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Origins of Leadership: Akhenaten, Ancient Leadership and Sacred Texts  
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## ***Introduction***

This paper presents an ancient international leader who used sacred texts to effect cultural change in all the major social institutions of ancient Egypt. The purpose of this paper is to help shape the future of leadership by presenting a form new to traditional leadership studies: that of an ancient Egyptian leader. This new face, Amenhotep IV, later known as Akhenaten, who founded a new place, Akhetaten, provided a new context for our study of international leadership.

## ***Guiding Questions***

Who was Akhenaten? What was the context of the times in which Akhenaten lived? What was Akhenaten's religious heresy? What are sacred texts? What do they teach? How did Akhenaten use sacred texts to change Egyptian culture? What can researchers, practitioners, and educators learn from a study of Akhenaten?

## ***Methodology***

I conducted a cross-disciplinary literature review from anthropology, history, Egyptology, religion and spirituality, political science, social psychology, psychohistory, and leadership studies on the subject of Akhenaten and the Amarna Period of Ancient Egypt. I also reviewed the literature to understand the concept of "sacred texts" both in Egyptian culture and Western culture and consulted books of ancient literature to uncover the "sacred texts" of Egypt that would have conceivably been known to a Pharaoh during the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., after 1500 years of the written record – for example, the Instructions of Ptah-Hotep from around 2300 B.C.E. (Hilliard, Williams, & Damali, 1987)

## ***Findings***

### Context of the Times

Pharaohs were looked upon as gods in ancient Egypt, eternally present on the earth and controlling the destiny of the land. Prior to Akhenaten's reign, 17 dynasties of kings had lived and died. Almost 1500 years had passed since Egypt had been united under a single ruler (Narmer or Menes) that had united African and Near Eastern elements into a single civilization encompassing both Upper (Nubia) and Lower (Nile delta) regions, as well as the lands we know today as Israel, Syria and other middle eastern regions.

Cosmotheism, a term coined by Lamoignon de Malesherbes to designate the ancient and stoic worship of the cosmos as supreme being (Assman, 1996), is the foundation of sun worship and from which the Cult of Ra emerged (Quirke, 2001). Assman expanded the use of the word cosmotheism to encompass all polytheistic religions that worshipped the cosmos as the collective manifestation of deities. Assman describes that in the religious history of Akhenaten's new kingdom, cosmotheism had materialized into traditional polytheism, in Akhenaten's reign into revolutionary

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monotheism, with a return to polytheism after his reign (under his son, the Pharaoh Tutankhamen), and in the late Greek and early Roman eras, pantheism. Cosmotheism (or natural science) a complex form of knowledge of the culture that kept the world in order, enabled the Egyptian people to regulate their lives (for which the Pharaoh was steward).

The sun and the river Nile had long been focal points of survival for the Egyptians (Assman, 1996). “The Nile brought life and fertility in the summer and retreated in the death of winter, so the daily rising of the sun in the East brought renewed life to the soil and to man after the night of cold and darkness” (Bratton, 1961, p. 51).

The sun and the river are Egypt... The entire religious, political and cultural history of the country was determined by these two forces. “The revolutionary movement of Akhenaten can be understood only against the background of the two great traditional religions of Egypt and their identification with the sun and the river... which became associated with the two chief deities, Ra and Osiris” (Bratton, 1961, p.52). Present life became represented by the sun god Ra and future life by Osiris. “Ra was the god of creation, the primal force, the father of kings and author of the cosmic order. His daily journey across the heavens from east to west signified his original appearance as the beginning of life. The regularity of the sun’s course suggested to the Egyptians not only creatorship but justice and equity” (p. 68). Akhenaten’s grandfather (Tuthmosis II) spoke of the power of the Aten as a “god of battles who makes the pharaoh mighty in his dominions and brings all his subjects under the sway of the sun disk (Aldred, 1988, p. 142). This focus on sun worship was carried down from the grandfather to the grandson through the reign of the father, Tuthmosis III, and through sacred texts, such as The Book of the Dead, which speaks of Ra as self-created, existing before creation (Bratton, 1961, p. 68).

Hail to thee, sun disc of the day  
Creator of all,  
Who made their life;  
Great falcon, feathered in many hues,  
Who came into being to life himself;  
Who came into being by himself without sire.

(From Breasted, 1968)

#### Akhenaten –Leader, Priest, Politician, Educator, Architect, Revolutionary

Akhenaten was the religious, political, economic, social, and educational leader of the Egyptian people (Quirke, 2001 and Bratton, 1961). There was no institutional separation in the culture at that time, no separation between “church and state.”

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Religious thought and state behavior were blended. As a religious leader, Akhenaten initiated a counter-religion that attempted to replace Egyptian polytheism with monotheism (Clayton, 1994). He architected a city, Amarna, as a metaphor for change and as the focal point of his religion. The city was meticulously designed and could serve as a model for city planning today (Quirke, 2001, p.158). Akhenaten used art and architecture as major tools of change (Freed, 1999). Akhenaten's reign represents the extreme of the sun-worshiping religions (Quirke, 2001). Akhenaten formally founded his new religion in the sixth year of his reign, when he changed his name from Amenhotep IV to Akhenaten. The heretical religious revolution started with Akhenaten's de-emphasis of military conquest. It then moved to his subordination of the Theban priesthood, his refutation of the worship of Amun and all other Egyptian gods. Akhenaten then founded a new city, Amarna as the home of his counter-religion – the worship of his god, the Aten. The Aten, as revealed to Akhenaten, was the universal god and creator of all things. The Aten was also described as “the father and mother of us all,” a god who was not the lord of a single land or race, but of the whole earth. This god symbolized by the sun disk, was an unseen spiritual being described as infinitely merciful and loving toward all his creatures. The rayed disk symbol of the Aten, with each ray depicted as ending in a human hand, showed the power of the sun god in all human affairs and was a hieroglyph or symbol that foreigners as well as Egyptians could understand (Bratton, 1961, p. 49).

The radical monotheism of Akhenaten's revolutionary religion negated other religions. Akhenaten's religious upheaval was the signature event in the religious history of The New Kingdom. “It amounted to the replacement of the entire pantheon of traditional religion by a single and... new god...this new god was known by the name Aten. What was important and decisive about this act, what distinguishes it as the central event in the religion, is that it was monotheism that proclaimed the oneness of the divine” (Assman, 2001, p. 198).

The religion of Akhenaten was not a religion that evolved naturally. It was a founded religion that intentionally opposed itself to the polytheistic traditions of ancient Egypt. The religion manifested itself in the sacred text as well as in the minds of the Egyptian people as a negation of the traditional beliefs. This religion was the first of those great-founded religions (Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity) that operated with the emotionalism of negation and legitimized themselves as revelation (Assman, 2001, p. 199).

Akhenaten's religious revolution represents a line of theological development pursued to a logical extreme (Quirke, 2001, p. 143). Akhenaten's religious heresy (Bratton, 1961) represents an extremity of sun worship in Egyptian history (p. 143) and thus represents the first counter-religion (Bratton, 1961).

#### A New Name and a New City

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The people of Egypt expected a break between Akhenaten and the priesthood of Amun for some years before it actually happened. Little is known of the details of the relationship between Akhenaten and the Theban priesthood. The literature describes a struggle between the god of Thebes and the new religion of the court (Weigall, 1922, p. 78). Akhenaten sought to reduce the prestige of the Amun priesthood by reducing its budget and winning over to his way of thinking some of the priests in highest standing. However, finding difficulty in winning the minds and hearts of the priesthood as well as the Egyptian people, while located in Thebes, Akhenaten decided to move the court and build a city away from contaminating influences (p. 79). Akhenaten first changed his own name from Tuthmosis III to Akhenaten because within his name was also the reflection of the god and he wanted to make clear the transformation of himself from the god Amun to the god Aten.

Akhenaten selected the site for his new city and named it Akhetaten (Hornung, 1999, p. 70). The site selected was between Cairo and Thebes on the east bank of the Nile River and came to be called the City of Light. In modern times, it became known as Amarna. Akhetaten was built to honor Aten, the god of light that emanated from the sun. Akhenaten carefully recorded the site and his intentions for the new city on a series of Boundary Stele that he had set in the cliffs surrounding Amarna (Freed, 1999, p. 62). The Amarna site includes a bay in which lies a small island. Akhenaten erected pavilions and houses on the island. Along the Nile was a strip of cultivated land where he planted gardens for the main palace and the villas of the court nobles (Weigall, 2000, p. 81). The Amarna site also included temples. The great temple was unique in its design in that it was a spacious enclosure open to the sky and full of light (Freed, 1999, p. 62) and people gather together there to worship the Aten. This temple style represented a divergence from the typical Egyptian temple enclosure that was dark and entered only by the elite priesthood.

Bratton (1961) describes the last years of Akhenaten's life as filled with disillusionment as he considered the future of his religion after his death. Leaders at court pressured the pharaoh to take decisive military and political actions, both at home and abroad but Akhenaten was unrelenting in his pursuit of global peace. He had committed himself to a rule of peace and the spread of Atenism throughout the world. As Akhenaten continued to build his holy cities in Nubia and Asia (Bratton, 1961, p. 61) the population at home fell into chaos and his health deteriorated leading to his death in 1358 B.C.E. during the 17<sup>th</sup> year of his reign.

#### What are sacred texts?

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *text* as “the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by the words in their order; the very words, phrases, and sentences as written. *Sacred* is defined “of things, places, of persons and their offices, etc.: Set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence

entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship consecrated, hallowed.”

We reached our definition of sacred texts by combining elements of these two definitions. Our definition is: The wording of anything written or printed that is dedicated to some religious purpose and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect. Egyptian sacred texts (Clark, 2000, p. xxvi) are Egypt’s sacred literature, for example The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Hymn to the Sun, The Hymn to the Nile (Peet, 1931), The Pyramid Texts (Aldred, 1988), The Memphite Theology, and writings in tombs and other monuments (Lichtheim, 1975, p ix). The purpose of the Egyptian sacred texts was to provide a medium that connected the Egyptian people with the meaning of their lives (Clark, 2000). The sacred texts reflected the language of the sacred science of Egypt and contained a vast array of god and goddess figures, animal totems, and celestial bodies.

#### How did Akhenaten use sacred texts?

Akhenaten used the sacred texts in at least four ways. First, as the foundation of his authority. Egyptian pharaohs had ruled for 1500 years prior to Akhenaten. The foundation of that rule was the sacred traditions of ancient Egypt (Clark, 2000). In ancient Egypt, religion and politics were fused around a single individual, the king (Quirk, 2001, p. 17). The political authority of the king was based on the religious beliefs of the people, therefore, the 1500-year history of the Egyptian people and the sacred writings that told that story provided the justification for Akhenaten’s authority.

Second, as an agent of change of the state religion. Akhenaten used sacred texts as a change agent to redirect the focus of his economy and re-engineer the political and military structure of his culture. Akhenaten used sacred text in letters (Freed, 1999), hymns (Quirk, 2001), stone carvings and artwork (Aldred, 1980), festivals (Quirk, 2001), and ceremonies (Bratton, 1961) to re-educate his people religiously. This religious re-education was needed because Egypt was emerging as a world power and the sacred texts opened the minds of Egyptians to accepting foreigners as a part of their culture and make foreigners under the control of the Egyptian government feel welcome in the Egyptian society (Hornung, 1995). Akhenaten used sacred texts to re-engineer his economic and political culture. The sacred texts provided techniques, such as the “reversion of offerings” that allowed for finances to move from one cult to another and the “great revision” that was a wholesale moving of resources from the estate of one god-cult or the estates of all god-cults to the estate or estates of the pharaoh’s choice (Quirk, 2001, p. 168). In the “great revision” of Akhenaten, he drained the estates of Amun in order to build up the financial estates of the cult of Aten. Politically, Akhenaten modified existing sacred texts by eradicating the name of Amun and the other gods from the sacred hieroglyphic record. In this way, Akhenaten changed the structure of his culture because each god had his own

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supporting institutions. By removing the gods, he removed the institutions and the political infrastructure that went with them. He narrowed the economic and political base of his culture by forcing the recognition of a single god.

Third, Akhenaten used sacred texts to establish a new traditional thoughts and behaviors. He accomplished this by modifying existing sacred texts and creating new ones. He created, through revelation, a new system of sacred texts that established his counter-religion. Akhenaten recognized that the pharaoh could create new sacred texts by simply having his scribes write down his new ideas and promoting those new ideas throughout his kingdom. This he did through the recitation of new hymns, changing art and architectural styles (Freed, 1999) and by moving the center of culture to his new city, thus pulling people from Thebes to Amarna.

Although little remains of the actual writings of Akhenaten, the example of his Great Hymn to the Aten (Appendix I) leads us to believe that he wrote many songs for his people to help them accept and understand the changes he was mandating. Structurally, Akhenaten removed the hierarchy of priests between god and the people and brought into being the idea of the oneness of all life. He established himself as the sole priest, Nefertiti as sole priestess, and they communicated directly with the people through hymns and rituals. He also used hieroglyphic and pictorial carvings on monuments and temple walls, and through the writings preserved in the temple libraries from his ancestors.

Fourth, to refute the old religion, Akhenaten issued new sacred texts that refuted the legitimacy of the old gods (Hornung, 1995, p. 34). “First, he gave the new god a formal name, very different from any name any Egyptian deity had ever had or would ever have again – The god was called Re-Harakhty, Who Rejoices in the Horizon in his Name SHU, who is Aten” (p. 34). Akhenaten’s refutation of the religion was not limited to writings, but was expressed visually in art, architecture, and depictions on rock walls and tombs. By redesigning the temples, he opened the perceptions of the people to a new relationship between god and man. He depicted change metaphorically by showing himself and his family in intimate poses and natural settings. A famous relief shows Akhenaten out riding, under the extended rays of the Aten, traversing the open spaces of his kingdom, in a chariot drawn by two horses, kissing his wife with his child at his feet (p. 45).

#### What can researchers, practitioners, and educators learn from a study of Akhenaten?

Akhenaten’s leadership lesson instructs us about a concept of oneness and wholeness for all life on earth. Many modern leadership theories propose a sense of oneness as essential to successful leadership, teambuilding, and organizational development practices (Wheatley, 2003; Eisler, 2003; Rost, 1991). Therefore, studying Akhenaten has value for leadership researchers, practitioners, and educators.

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For researchers, the study of Akhenaten highlights the importance of deep history, religion, and culture to the development of leadership theories. Awareness of Akhenaten's focus on the concept of a global community extends the leadership study back into pre-Grecian history, and offers themes common to the most forward-looking leadership literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Practitioners can benefit from the study of Akhenaten because his life demonstrates how leadership and organizational structure impact cultural values, goals, and objectives. Akhenaten showed how drastic change in the mission of a culture requires change to all of the major institutions. Akhenaten's reign also helps us understand centralized vs. decentralized authority and how much control a highly centralized organization can effectively exert on its members.

Educators can gain insight on curriculum and facilities design, as well as the teacher-student relationship by studying Akhenaten. By controlling the curriculum of his culture, Akhenaten focused the learning of his people on what he felt was real and what was possible, as well as how things were done and who would be responsible for doing them. By redesigning the "facilities," Akhenaten created a more open space for teaching and learning and brought religion out into the open, under the sun. Akhenaten reinforced his curriculum through art, architecture, song and poetry, and religious rituals to reach to the hearts of his people. However, Akhenaten's teacher-student relationship was not collaborative; it was dogmatic and authoritarian. In part, because of the inflexibility of his curriculum and his leadership style, the changes that Akhenaten implemented were not sustained after his death and had to wait until another religious revolutionary built on his idea of the oneness of all life symbolized by one divine being.

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## Appendix I

### The Great Hymn of the Aten

“The essence of the god Aten is captured in Akhenaten’s ‘Great Hymn to the Aten,’ which is perhaps to be ascribed to him personally. It was recorded in the rock tomb of Aya, where it survived through the ages until 1890 A.C.E.... It is in this literary work that Akhenaten’s ideas found their purest expression (Hornung, p 78).

Beautiful, you appear

In the horizon of the sky,

Oh living sun,

Who determines life!

You have appeared on the eastern horizon

And filled every land with your beauty.

You are beautiful, great and shining,

High over all the land.

Your rays embrace the lands

To the limit of all you have created,

You are Re when you reach their borders

And bow them down to your beloved son.

You are distant, though your rays are on earth;

You are in their face, though your course is inscrutable.

When you set in the western horizon,

The world is in darkness,

In a state of death.

Sleepers are in their rooms,

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Heads covered, no eye sees the other.  
Were all the possessions under their heads robbed,  
They would not notice.  
Every beast of prey emerges from its den,  
And all the serpents bite.  
The darkness is a tomb,  
The earth lies numb,  
Its creator has indeed set in his horizon.

In the morning, you rise on the horizon  
And are radiant as the sun in the daytime;  
You drive off the darkness and cast your rays.  
The Two Lands are in festival daily,  
The people awaken  
And stand on their feet, for you have roused them.  
Clean is their body, they had clothed themselves,  
And their arms are (raised) in prayer when you appear,  
The whole land does its work.

All cattle are satisfied with their fodder,  
Trees and foliage bloom.  
The birds have flown from their nests,  
Their wings praise your ka  
All the game animals frisk on their hooves,  
All that fly and flutter live

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When you have risen for them.  
Freighters fare downstream  
And back upstream,  
Every road is open through your rising,  
The fish in the river leap before your face,  
Your rays are within the sea.

Oh you who cause semen to develop in women,  
Who make 'liquid' into people,  
Who keep a son alive in his mother's womb  
And quiet him so that his tears dry up-  
You nurse in the womb! –  
Who give breath  
To keep all creation alive.  
When (the child) emerges from the womb  
To breathe on the day of his birth,  
You open wide his mouth  
You provide for his needs.

The chick in the egg,  
Which speaks already in the shell –  
You give it breath therein to bring it to life  
You have set its due time  
To break (the shell) in the egg;  
It emerges from the egg

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To speak at its due time,  
It is already running about on its feet when it  
emerges from it.

How manifold are your works  
Which are hidden from sight,  
You sole god without equal!  
You have created the earth as you desired, quite alone,  
With people, cattle, and all creatures,  
With everything upon earth  
That walks about on feet  
And all that is on high and flies with its wings  
The foreign lands of Syria and Nubia –  
And the land of Egypt-  
You set all in their place and care for their needs,  
They all have their nourishment, their lifetimes  
Are determined.  
Tongues differ in speech  
Their characters as well;  
Their skin colors differ, for you distinguish the peoples.

You create the Nile in the netherworld  
And bring it up according to your will  
To keep humankind alive, for you have created them.  
You are lord of them all, who toils for them,

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Oh lord of all lands, who rises for them,  
Oh sun of the daytime, great of majesty  
All the distant foreign lands, you yourself keep them alive,  
You have placed a Nile in the sky,  
That it might descend to them,  
With waves beating on the mountains like the sea,  
To water their fields with what they need.  
How effective are your plans, oh lord of eternity!  
The Nile in the sky, which you give to foreign peoples  
And all the creatures of the desert that go on legs;  
But the true Nile comes from the netherworld to Egypt.

Your rays nurse all the fields –  
When you rise, they live and grow for you.  
You create the seasons to make all creation develop- -  
The winter to cool them,  
The heat of summer that they might sense you.  
You made the sky far in order to ascend to it  
And gaze upon what you have created.

You are unique when you have risen  
In all your manifestations as the living Aten  
Who shines and gleams,  
Distances himself and comes near;  
You create millions of forms from yourself alone-

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Cities, towns, and fields,  
Roads and river.  
All eyes find themselves facing you,  
When you are above the land as the sun of the daytime.

When you have gone, there no longer remains your eye,  
Which you have created for their sake,  
So that you do not behold yourself as the sole one  
Of what you have created-  
Even then you remain in my heart,  
And there is no one else who knows you,  
Except for your son, Neferkheperure Waenre  
Whom you have taught your nature and your might.

The world comes into being from your gesture,  
As you have created it.  
When you rise, they live,  
When you set, they die;  
You are lifetime itself, one lives through you.  
Eyes rest on beauty until you set,  
All work is laid down when you set in the west.  
The rising one strengthens all arms for the king  
And speed is in every foot.

Since you founded the world, you rouse them

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For your son, who emerged from your body,  
The king of the two Egypts, who lives on Maat,  
Neferkheperure Waenre,  
The son of Re, who lives on Maat,  
The lord of diadems, Akhenaten, great in his lifetime,  
And the great king's wife, who he loves,  
The mistress of the Two Lands, Neferneferauten Nefetiti,  
Who lives and is rejuvenated  
For ever and ever.  
(Hornung, p. 83)

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Appendix II  
Chronology of Ancient Egypt

<b><i>Predynastic Period</i></b>	4800 – 3100 B.C.E.	<b><i>New Kingdom</i></b>	
Dynasty 0	3100 – 3000	Dynasty 18	
<b><i>Early Dynastic Period</i></b>		Ahmose	1539 – 1514 B.C.E.
Dynasty 1	3000 – 2800 B.C.E.	Amenhotep I	1514 – 1493 B.C.E.
Dynasty 2	2800 – 2675 B.C.E.	Thutmose I, II	1493 – 1479 B.C.E.
<b><i>Old Kingdom</i></b>		Hatshepsut	1478 – 1458 B.C.E.
Dynasty 3	2675 – 2625 B.C.E.	Thutmose III	1479 – 1425 B.C.E.
Dynasty 4	2625 – 2500 B.C.E.	Amenhotep II	1426 – 1400 B.C.E.
Dynasty 5	2500 – 2350 B.C.E.	Thutmose IV	1400 – 1390 B.C.E.
Dynasty 6	2350 – 2170 B.C.E.	Amenhotep III	1390 – 1353 B.C.E.
Dynasty 7-8	2170 – 2130 B.C.E.	Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten	1353 – 1336 B.C.E.
<b><i>First Intermediate Period</i></b>	2130 – 1980 B.C.E.	Nefernefruten/Smenkhkara	1336 – 1332 B.C.E.
<b><i>Middle Kingdom</i></b>		Tutankhamen	1332 – 1322 B.C.E.
Dynasty 11(after reunification)	1980 – 1938 B.C.E.	Ay	1322 – 1319 B.C.E.
Dynasty 12	1938 – 1759 B.C.E.	Horemheb	1319 – 1292 B.C.E.
Dynasty 13-14	1759 – 1630 B.C.E.	Dynasty 19	1292 – 1190 B.C.E.
<b><i>Second Intermediate Period</i></b>	1630 – 1539 B.C.E.	Dynasty 20	1190 – 1075 B.C.E.
		<b><i>Third Intermediate Period</i></b>	1075 – 656 B.C.E.
		<b><i>Late Period</i></b>	664 – 332 B.C.E.
		<b><i>Greco-Roman Period</i></b>	332 B.C.E. – 642 A.C.E.

Based on William J. Murnane, "The History of Ancient Egypt," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 712-14.

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