Inborn Destiny

The ancient Egyptian and African societies are divided into various labor groups. To some extent, an individual’s labor group is determined by birth.

Heredity is important in determining most people’s destinies. A common expression, “nature vs. nurture”, raises the eternal question — how much is inborn, and how much is a result of our upbringing/environment.

People are born with certain skills, i.e. there is a hereditary factor(s) in our making. In the United States, people refer to a reason for someone’s genius, by saying, “It’s in her/his genes”, i.e. the reason is genetic.

It would take several generations to acquire the knack or the special skills peculiar to a given type of job. Relying on habit, the sense of custom, and tradition, Egyptians generally preferred not to run risks, and therefore chose to stay within the confines of the profession in which they had been raised — the ancestral profession — for their own personal good and for that of society as a whole.

The above is what Diodorus said about the labor system in ancient Egypt, along with noting that the members of a given profession or trade constantly rivaled each other
in their quest for perfection.

All the professions were clearly demarcated, and highly efficient and specialized. Encroachments on the preserves of others were not desired or encouraged.

This system allows the building up of work experience at an early age. The inborn skills, together with such acquisition of experience, are much more efficient and productive than our common education system nowadays.

There is a common misconception that a "caste" is a ranked endogamous division of society in which membership is hereditary and permanent. The emphasis on hierarchy inhibits our understanding. A more accurate analysis for these societies would be to distinguish castes by culturally defined sources of capacity or power.

Castes are not some type of hereditary succession; for though a son usually followed the profession of his father, owing to habit, thoughts, education, or patronage and connection, which have existed at all times and in all countries, he could still enter a different profession/trade. He would have to do that without the benefit of his family's experiences and connections. He could choose another labor group, but it would be difficult. There were therefore no rigid castes, in the strict sense of the term.

All the most essential parts of life — marriage, housing, occupation and status — revolve around profession. It is clear that one's profession defines one's existence.

In our post-Industrial Revolution societies, we waste time and energy in schooling. Most people don't become effective in their trade/profession, until they are about 30 years old. To be born into a trade/profession, one would be able to contribute at a much earlier age.
Division of Labor / Castes / Classes

Ancient Egypt, like most west African societies, did not have castes, in the strictest sense of the word. But there was a general division of labor into five main groups:

1. Intermediaries, consisting of the clergy (temples and shrines), judges, and doctors.

2. The farming community, consisting of royal lineages, nobles, farmers (who made up the bulk of the population), stock breeders, gardeners, supervisors of waterway activities and duties such as irrigation, water and fishing rights, etc., huntsmen, boatmen of the Nile, traders, and shopkeepers.

3. Specialized professionals (artisans), consisting of the Ny-Ama (energy/word) handlers, such as: the smiths, leatherworkers, woodworkers, weavers and bards (oral historians), as well as masons, and probably potters.

4. Servile bondsmen, consisting of long-term servile bondsmen and from whom people were drafted for military and enforcement duties.

5. This group mainly consists of people without a permanent home address, such as the herdsmen groups, pastors, oxherds, shepherds, goatherds, swineherds, poulterers, and fowlers.

These five main groups were usually subdivided again, according to their peculiar trade or occupation.

More details of the five major groups will follow later in this chapter.
Dynamics Within Each Labor Division/Caste

Within this hierarchical social structure, each member of the community finds his/her social position according to the heredity position of the family. Even if a child does not perform the traditional role of his/her parents, the child’s status remains as theirs.

Whether or not they choose to develop that capacity and exercise their right, does not change the fact of their inheritance, nor does it provide easy access to others that may wish to enter that domain.

Members in a class are mobile within their particular occupation or range of occupations, which is considered to be appropriate to each caste.

Dynamics Between the Occupations/Layers

The whole society is/was aware of the inter-dependence of all groups within the society.

The different social classes contribute equally but separately to the society. For example, blacksmiths assist all youth through a physical and psychological journey to adulthood, through the rites of male initiation and circumcision. A blacksmith would lead the rite and physically perform the circumcision itself.

All groups rely on the Ny-Ama (energy/word) handlers (artisans) to be their intermediaries, to guide their religious upbringing, handle power and solve their problems from the
physical (e.g. fixing tools) to the spiritual (e.g. inability to conceive). An artisan may act as healer, exorcist, peacemaker, arbiter, or counselor.

The hunters contribute to the society with their unsurpassed knowledge of the bush and their herbal abilities.

Client-patron relationships are/were organized between the noble families and the artisans. The nobles provide financial and material support for their artisan families while they in turn act as their host’s blacksmiths, tanners, cobblers, weavers, musicians, historians and entertainers.

Traditionally, the most skillful artisan families are attached to the personal service of the kings and leading noblemen. Lesser-talented casted persons serve lesser noble families in a corresponding, hierarchical system.

For the bards, in particular, those who are clients of royal nobility have a higher status than the wandering minstrels of the countryside who are not attached to any specific noble family.

There is mobility not only between the different occupations but also within any particular occupation.

Individuals are not necessarily confined to this occupation for life. They have the option of seeking out other occupations but can only perform the less complicated tasks.

Intermarriage between the various work groups does not normally take place, not because of disrespect for each other, but because it is against the nature that maintains the talent of each ancestor lineage. This is not a racist or cultural superiority complex. It is meant to maximize the knowledge, and not to scatter it.
1) Public Servants (Intermediaries)

Since order is the natural, desirable state, disorder must be identified and rectified. It is therefore important to determine who or what is responsible for any disorder. Trained intermediaries are employed to rectify these disorders and imbalances.

This group of intermediaries can be categorized in the following major groups:

1. The priesthood at the large temples are/were the officially delegated subordinates of the king, and perform the necessary rituals to ensure the well-being of the land and people. These large temples were built as shrines for the net eru (the divine aspects/forces of the universe). Any equilibrium between the mass of humanity and the deity is thus maintained through the divine offices of the Pharaoh/leader.

The priests (servants) of the major temples consisted of various grades — chief priests or pontiffs, prophets, judges, sacred scribes, dressers or keepers of the sacred robes, the bearers of the shrines, banners, and other holy emblems, the sacred sculptors, drafts-
men and masons, the embalmers, the keepers of sacred animals, and various officers employed in the processions and other religious ceremonies. There was also the king’s own priest and the royal scribes.

2. Judges of high rank served **Ma-at** as priests and the chief justice of the land wore a little figure of **Ma-at** around his neck as a badge of office. Judges were fully trained in law, harmony, and equilibrium.

3. Specialized doctors for the different ailments. Ancient sources refer to the Egyptians as the healthiest people of the ancient world. Herodotus wrote, in the 5th century BCE:

   “Of all the nations of the world, Egyptians are the happiest, healthiest and most religious.”

The excellent condition of the Egyptians was attributed to their application of metaphysical realities, in their daily lives. The Egyptian medicine understood man as a whole, in tune with the cosmos. The body is an immensely complex vibratory system. Everything is in a constant dynamic state of movements that are intimately connected to the rhythms, harmonies and pulsation of the universe. Accumulating evidence proves the existence of cycles in the incidence of diseases, and in their intensities, which are indicative of cosmic resonance. If a person’s orderly rhythmic patterns were disturbed, this was an indication of trouble ahead. When out of tune, the body was seen as unhealthy or diseased. In the case of illness, it is of the greatest importance to ascertain which spirit or which person is responsible for undermining the natural or-
To heal a person, is to bring that person back into tune, by the deliberate summoning-up of the specific harmonic phenomena pertinent to the case. Magic for ancient Egyptians was the profound understanding of cosmic resonance, as opposed to the current shallow notion, that magic is a synonym for superstition.

Western medicine is mostly a combination of butcher medicine (surgery) and shock treatment (induction of concentrated chemical compounds).

4. Servants of the local ancestor shrines, who perform the duties and ceremonies, connect with ancestral spirits in the appropriate relationship. Such services were performed by a member of each family, at their local shrine, who in ancient Egyptian dynastic times were called the Servant of the KA. These shrines continue to be very active throughout Egypt, especially in the rural areas. The chief of every large village, town, or district, usually attached a man to his service, who was believed to be able to hold communication with the ancestor spirits and to have influence with them. This person was also believed to possess powers of an occult character with which, when necessary, he could control, limit, or abrogate the action of evil spirits.

5. Special practitioners in ancient Egypt, present-day rural Egypt, Yoruba, and other African areas deal with
everyday life disorders such as: misfortune, sickness, infertility, drought, famine, floods, political rivalries, inheritance disputes, marital or career choices, or the clearing of a new field.

Magic and sorcery both serve this end. From society's standpoint, magic is positive or neutral. On the one hand, magicians try to influence life forces to alter the physical world, perhaps to bring good fortune or a return to health. Sorcerers, on the other hand, are anti-social, using sorcery (or "black magic") to control or consume the vital force of others. Unlike magicians, whose identity is generally known, sorcerers hide their supernatural powers, practicing their rites in secret. When misfortune occurs, people often suspect that sorcery is at the root of their troubles. They seek counsel from diviners or magicians to identify the responsible party, and to help to rectify the situation. If the disruption is deemed to threaten everyone, leaders may act on behalf of the community at large.

If it is thought that an evil spirit has possessed a person, the diviner or magician may take care of it, or an exorcist with a greater degree of specialization may be called in. These special practitioners or medicine men, are the ones who dispense charms, bags full of fetishes such as birds' skulls and shells, and medicinal products. They may tell fortunes, or give advice on how to avoid danger. All these items must be activated/blessed by the medicine man, prior to its use.
2) The Farming Community (Nobles & Farmers)

The new farmland areas, from Kanem to Hausaland to Songhai, all the way to Wagadu, adopted an intensive system of irrigation and cultivation. All these ideas came from ancient Egypt, as well as the irrigation method employed — that of the hydraulic shadouff (see illustration on page 161). Water is raised from streams or shallow wells by means of a bucket attached to the end of a pole, which is levered on a crossbeam of wood. The other end of the pole is weighted with a slab of dried mud, causing the pole in its rest position to stand erect. The bucket is drawn down by hand to raise the water from the stream. The weight of the mud-slab causes the pole to raise the filled bucket automatically. All these new societies maintained the ancient Egyptian name, to this day, i.e. shadouff.

Nobles were basically farmers. Friedrich Nietzsche traced the origin of the concept of ‘good’, in German culture, to the concept of ‘noble’. Likewise in ancient Egypt and throughout sub-Sahara Africa — a noble was not a rich aristocrat, but a good person.

The term, noble, came from the ancient Egyptian Neb/Nab/Naba, which is one of the titles of the leaders throughout ancient Egypt and sub-Sahara Africa. Neb means gold (traditionally the finished perfected end product — the goal of the alchemist). Neb also means Lord, Master, and All. Nobles are/were also the leaders of the community.
Likewise, the Wolof peoples of Senegambia identify the concepts of goodness, beauty, and nobility as inherently related.

Even though their major occupation is farming, nobles also take up other activities such as hunting or part-time business during the off-season. They managed to trade and exchange various products between the different communities.

Rulers of the various polities were chosen from members of a particular royal line. Nobles not of royal blood had differential rights and privileges depending upon their families and their duties in the state. The nobility participated in the selection of the kings-to-be, although they themselves were not eligible to be chosen.

3) The Artisans (Manifesters of the Cosmic Word)

Egyptian creation texts repeatedly stress the belief of creation by the Word. In effect, The Supreme contained the potential existence of all things, and when He spoke, He and all things with Him came into objective existence.

In ancient Egypt, Ptah is/was the Cosmic Architect, the cosmic shaping force, the giver of form (smith). He is/was patron of crafts, trades, and the arts. He is/was the coagulating, creative fire, simultaneously the cause (of the created world) and effect (of the scission).

Ptah sits enthroned or stands upon a pedestal in the form of the glyph for Ma-at (cosmic law, harmony, equilibrium), to emphasize
the importance of balancing energies in the transformation process, from a raw to finished form.

3a) The Smiths

Ptah’s counterparts on earth are the smiths, who are/were called The First Sons of the Earth. The forge was called the fan — the same name given to the cosmic egg from which all life was born. The four creation (or mother) elements were always present at the smith’s forge: fire, the air of the bellows to tease fire, water to tame fire (her twin sister), and earth to stand upon for security.

Ironworking demands a great deal of the energy of action, by the handler (smith) himself, in order to release the energy. This energy is lodged in the inorganic matter and is emitted as a part of the transformation process, when the ore is smelted, or the iron is shaped. During the process, enormous amounts of Ny-Ama are given off.

Smelting is/was a mystery, surrounded by a ritual symbolism which compared the act of smelting to sexual intercourse, and the reduction of the ore to the ‘cooking’ of a child in its mother’s womb.

Blacksmiths are/were highly revered and sometimes feared because they are believed to be powerful magicians,
and their work was shrouded in mysticism. African blacksmiths had a closed and secret society, through which their skills were/are passed from one generation to another.

The smith’s guild was divided into three subgroups:
1. blast-furnace smiths
2. blacksmiths
3. workers in precious metals or jewelers

Each group had rites and rituals that prepared an apprentice smith for initiation into the body of masters.

Blacksmiths also make most of their society’s wood and iron works. Generally, several male smiths in a town will work iron and wood, while at least one female member of the family will work clay.

Ptah’s counterparts on earth (the smiths) perform the work aimed at shaping the environments and the individuals around them. Their activities include those of technicians, healers, sorcerers, and mediators.

3b) The Weavers

The weavers, like blacksmiths, possess some mystical powers. They were both respected and feared.

The spider is the divine animal that symbolizes the art of weaving, and as such it is the divine archetype of this craft.
The weaver’s work, like the smith’s, was teeming with symbolism. There are/were thirty-three parts of the loom, and all of the parts had a meaning. For example, there were/were eight parts of the frame, four of which were symbols of the mother elements—fire, air, earth, water—and four that symbolized the directions—north, south, east, and west. The weaver is/was also counted as part of the magic of the loom. Before beginning work, the weaver touched every part of the loom and said an invocation.

As the weaver’s shuttle moved to and from, the weaver sang rhythmically with his/her actions. Only weavers could understand the language of the loom.

### 3c. The Leathermakers

The leatherworkers handle forces/energy, because the life force and power that the animal once possessed is retained in the leather and is released with its manipulation.

The leatherworker beats [the Word] smooth.

Leather, like feathers, horn, claws, and bone, retains its life form and life force after the flesh has disintegrated.

Leather workers have a major role in the amulets made by priests, medicine men, and blacksmiths for clients with particular problems to solve, or particular goals to achieve. **Ny-ama** is the active ingredient in these devices, and so leather workers must themselves possess enough of it, to defend against its potentially awesome effects. They make the ap-
propriate and compatible leather covers/containers for the amulets. The amulets lose their entire efficacy if they are not properly wrapped in covers made by such experts.

There is a certain mystical aspect of musical instruments, as though they were alive with their own language of sounds. The fact that goats are the most talkative animals, and their skins are used almost exclusively in making drums, is no coincidence. One reason for the variety of drums is that they serve not only as musical instruments, but also as a method of communication.

3d) Wordsmiths (Storytellers)

The mouth and tongue, both of which are intensely nyama-laden, produce words. Words are full of special energy, which can be dangerous (the tongue is mightier than the sword) if misused. Bards are believed to possess great reserves of this power, and they are trained to use it with the utmost care. Bards are/were “wordsmiths” — anything to do with words and songs was their specialty.

They, like smiths, also work with spells, the supernatu-
rational formulas that activate the energy on behalf of a person or against certain negative forces/energies.

Almost all that we know about the ancient history of Africa comes from oral tradition. Written history is less credible than oral history, if it is biased and irresponsible. Transmitting history by word of mouth from generation to generation through professional historians was a common and credible method, until foreign forces came to Africa, and the locals colored their stories to appease their Muslim overlords.

The wordsmiths’ accounts are often poetic and accompanied by musical instruments, such as the harplike kora and the small tam tam or “talking drum.”

This is not sheer entertainment. It is a responsible duty. All through history, storytellers the world over, share their craft with children and adults alike, and make the conveying of knowledge a pleasant experience.

4) Servile Bondsmen

While traditional Western notions of slavery might include gruesome, immoral images of vulnerable and helpless victims, slavery in Africa, before the arrival of Islam in the 11th century, was by no means a hardship or miserable existence. It was a relatively marginal aspect of traditional African societies. It was generally in the form of servitude, and was relatively benign — an extension of lineage and kinship systems, and it was a case of adoption rather than slavery. They were treated as members of the family. Anyone applying the epithet of “slave” to them, would be hotly taken to task by the owner. They were always well treated and could rise to respected positions in households and communities.
Even in modern times, one can witness the relationship between a noble and servile bondsman, as a two-way relationship of love, caring, and dedication.

Soldiers, law enforcement officers, tax collectors and minor bureaucrats were recruited from servile bondsmen.

The Moslem conquests of North Africa, and their penetration in the south, were for the main purpose of capturing a large number of helpless people to be traded as a commodity (slaves). As a result, the slave trade of Africans — especially women and children — developed on a new scale. It was no longer a mutual agreement of civil adoption relationship between two parties, but Islamic jihads changed it to a case of abduction, kidnapping, and reducing the people to a mere commodity to buy and sell. In theory, slaves could buy their freedom, but this was very difficult to do.

It is only within the last hundred years that slavery has become illegal in these areas. Even now, its effects are still felt by the descendants of former slaves, who still work as tenant farmers for their former masters.

5) Homeless Herders

Ancient Egyptians sent their cattle for a part of each year to the marshes of the north; for though all the land in the Nile Valley was pretty well brought under cultivation, a good part of the Delta was still wild and uncultivated.
In the marshy districts, the men who kept the cattle were barely regarded by the true Egyptians as their equals.

These men lived in the marshes with the cows; they had no settled home, for their reed huts could be moved from place to place when necessary.

They were a small, foreign minority among Egyptian farmers who were very attached to their land, and unable to envision wandering as nomadic herders.