

Ancient Egypt

“The eye of Ra” and Cheikh Anta Diop’s The African Origin of Civilization are two separate texts which discuss the society that is Ancient Egypt. There are some strengths and weaknesses to reading both texts in isolation, but together they prove to be very valuable in providing an understanding of Ancient Egypt.

“The Eye of Ra” is a myth stemming from Ancient Egypt. Ra, a supreme god, comes to earth in mortal form. Initially, earth is very prosperous, until Ra ages. Showing signs of weakening, he refuses to “renew the fertility of the earth” (19). This leads many humans, who initially felt comfortable mocking Ra for his old frail age, to begin cursing him and refusing offerings. Upon counsel of Nun, his “primordial parent”, Ra plucks out his eye (hence the name of the text) and the rage and pain he felt plucking it out, took form in the goddess, his daughter, Sekhmet. Sekhmet has a reign of destruction over the people of the Earth, until Ra, through the counsel of other gods, acknowledges the necessity of humans, to make offerings in the temples. Aided by humanity, Ra concocts a beer which puts Sekhmet to sleep allowing him to put an end to her rageful form. Humans commemorate the end of Sekhmet with a celebration, a yearly festival.

While Jonathan Dee writes is the author of the physical, English translated and transcribed text, the actual author of this tale is not noted. Although knowing the original creator of the text may assist in gaining a deeper understanding of the text, “The Eye of Ra” as it is written here highlights that in Ancient Egypt obedience, reverence and servitude to both their gods and pharaohs was extremely important. The common man in Ancient Egypt had a role to play, and stepping out of that role leads to destruction.

In order to understand just how important obedience, reverence and servitude were, we must look at the chronology of Ancient Egypt. Prior to the men mocking, cursing, and refusing offerings, Egypt was described as a place where “no one was sad, for the prosperity that flowed from the power of the divine King ensured that happiness reigned upon the earth” (Dee, 19). There is no need for interpretation here, quite simply, Egypt was initially quite bountiful and prosperous, a utopia. However, as Ra began showing signs that he was growing old, “men no longer gave him the respect that is due to a king and god” (Dee,19). Notice the word “due” here, the respect was not just suggested, there was no decision making, the ancient people didn’t have a choice of whether they wanted to respect Ra, they were obliged to do so.

Ra grows deaf (naturally from aging) and old, forgetting his role to renew the Earth which ailed, leading people to “[cry] out” against him (Dee,20). Soon “prayers turned to curses and the name of Ra was vilified upon the lips of men” and “temples were thrown down and images [...] shattered” (Dee, 20). These rebellious acts anger Ra who cries out to Nun, “these ingrates have turned against me” (Dee, 20). Ra notes that these people are “ingrates,” even though at that time they didn’t have much to be grateful of. The prosperity which they once enjoyed no longer existed, and they had no ability to directly control the fertility of the Earth. Yes, they did mock Ra, but they still supposedly made offerings because only now “no longer were plentiful offerings made” (Dee,20). The humans even cried out and still prayed, yet they saw their efforts were in vain, but Ra still calls them ingrates. Maybe he is also referring to their mockery from before, but the text does say Ra was deaf in his old age. Despite having nothing to be grateful for, despite Ra not performing his own duties (renewing the fertility of the Earth) people were still expected to show respect and pay their dues.

Since Ra sees these “ingrates” as people capable of attacking him, his words formulate into action as he eventually bears Sekhmet by plucking “out [his] eye and [sends] it forth against those who would attack him”, the mortal men (Dee, 20). The violence Sekhmet causes is seen as punishment for humanity’s disobedience and cursing. Ultimately it is not until Ra decides to put an end to the violence of Sekhmet that humans are grateful again. They celebrate this end and even acknowledge the gods and goddesses in their celebration, ultimately reinforcing to them the importance of offering and respect of the gods. Beyond this reading Ancient Egyptians show this quality as seen with their approach to the afterlife in *The Book of the Dead: A Collection of Spells* by Raymond Faulkner, but that is for another day.

Ultimately, the text highlights the importance of service and respect of gods in Ancient Egypt. Understanding that at this time rulers, such as pharaohs were seen as extensions of gods, humans were also expected to revere and obey them as well. The prosperity of the humans was up to Ra, and refusal to continue doing as expected of them would only lead to his fury which took the form of destruction. Analyzing this text to understand the society of Ancient Egypt gives insight into the social expectations relating between common man and kings, as well as the hierarchal nature of the time.

However, this text only addresses a myth which proves to be a large weakness for studying the past. It does not place huge emphasis on the geography and physical nature of Egypt at the time. Maybe this text was used to explain the dry season in Ancient Egypt. Maybe Ra not remembering “to renew the fertility of the Earth” (Dee,19) was the way the Ancient Egyptians made sense of periods where they didn’t enjoy prosperity. Additionally, this text does not confirm that ancient pharaohs used this to keep their subjects in check. For that, we may need to consult who the original author is, which is unknown. The mystery of who this person is comes

from the translation and transcription which could have spanned many generations. Maybe this myth is simply a story that people just enjoyed hearing.

In contrast, Cheikh Anta Diop's African Origins of Civilization is an anthropological and archaeologically backed text. In it, Diop seeks to challenge the West's teaching of African history and their belief that Africa had no history. More specifically, in this excerpt of the text, Diop seeks to challenge the long held European belief that Egyptians were white and separate from the rest of Africa. Diop calls upon various accepted sources and goes a step further in verifying their reliability in order to prove Egyptians were actually black and that by extension, Africa did have history.

Ironically enough, in order to counteract the European belief, Diop includes quotes of two Europeans himself. Diop references Diodorus of Sicily, a widely recognized historian from ancient Greece, who wrote that "Ethiopians say that the Egyptians are one of their colonies" (Diop, 1). According to Diop if "the Egyptians and Ethiopians were not of the same race, Diodorus would have emphasized the impossibility of considering the former as a colony" (Diop, 2). Diop does take some liberties in order to make this conclusion since in the provided excerpt from Diodorus neither explicitly mentions that the Egyptians were black, nor does it explicitly state how Diodorus qualifies a colony. Further reading may illuminate whether what Diop says on behalf of Diodorus is true. However, Diop also references Herodotus, another Greek historian who explicitly labels the Egyptians as black. In attempting to disprove that melting snow was the true origin of the Nile "he cites 'It is certain that the natives of the country are black with heat'" (Diop, 1). Herodotus explicitly naming the race of the Egyptians is useful to Diop as he doesn't need to make any further conclusion. Diop's argument has already been claimed prior to him making it, the idea that the Egyptians were black is not one that is isolated. Using the two

historians Diodorus and Herodotus, Diop is able to provide evidence of his argument that the Egyptians were black.

Understanding that the easiest way to disprove his argument would be to discredit his sources, Diop attempts to accredit his sources. He places major focus on Herodotus as he retorts “was Herodotus deprived of logic”, continuing with how “his explanation of the Nile reveals a rational mind seeking scientific reasons for the natural phenomena” (Diop, 3). Diop finds it necessary to provide proof that Herodotus’s claims were not unfounded to the extent that he draws on other conclusions Herodotus makes. Herodotus’s hypothesis on the Nile was so elaborate and scientific, there is no reason why Herodotus would make up or get something as simple as race entirely incorrect. This illustration of Herodotus is not one that is isolated. In other pages of the chapter, Diop mentions, “Herodotus was not a credulous historian who recorded everything without checking” (Diop, 2), as well as Herodotus was “quite scrupulous, objective, scientific for his time” (Diop, 4). There is a method in doing this; by establishing Herodotus as a credible, logical person, over multiple pages, Diop can reinforce the validity of his argument. Ultimately, Diop seeks to strengthen the reliability of his sources to strengthen the evidence of Egyptians being black.

Diop goes on to establish the role of Egypt in the ancient world as well as to highlight why the claims of Egyptians being white became so pertinent. Egypt the oldest civilization, faced conquests. According to Diop, after “the conquest of Egypt by Alexander, under the Ptolemies, crossbreeding between white Greeks and black Egyptians flourished thanks to a policy of assimilation” (Diop, 5). As a result of their interaction with the wider world outside of their own civilization and Africa, the Egyptians no longer were seen as black. Furthermore, Diop details how now, the Ancient Egyptian is “whitened whenever one seeks the origin of civilization”

(Diop, 9). This portion of the text is extremely necessary as it explains the trend of history over time as it relates to the perception of Egyptians.

Ultimately, Diop in his text calls upon the works of relevant historians to prove Ancient Egyptians were black and emphasize the history of African civilization.

One of the detriments of using Diop's writing as a tool to study the past that is Ancient Egypt, is that Diop is arguing something. Diop writes at a time when African civilizations were first gaining their independence and were just being freed from the hands of the Europeans who sought to "civilize" them. The reason for "civilizing" them in the first place, was because they thought Africans were devoid of a history. So, it would make sense for Diop to do things such as uplift Herodotus as a reliable source. However, unlike the Egyptian myth, Diop can place Egypt in a relationship with the rest of the world. In the myth, whenever the Earth and humanity is referred to, it is a reference to ancient Egypt and the civilization which existed back then. The myth is not an artifact found in ancient Greece or Rome, it is one that is found in Egypt and appeals to Egyptians. Diop is also able to develop an image of the Ancient Egyptian, a group of people who were black, something the myth also does not explicitly mention. In some ways, it is valuable to study the myth, in other ways it is valuable to study the Diop's text to understand the society which was Ancient Egypt.

Citations:

Dee, Jonathan. "The Eye of Ra" and "The Journey of Ra", in *Chronicles of Ancient Egypt*. Collins & Brown, 1998.

Anta Diop, Cheikh. Cook, Mercer. *The African Origin of Civilization*. Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974