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The Egyptian Civilisation and the Sun Cult in a Water Perspective

“The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest” (Dawson 1957:128).

Ra, Horus and the Nile

In the Egyptian civilisation (ca. 3000-332 BCE) the sun ideology and cult dominated the religious life. Ra was the sun and all the pharaohs were the Son of Ra – Horus (Assmann 1995). This triggers off a question: Why was not the river Nile the most supreme of all gods and goddesses in Egypt? This question may at the outset seem quite inferior and minor compared to studies of the religious ideas regarding why the pyramids were built, but “in these deserts the river was life itself. Had it failed to flow, even for one season, then all Egypt perished. Not to know where the stream came from, not to have any sort of guarantee that it would continue – this was to live in a state of insecurity where only fatalism or superstition could reassure the mind” (Moorehead 1960:vii). Without water everyone would have died within a short time in the extreme heat. Still, despite the Nile’s fundamental and vital role in the Egyptian civilisation (fig. 1), it did never attain the greatness as a supreme god, but the sun, however, became Egypt’s greatest deity ever. “Although the Nile was the obvious giver of life to the early men of Egypt it was not the great river and its precious waters that first stirred thoughts of worship in their primitive minds. It was the sun, relentless bearer of death, that they supplicated” (MacQuitty 1976:50). This is seemingly a paradox. Why worship the sun and not the Nile in a desert environment when the temperatures during the summer approach 50°C? Thus, at the outset the sun-cult in Egypt, in the desert land where all life was dependent upon the Nile, seems mysterious and illogical.



Figure 1. **The flooding of the Nile and the pyramids at Giza.** Photo taken by Lehnert & Landrock around 1920

The Ancient Greeks and Romans praising the Nile

The absence of any obvious and overall cosmic important river god or goddess is striking, particularly since the classical Greek and Roman authors had enormous admiration and adoration of the Nile. The Syrian writer Heliodorus wrote that the Nile “is called Horus”, “the giver of life”, “the saviour of all Egypt, both Upper and Lower Egypt”, “the father of Egypt”, “the creator of Egypt” and “he who brings new mud each year”. The latter aspect with regards to the silt which the Nile annually deposits, is also stressed by Seneca: “...it renders a two-fold service to the fields...Egypt owes to the Nile not only the fertility of the land but the very land itself”. According to Philostratus, the gymnosophists of Egypt recognised this dual nature, because they rendered “cultic worship to the Nile in particular, for they consider this river to be both earth and water”. The whole Egypt was made of the Nile, the silt created the land and the water gave its life – both qualities and outcomes of the flood, which created an extremely fertile environment. Theocritus emphasised that “No land produces as much as Egypt when the Nile floods” and Themistius proclaimed that the Nile is “the father of crops”.

The Nile was the most spectacular river in the world (fig. 2); Diodorus said that “The Nile surpasses all the rivers of the inhabited world in the benefactions to humanity”. According to Seneca, all the rivers are “vulgares aqua”, but the Nile is the “most noble” of all watercourses. Arnobius proclaimed that the Nile is “the greatest of rivers” and according to Ammianus Marcellinus it was “a river which is kindly to all”. Or in the famous words of Herodotus, “Egypt is the gift of the Nile” (Wild 1981:88-94).



Figure 2. **The life-giving Nile. Where the Nile does not reach Egypt is a desert.** Photo: Terje Østigård

The life-giving waters: rain or river?

The inundation was worshipped, but there was no supreme Nile god or goddess. Compared to other river civilisations or Hinduism’s Mother Ganga, Sarswati, Yamuna and the Indus, “There is a striking lack of personifications of waterways or stretches of water in the Egyptian pantheon. The so-called “Nile gods”, more recently termed “fecundity figures”, personify general concepts of abundance and its causes, among which the most prominent is the inundation”, Hornung argues, “[but] they can scarcely be termed deities. There is neither a

river god of the Nile (there are of course no other rivers in Egypt), nor deities of lakes” (Hornung 1982:77-79). Nevertheless, the term “Nile god” was already used in 1844 by Champollion (1844:297-298), but the problem is that within this group there is a number of figures which in various ways either are related to the Nile itself as a river or the inundation as a process (Baines 1985:112). Hans Sethe (1918) was the first to argue explicitly that the term “Nile god” was inappropriate or misleading. Still, the divine waters were present, but expressed in other ways.



Figure 3. **The blessed, but still dangerous rain and storms, Egypt.** Photo: Terje Østigård

One of the original and oldest myths in the Egyptian mythology is the battle between the gods Horus the Elder and Seth concerning the life-giving waters. Originally, Seth was a rain and storm god (fig. 3) – “a god of the blessed yet dangerous storms” (Bell 1971:24) and Horus was a sun-god (fig. 4). The foundation of the Egyptian civilisation coincided with the end of the Neolithic Wet Phase (around 3000 BCE), which was a rainy interlude. As the rain became rarer with the decline of the NWP, everything from the desert became sinister to the peasants,

and Seth eventually became the personification of evil (Bell 1971:24) whereas all life became dependent upon the river instead of rain. In the mythology, seen as ideology, this is described as a battle between Seth and Horus.



Figure 4. **The sun sets at the Valley of the Kings, Luxor.** Photo: Terje Østigård

Seth stroke and violated Horus and snatched one of his eyes. Horus grabbed one of Seth's testicles and made him impotent. Seth as an original rain-god seems to have lost his powers which literally were in the hands of Horus (Te Velde 1967). Thus, there took place a change between the gods who possessed the life-giving waters. The old rain-god was replaced by Horus for whom the Solar Eye was the most prominent symbol, and "there is sufficient to show that the fertility duties of the Pharaohs were double ones, originally concerning the rain but later the Nile" (Wainwright 1938:75). Seth was pacified and Horus had gained the former rain-gods' power, but only after he regained his wounded Eye. After the Eye was injured it was filled up (Griffiths 1960:30), and consequently, all the former rain-water was now contained in Horus' Eye as the river Nile.

According to Wainwright, the old sky-gods were transformed into either fertility gods or could become solarised (Wainwright 1935:170). Thus, there has been a transformation and transfiguration of power, and what was at stake in the feud between Seth and Horus was the life-giving waters – rain or river – and consequently the life and prosperity for all of Egypt. A common theme throughout Egyptian mythology is therefore that the Eye or the sun-disk contained the life-giving waters and the Nile’s inundation (Assmann 1995:181). Moreover, the outcome of the mortuary cult was “The utilitarian provision of rain, a “Nile in the sky”, to sustain those people who do not have a share in the terrestrial Nile” (Assmann 2001:59), and in the *Pyramid Texts* it is said that “*My water is in the sky..*” [Pyr. 688].

In the later mythological feud between Seth and Osiris, Seth killed Osiris, but Horus avenged his father and killed Seth. Osiris was rejuvenated through Horus’ Eye; “...*I bring to you the Eye of Horus, that your heart may be refreshed possessing it*” [Pyr. 22], and the Eye contained the life-giving waters. Seth inflicted a wound on Osiris’ leg from where the annual inundation poured out, and the leg was connected with Elephantine; “*O King, receive this pure water of yours which issued from Elephantine, your water from Elephantine...*” [Pyr. 864]. Thus, the Nile had cosmologically its origin in Nun or the primeval waters, connecting the celestial waters with the terrestrial waters through Horus’ Eye.

Conclusion

The sun-cult and the religion behind the construction of the pyramids and other monuments can be seen in a water-perspective because the sun was the source of the Nile and hence all life. The transformation of the life-giving waters was first and foremost a change from a rain ideology to a river ideology. Contrary to what one could have expected, with this change the river god remained celestial rather than became terrestrial: Horus as the former sun-god incorporated all of the river ideological qualities and capacities in the form of the sun. The images of the divinities continued, but their contents and cosmic functions changed. The Nile was the every foundation of the Egyptian civilisation, but it did not become a “traditional” river god or goddess such as Ganges because the life-giving water was assimilated into an older, celestial and divine Parthenon: Ra or the Sun God.

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