979), 275-279.
2. Norman deGaris Davies, *Five Theban Tombs* (London, 1913), 9-10.
3. Erik Hornung, *Idea into Image* (New York, 1992), 169. Contrary to Hornung's assertion, nowhere is the *tekenu* shown being dragged by cattle; the sledge on which he is transported is always pulled by 2-4 men. See summary of Jürgen Settgast in Hartwig Altenmüller, "Gestattungsritual," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie I* (1975), col. 758-759.
4. Davies, 10. 5. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
6. Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1982). See sign list L-7.
7. Davies, 10.
8. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Opening of the Mouth* (London, 1909), Vol. I, xii-xiv.
9. Davies, 11, note 1. 10. *Ibid.*, 10. 11. *Ibid.*, 12. 12. *Ibid.*, 15. 13. *Ibid.*, 15.
14. Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago, 1993), 120-122; also note 571 and pp. 113-119.
15. Herbert Winlock, *The Rise and Fall of the Middle Kingdom in Thebes* (New York, 1947), 46-47, 55.
16. Davies, 16.
17. Budge, 105, 207, 96, 153.
18. Alexandre Moret, *Mystères Égyptiens* (Paris, 1927), 42 ff.
19. Budge, 31.
20. Norman deGaris Davies, *The Tomb of Rekhmire* (New York, 1944), pl. LXXXIII.
21. Davies, *Five Theban Tombs*, 10.
22. Budge, 31.
23. Davies, *Rekhmire*, pls. CV, CVI.
24. Budge, 155-158.
25. Ritner, 220 note 1024.
26. Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1978), 133-134.
27. Hornung, 169.
28. M. Abdul-Qader Muhammed, *The Development of the Funerary Beliefs and Practices Displayed in the Private Tombs of the New Kingdom at Thebes* (Cairo, 1966).

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