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EGYPTOLOGY BETWEEN AFRICA AND EUROPE

Review –article by **Mark de Brito**

Africa Antigua - el Antiguo Egipto, una Civilizacion Africana, Actas de la IX Semana de Estudios Africanos del Centre d'Estudis Africans de Barcelona (18-22 de marzo de 1996)

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The thrust of this symposium is to interpret Egyptian civilisation in the context of present-day and other ancient African cultures. An impressive array of contributors, European and African, pursue the theme across several disciplines : theory (epistemology), language, comparative religion, anthropology, history, prehistory, and archaeology.

In his introduction, Dr Cervello Autuori describes a number of contributors as representative of the "Dakar school" advocates of an approach initiated by Cheikh Anta Diop. This is misleading. In fact, the book is a powerful antidote to trends in Egyptology which emphasise ideology at the expense of scholarship. This is because several writers critically examine such ideologies in their historical manifestation and philosophic import. The African school of thought which invokes subjective etymologies to derive contemporary African cultures from Egypt and the European attitude which deploys a pseudo-philosophy to attribute monotheistic belief to the Egyptians – neither of these viewpoints finds support in the pages of the book under review.

Written scholarship on oral African cultures is a younger discipline than most in Near-Eastern studies. If, therefore, an Africanist approach to Egyptology (which made a tentative beginning in the nineteenth century) has been slower to mature, it certainly promises fresh and challenging insights. As Professor Leclant notes in his preface, this conference is a major event as much for Egyptology as for African studies.

The contributors are: Alain Anselin (Fort-de-France, Martinique), Francesca Berenguer Soto (Barcelona), Mubabinge Bilolo (Kinshasa, Congo), Marcelo Campagno (Buenos Aires), Josep Cervello Autuori (Barcelona), Montserrat Diaz de Cerio Juan (Barcelona), Terence DuQuesne (London), Christopher Ehret (Los Angeles), Emma Gonzalez Gil, Luis M.Gonzalvez (Barcelona), Ferran Iniesta (Barcelona), Jean-Loïc LeQuellec (Brenessard, France), José Luis Menedez Varela, Guillermo Alonso Meneses, Anna Montes (Barcelona), Alfred Muzzolini (Toulouse), Oum Ndigi (Yaounde, Cameroun), Albert Roca Alvarez (Barcelona), Helmut Satzinger (Vienna).

Theory

A particular pleasure of the book is the sense of contributors in dialogue with each other. For example, a prominent theme is the concept of the 'substrate', a term borrowed from diachronic linguistics which here theorises the relationship between Egyptian and other African cultures. No fewer than six authors mention this term: Cervello (p.87), Roca (248-250), Campagno (71), DuQuesne (115), Bilolo (64) and Meneses (189). It is Cervello, however, who treats the idea in greatest detail. Cervello is the author of book which extends the argument of his paper¹, a book reviewed by DuQuesne². Cervello's paper to the seventh ICE was a balanced assessment of Africanist Egyptology³.

¹ *Cervello Autuori, Josep*: Egipto y Africa: Origen de la civilizacion y la monarquia faraonicas en su contexto africano, Editions AUSA, Barcelona, 1996

² *DuQuesne Terence*: Review of Cervello, o.c. 1996, Discussions in Egyptology 41 (1998, 75-80)

³ *Cervello Autuori Josep*: Egypt, Africa and the ancient world, in C.J.Eyre (ed) Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists (Cambridge, 1995, 261-272), Peeters, Leuven, 1998 (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 82)

The theory of the substrate, according to Cervello, arose in reaction to diffusionism. Cervello describes diffusionism as a colonial way of thinking, which supposes transfer of cultural contents from more to less 'developped' societies. He rejects diffusionism as an explanation of the parallels between Egyptian and other religions. Diffusionism is ideologically motivated, typically unscientific and innocent of archaeology : the 'method' can yield any number of possible results from the same data. Diffusionism was also propounded by opponents of colonialism : Diop, for example. For him, Egypt was the cradle of African civilisation, and migrations from Egypt gave rise to all major African cultures.

Cervello proposes the theory of the substrate in place of diffusionism, classifying variants of his theory (p.88). The substrate is not itself a culture or civilisation, but an abstract fund from which cultures may draw their contents : a cultural potential rather than actuality. The substrate-theory is a deconstruction of diffusionism : it dissolves the major and minor terms of diffusion (source culture and recipient culture) in a common origin. As with much deconstructive theory, the substrate-theory runs the risk of being ahistorical.. I suspect Cervello calls the substrate a 'collective cultural subconscious' : evidently he sees it not just as a textual artifice but as a psychic repository. He sketches a history of the theory of the substrate in the latter half of the twentieth century.

DuQuesne associates the term 'substrate' with a theory of mythic archetypes. Muzzolini means something similar by 'un fonds symbolique commun'. Bilolo, Campagno and Meneses more or less subscribe to Cervello's analysis. Roca's is the only voice of dissent here. He attacks the concept of the substrate as a metatextual convenience which is inadequate to explain historical process (p.249). Cervello's reply to this would be that the theory of the substrate is flexible enough to take demonstrable cultural transfer into account. In his view, the substrate- theory can incorporate historical transfer or migrations. Roca's paper criticises the view that the Dakar school is less 'scientific' than mainstream Egyptology. Noting the three distinct claims to filiality in regard to ancient Egypt (the Black African, the

Western and the modern Egyptian), Roca warns that these factions ignore each other at their peril.

Iniesta reflects on the ideologies which have informed interpretations of Egypt. He distances himself equally from 'whitening' ideas of Egypt (as forerunner of Israel) and from Diopist claims that Egypt is the origin of modern philosophies (which are quite foreign to it). Iniesta praises Diop, less for his scholarship, one suspects, than for his inspiring polemics.

Language

Linguistics is no less subject to ideological bias than any other field. It is a virtue of authors in this collection to highlight such problems. Ehret offers a thoughtful paper in which he rejects the terms 'negroid' and 'caucasoid' as folk categories without firmer scientific basis. He criticises the inversion by Black writers of European racist thinking. Ehret asserts some of the conclusions of his work in linguistics, in so far as these conclusions have bearing on historical inquiry (for example, that Egyptian culture emerged from areas to the south). The method he adumbrates is an exploration of three processes: word-histories, genealogy of languages, and the evolution of a standard list of words. From these he extrapolates to claims about social and cultural developments. Ehret's work on proto-Afroasiatic, however, is difficult to follow.⁴

In contrast to Ehret, Satzinger uses more traditional methods. His results appear less grandiose but are verifiable and more solid. He brings to the subject a linguist erudition which is probably unparalleled. His paper discusses in detail certain similarities in grammatical structure between Egyptian and a number of other African languages. He avoids pronouncements on the question of genetic relationship between the languages.

Ndigi probes the similarity between Geb and the divinity of the contemporary Basaa people of Cameroun called 'Kobà'. There are striking similarities between the two names and between clusters of words related to the names. There are also

⁴ *Ehret Christopher*, *Reconstructing proto-Afroasiatic (proto-Afrasian): Vowels, tone, consonants, and vocabulary*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995 (University of California publications in linguistics 126)

suggestive mythological parallels. Ndigi has strong instincts for symbolism : his paper is a *tour de force*. His comparisons cannot be used to support claims about the genetic relationship between Egyptian and Basaa language and culture. This is because Ndigi focusses on only the two divinities and because the origin of the name 'Geb' is onomatopoeic (as are several words for animals in Egyptian). Ndigi does not demonstrate connections between a wider range of words in the two languages, nor does he indicate that such an investigation might be fruitful. Spurious etymologies are the stock-in-trade of Afrocentrists. Ndigi shows that a scholarly comparative exercise is valuable regardless of the status of such comparison.

Anselin presents a preliminary account of the relationships between hieroglyphics relating to architecture and their physical and symbolic functions. Anselin's books *La cruche et le tilapia*, reviewed by Campagno⁵ and *L'oreille et la cuisse* explore connections between Egyptian and other African languages⁶, but it is a travesty to regard him, as Cervello does in his preface, as a representative of the Diop school. It will usefully be mentioned here that Anselin has published elsewhere a second communication to the Barcelona conference, which lays special stress on an africanist perspective⁷.

Comparative religion and anthropology

DuQuesne discusses masking and the role of animality as a metaphor of the divine. His broad comparative perspective embraces Egyptian and other African civilisations as well as European, Semitic and Indian cultures. He draws attention to a striking parallel between divine canids in Egyptian and Dogon religion and quotes a poem by Senghor which alludes to Wolof masking. DuQuesne has written another article on masks

⁵ *Campagno, Marcelo* : De Discursos y Disciplinas Acerca de dos libros sobre prehistoria del Antiguo Egipto, *Studia Africana* 11, mars 2000,96-108

⁶ *Anselin, Alain* : La cruche et le tilapia : Une lecture africaine de l'Egypte nagadéenne, *Revue Tyanaba/Editions de l'UNIRAG, Martinique/Guadeloupe*, 1996, and : L'oreille et la cuisse : essais sur l'invention de l'écriture hiéroglyphique égyptienne, Editions Tyanaba, 1999

⁷ *Anselin, Alain* Le scribe et le poisson : Les hiéroglyphes des poissons, *Discussions in Egyptology* 40, 1998,7-49

in Egypt.⁸ In the present paper, he attacks the ethnocentrism which has plagued interpretations of Egyptian religion. Ethnocentrism has tended to limit understanding of Egyptian religion to a Near-Eastern context. DuQuesne extends this polemic in two other eloquent papers.⁹

Campagno considers the rival theories of the origin of Egyptian culture in Asiatic and African roots. He inclines to the latter view with recourse to the notion of a cultural substrate, the concept to which we have already referred. Campagno uses this concept in a discussion of divine kingship in Egypt. According to him, Egyptian kingship is closely related to the once widespread practice of ritual regicide in Africa. The Egyptian counterparts to ritual regicide are the myth of Osiris and the Heb Sed festival. Campagno does not suppose a direct genetic relationship between Egyptian and contemporary African cultures.

Campagno agrees with Cervello that the concept of substrate is a useful tool in making sense of aspects of religion which appear to belong both to ancient Egypt and to other African cultures. Divine kingship and ritual regicide are embedded in the same conceptual matrix relating to cosmic balance. Campagno cautions that the concept of the substrate is useful in application to general cultural outlines and not to specific rituals or myths. Like Cervello, he distances himself from crude diffusinism and evolutionism (which entail a hierarchy of cultures). He defines the substrate as an abstract category from which Egyptian and related African cultures take root, rather than as the totality of the 'less evolved' cultures in which ancient Egypt has its origin. An archaeological article by G.R.H Wright about dismemberment of the corpses of kings is relevant to the imagery of 'regicide' in Egypt.¹⁰

⁸ *DuQuesne, Terence* : Concealing and revealing : Ritual masking in ancient Egypt, *Discussions in Egyptology* 51 (2001, in press)

⁹ *DuQuesne, Terence* : The raw and the half-baked : Egyptian religion and obstacles to its understanding, *Discussions in Egyptology* 30 (1994,29-35) and :The spiritual heritage of Egypt and Africa, *Cahiers Caribéens d'Egyptologie* 2, février/mars 2001,87-95

¹⁰ *Wright, G.R.H* : The Egyptian sparagmos, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts zu Kairo* 35, 1979 , 345-358

Gonzalez explores myths relating to death in African cultures (drawing on Abrahamsson¹¹) and then makes some remarks about Egyptian conceptions of death, but she draws no conclusions about the connections. Montes discusses circumcision in ancient Egypt, relating it to the practice in other parts of Africa. She states that there is no myth relating to circumcision in ancient Egypt, omitting to mention Spell 17 of Book of the Dead :

O you who are in my presence, give me your hands, for indeed I am he who [grew up among you

What does it mean ? It means the blood which fell down from the phallus of Re when he took to cutting himself¹²

Among recent contributions not cited by Gonzalez, there is a paper by Bailey on circumcision in ancient Egypt.¹³

Meneses writes about the Guanches, the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Canary Islands. Their culture flourished until the fifteenth-century conquest. Meneses makes use of the term 'substrate' in reference to the African component of this culture.

Prehistory

Muzzolini writes about the relation between ancient Egypt and the Sahara, a field somewhat neglected by Egyptologists. Muzzolini is an authority on North African petroglyphs.¹⁴ In his paper, he sketches a prehistory of Egypt and the Sahara. African cultural unity, even in limited application to North Africa, is a false notion, he says, in view of the vast distances involved. It appears, however, that there could have been contacts between Egypt and the Sahara in the Holocene period (8000 BC onward), at a time when climatic conditions favoured such communication, Muzzolini rejects diffusion as an explanation of the similarity of certain motifs in Egyptian and Saharan art. He proposes a very ancient fund of symbols, common to Egypt and the Sahara. Certain motifs in Nilotic and Saharan art are genetically related

¹¹ *Abrahamsson, H.* : The origin of death, Uppsala 1951 (Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia 3)

¹² Translation : *Faulkner, Raymond Oliver* : The ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, ed *Carol A.R. Andrews*, London, 1985 (45)

¹³ *Bailey, E.* : Circumcision in ancient Egypt, Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology 7, 1996, 15-28

¹⁴ *Muzzolini, Alfred* : Les images rupestres du Sahara, Toulouse, 1995

(have an *air de famille*). He invokes a linguistic analogy in describing diversification from a common heritage.

Le Quellec's paper is about Saharan rock art and its relation to Egyptian art. He reviews the literature (from the nineteenth century onward). Following Paradisi, he lists graphic features common to both Saharan and Egyptian art.¹⁵ Le Quellec outlines a method of comparison: he warns against out-of-context comparisons of isolated graphic elements and against assuming mythological connections before thorough graphic analysis. Le Quellec has written two major studies of the symbolism of Saharan art.¹⁶ Unlike Muzzolini, he is an expert in comparative religion.

History

Bilolo stresses the reciprocal influence between Egypt and Nubia throughout pharaonic history. Egypt was never isolated, he argues: there was no racial prejudice on the part of Egypt against Nubia. It can be questioned whether racism is an appropriate category in regard to the ancient world. For Bilolo, it is time to re-examine the Greek idea that Egyptian culture was derived from Nubia. The opponents at whom Bilolo's rhetoric is directed largely belong to the past. Who now believes the Egyptians were 'caucasoid'? The heirs of the occidentalisers, however, are those who claim Egyptian religion as the prototype of monotheism or those who mis-apply modern sociological categories to Egypt. Bilolo is here indulging in a certain amount of political rhetoric. His principal Egyptological work is not in this mould: it is a major study of ancient Egyptian philosophy.¹⁷

In a curious paper, Menendez examines Herodotus' conception of Egypt. Herodotus' geography is less physical than symbolic, he writes, with some justification. Menendez claims

¹⁵ Paradisi, U.: La doppia protome di toro nell'arte rupestre sahariana e nella tavolozza predinastica egiziana della caccia al leone, *Aegyptus*, 1963, 269-277

¹⁶ Le Quellec, Jean-Loïc: Symbolisme et art rupestre au Sahara, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993 et Art rupestre et préhistoire du Sahara, Paris, Payot, 1998

¹⁷ Bilolo, Mubabinge: Les cosmo-théologies philosophiques de l'Égypte antique: Problématique: prémisses herméneutiques et problèmes majeurs. Publications Universitaires Africaines, Kinshasa, 1986, Travaux de l'Académie de Pensée Africaine

that Herodotus emphasises the cultural distance of Egypt from the rest of Africa (Libya, for example), while minimising Egypt's remoteness from the Hellenic world.

Archaeology

Berenguer, Diaz de Cerio, and Gonzalvez offer papers in the archaeology of Egyptian-related cultures in Sudan. Berenguer and Diaz de Cerio report on the excavation of an unpublished royal tomb in Gebel Barkal ; Gonzalvez documents pyramids in the same area. These contributions are especially valuable, since Kushitic studies have tended to be under-emphasised in Egyptology. The relationship between Egypt and Nubia is at the heart of any Africanist reading of Egyptian civilisation.

Africa Antigua is a vital and encouraging book, which will doubtless come to be seen as a major point of reference in the scholarship on Egypt and Africa. The collection has relevance not just for Egyptologists, but for those who, like the present writer, are concerned more generally with African cultures and with associated philosophic and political issues. The typography and production of the book are exemplary. The affordable cost will contribute to its being read as widely as it deserves. A final note : the *Centre d'Estudis Africans* in Barcelona also publishes an extremely fine journal, *Studia Africana*, which gives prominence to themes (and personnel) evident in the symposium. *Studia Africana* has been operating for almost a decade (ISSN : 1130 5703)¹⁸

¹⁸ Publishers's address : *Centre d'Estudis Africans*, Via Laietana 54, 4rt,3a, 08003 Barcelona Spain