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Egypt in the Memory of the World

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From the earliest known encounters with the various cultures of Western civilizations, ancient Egypt has been a cultural point of reference and an inseparable element of the dynamics by which Europeans and Egyptians have envisioned their own cultures. The viability of Egypt as a historical reference with the power to legitimize and validate "novel" historical religious and cultural paradigms ranging from cultural identity to science is highly remarkable. A number of mechanisms employ certain conceptions and "models" or "schemas" of ancient Egypt within emerging ideologies and cultural "paradigms" to further the claims of a variety of groups and to empower them against their rivals. The result is a multiplicity of interpretations of ancient Egypt: Roman, Christian, Islamic, nationalistic (both foreign and Egyptian), Egyptological, and commercial. By emphasizing different aspects and de-contextualizing these, the various users or consumers of ancient Egypt formulated particular historical narratives, all claiming to be founded on one monolithic tradition. In recent years Egyptologists have realized that even in ancient Egypt a process of legitimation was based on a constant reinterpretation of "ancient" Egypt and a reiterative process of invention of traditions Egypt (see Kemp 2006), and that any study should take into account the past and present social, political, and economic interests.

The Eye of the Beholder: The Classical Discovery of Egypt

We owe most of our views of ancient Egypt to "outsiders" who first came in contact with Egyptians when Egyptian civilization was already more than 3000 years old. Among the Greek intellectuals who flocked to Egypt since the fifth century BCE, it was Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE) who left one of the most vivid and tantalizing accounts (*Histories*) of ancient Egypt as he presumably experienced it (Lloyd 1988). Less than two centuries later and over the span of the Ptolemaic period (305 BCE–30 BCE), many Greeks resided in Egypt, and one of the key accounts of the Egyptian dynasties was written by Manetho, an Egyptian priest, at the

invitation of King Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–246 BCE) to compose a history. Manetho's *Aegyptiaca*, written in Greek (Waddell 1940), revealed the care with which Egyptians maintained historical records in temple archives and libraries that went back in time for more than 3000 years. We only know of this account through excerpts and abbreviated fragments written by the Jewish historian Josephus (b. 37 CE) in the first century CE, by Sextus Julius Africanus about 220 CE, and by Eusebius, Bishop of Caeseria, in 320 CE. The original work by Manetho was abridged to *Epitomes* that boiled down his rich text to a list of pharaohs with a few notes. Sextus Julius Africanus and Eusbius used the abridged version of *Aegyptiaca* in the third and fourth centuries CE, during the formative stage of Christianity, five to six centuries after Manetho completed his original text. Manetho also provided tables revealing the kings of Eastern peoples who were contemporary with the Egyptian kings. This proved to be a bonanza for Christian polemicists, who were preoccupied with comparing the annals of peoples of the ancient world to establish a chronology of the Old Testament.

The Greeks, Ptolemies, and Hellenes selected, emphasized, and glamorized the wisdom of ancient Egypt and developed their own version of Egyptian civilization. In addition to the Greeks who resided in Egypt, there were also many illustrious visitors who came to Egypt for short or long sojourns. For example, Diodorus of Sicily lists among the visitors to Egypt Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Plato, Pythagoras, Eudoxus, and Democritus. Some of the Greeks were in direct contact with Egyptian priests and were thus able to gain as much first-hand information as the Egyptians were willing to reveal and to the extent that the Greeks were capable of grasping the subtleties of Egyptian thought. A great deal of confusion and misunderstanding was probably also due to the use of Greek language for communication instead of the Egyptian language with its layered philosophical meanings. Notions of ancient Egypt elaborated by Greek scholars were imprinted on the memory of Europeans because Egypt was prominent in the writings of no less than Plato (c. 428–347 BCE), Diodorus (c. 80–20 BCE), and Strabo (c. 64 BCE–21 CE). According to Hornung (2001:23), Osiris and Isis featured prominently in Diodorus' account of Egyptian religion. The views expounded by Diodorus had an extraordinary influence on succeeding periods down to the eighteenth century. Isis, Osiris, and Horus survived in the cultural memory by a process of transfiguration, transmutation, absorption, and amalgamation to fit into the prevailing cultural hegemonic view. The triad first acquired their importance from their association with kingship; they were the gods of kings, royal gods, looming high above all other gods and peoples. Osiris was identified with Sarapis, and with Zeus and Jupiter. Isis also became the "One who is *All*." Her status shifted to the cosmos to become the embodiment of cosmic order, thus circling in the realm of astronomy and astrology independent of her original position as a mother goddess. By the first century CE, she was affiliated with Hermes, who raised her, and was regarded as a co-inventor of writing with him. Her worship spread all over the Mediterranean in the fourth century BCE because she was adopted by sailors as their guardian goddess; her temples were thus founded at ports in many places, including Piraeus, Eretria, Delos, Rhodes, Cos, Samos, Lesbos, and Cyprus, among many others along the Mediterranean coast. Her cult spread afterwards from ports to river valleys along

the main trade routes to Germany, Holland, Hungary, and eventually England (Hornung 2001; Takács 1995; Witt 1971).

Ancient Egypt and the Biblical Tradition

Isis, Osiris, and Horus were perpetuated outside Egypt because they were integrated within Greek mythology and biblical traditions. The iconographic and conceptual linkage between Nursing Isis and Nursing Mary is compelling. Mary and Jesus sojourned in Egypt. Mary's sycamore tree at Heliopolis (Mataryia today), where the sacred learned institution once stood, is also a compelling pointer to the identification of Mary both with Isis/Hathor and with the wisdom of ancient Egypt. An old tree is still identified as the Tree of Mary in the middle of the housing projects that have replaced the scared ground of ancient Heliopolis (On). Jesus was identified with Horus. One amulet depicts on one side the head of Christ and scenes from the New Testament and on the other side a winged, young Horus who tames crocodiles and scorpions. The passions of Jesus were mixed with Osirian traditions (Hornung 2001:75). Bes, an Egyptian folk god who protected women during birth, was also identified with Christ.

The biblical account of Moses places him in Egypt and creates an inescapable affiliation between the Hebraic traditions and Egypt. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 CE) asserted that Plato and Solon became acquainted with the wisdom of Moses in Egypt. According to Diodorus, Moses appears parallel to Hermes together with Zarathustra in a triad. Clearly, the position of Moses was elevated by this association, gaining legitimacy from the renowned fame of Hermes/Thoth (Hornung 2001). The acclaim to be accorded Moses was within the hegemonic trope of Wisdom, independent of gods and kings. It is that diversion of the intellectual stream of Egyptian thought to the domain of Wisdom that made it possible for one generation after another and in so many different regions to rework Egyptian notions within specific invented traditions and beliefs. Thus ancient Egypt has survived because of its association with Wisdom, as well as with the existential issues of Life and Death, still evident today in the interest in mummies and the ankh amulet (Brier 1994, 2004).

Furthermore, the memory of Egypt has been retained because of the biblical references to Egypt and the mobilization of ancient Egypt in the works of Jewish and Christian Church fathers. Egypt was central to one of the main foundation myths of Jewish identity (Lemche 1998:88–93). According to Lemche,

> being only a handful of persons when they left Canaan, the Israelites came out of Egypt as a mighty nation. In this way Egypt became the cradle of the Israelite people, but would have turned out to be their grave if they had not been liberated from this place in time by the intervention of the God of their fathers, here Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Lemche 1998:89)

Egypt was also central to Christian ideology and theology. The sojourn of the Holy Family in Egypt continues the tradition of placing Egypt within the religious map of the world. Perhaps more important were the contributions by the

Alexandrian Church fathers, including Clement of Alexandria and Origen (Grant 1986). Evidently, the classical and Hellenistic, as well as Jewish, notions of Egyptian wisdom contributed to Wisdom Christology. The title given Christ in Corinthians 1:24 and 30 is "Wisdom" (*sophia*). The influential Jewish philosopher Philo (Modrzejewski 1995) regarded Wisdom as God's daughter, "the first-born mother of all things" (Grant 1986:102). Philo also uses the term "*Episteme*" (Knowledge) when he speaks of a female principle with whom God had intercourse so that she brought forth the only and beloved perceptible son (Grant 1986:100–104).

Contrary to this positive identification with Egypt was the emergence of a tradition that vilified Egypt as a land of paganism. In one of the most perceptive attempts to deal with the *topos* of "Moses the Egyptian," Assmann (1997:217) suggests that the Jews and Christians turned Egypt into a nightmare and a fatal disease. Egypt was the counter-image, a polemical counter-construction created by "normative inversion" – the creation and perpetuation of a binary opposite needed for contradistinctive self-definition. Egypt, rejected and "forgotten," survived as an abomination in biblical accounts (though in cosmotheistic movements such as Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, alchemy, and Deism, the attitude to Egypt was more sympathetic). Assmann assumes this might be explained as a return of the repressed, using an insight from Freud. The struggle between Judaism and Christianity against the prevailing political regimes of the Roman Empire targeted the tangible icons of their world, which included those of ancient Egypt. Egypt, as the foundation of the hegemonic system of the classical world, became the subject of attacks. Only on the ruins of Egyptian temples could churches celebrate and legitimize the new religion that replaced the old. Theophilus, the Archbishop of Alexandria, was adamant, and ultimately successful, in his demand for an imperial edict that would allow him to destroy pagan temples and statues. The early history of the Christian Church as narrated by Theodoret, born 393 CE (cited in Kravachok 2002; Schaff and Wace 1890–1900), includes a graphic description of one of the events during the year 391 CE when Theophilus terrorized pagan philosophers and razed to the ground ancient temples. One of the main targets of destruction was the Sarapeion, the principal temple for the worship of the royal cult of Sarapis founded by Ptolemy III (246–241 BCE). Nothing remains from this temple except one of the columns currently known as the Pompei Pillar.

Backed by royal decrees, the guardians of the new religion were engaged in a political struggle that aimed to dislodge the grip of "pagan" Alexandrian philosophers on intellectual, and hence political, power. For the general public who are not versed in the nuances of theological debates, the use of tangible icons to stand for simplified ideas, regardless of their veracity, has been one of the successful strategies to win mass support. Through misinformation, and disinformation presented with passionate rhetoric and sensational stories and fables, often with fabricated content, popular beliefs were cast. Ancient Egypt was a rich source for stories, and became almost a fairy tale (see Fentress and Wickham 1994:71). The portrayal of ancient Egypt as a pagan culture and the use of the motif of the destruction of idols as a transition from falsehood to truth in early Christianity totally misrepresented Egyptian religion. The stories of Moses and the sorcerers or magicians of Egypt, the golden calf, or the Exodus provided a literary drama with a fascinating imagistic, theatrical aura. In a balanced review of the impact

of ancient Egypt on the Old Testament, Currid develops the view that Moses and Aaron's confrontation with the magicians of the Pharaoh (Exodus 7) is a direct polemic against the gods of Egypt and the Pharaoh as a divine figure. The effect of the plagues was to unleash Chaos and upset the "cosmic order," which is the basis for Egyptian cosmogony (Currid 1997:83–120). During the nineteenth century, Currid remarks, scholars preferred to ignore or underestimate the significance of Egypt.

Islam and Cosmic Order

Islam, by embracing the Old and New Testaments as holy books and by continuing to refer to the biblical account of the Exodus, the golden calf, and the encounter between Moses and the Pharaoh, also furthered the memory of Egypt. Both Christianity and Islam spread beyond their place of origin among many groups of people by the emphasis they placed on the social virtues of love, mercy, compassion, charity, and solidarity. In a sense, such notions embodied in the conceptions of the Egyptian goddess Maat were already evident in the Old Testament, again in spite of the condemnation of Egyptian gods. Maat, who ordained the movement of the stars, the succession of seasons, and in general the orderly harmony of the universe, was also the goddess of justice and "truth." Pharaohs, viziers, and high officials abided by Maat and proclaimed that they fed the hungry, provided water for the thirsty, and took care of widows, orphans, and the needy (Assmann 1989). It is indeed logical to envision how such an idea could be used by a people against tyrants and how it would evolve into a universal notion of the fundamental "truth" of the cosmos. In the biblical tradition, Maat appears as the "Justice God," manifest in the "Sedeq" of Yahweh (the word *Sedq* in Arabic means "truth"). In his analysis of power in the biblical tradition, Walsh concludes that "justice is the 'one necessary thing'. The cry of the poor, the need of the other, the claim the powerless make on us is central and non-negotiable. This is what Yahweh, the 'passionate god', takes with absolute seriousness. He wants to feed the hungry, clothe the naked. He wants his banquet hall filled" (Walsh 1987:174–175)

In Islam, the "anti-Egyptian revolution" (Assmann 1998:211) expounded in the book of Exodus (Haarmann 1980:56; Hassan 1998:210; Wood 1998:186) was counterbalanced by a favorable regard for Egypt as a land of virtues (Youssef 1991). From the ninth century and up to the fifteenth century CE, Arab scholars set the foundation for Egyptological learning (El-Daly 2003b).

The Renaissance and Egyptian Wisdom

The admiration of the classical world for Egypt ensured that it met with a similar appreciation in Renaissance European civilization. The "lore" of ancient Egypt became an integral ingredient in the tool-kits of intellectuals; the impact of classical tradition on Western literature is unfathomable (Highet 1976). Classical writers celebrated the wisdom of ancient Egypt and their constructions were

appropriated by Renaissance Humanism. The Humanists emphasized intellectual cultivation over spiritual matters, and in their campaign against clerical authorities they fortified their position by the "authority" of the past. According to New (1969), Antiquity legitimated the secular pursuits of the Renaissance. It provided a hitherto underused and seldom appreciated wealth of materials on art, architecture, jurisprudence, philosophy, and the sciences. The great emphasis placed on the works of classical writers led to a surge of interest not only in the texts and antiquities of Rome and Greece, but also in those of Egypt. In Rome, antiquarian surveys and excavations were essential for the birth of a new political philosophy and to the renaissance of art and sciences (Schnapp 1997:2). Classical lore of ancient Egypt became embedded in this crucial episode in the making of European civilization.

The emergence of modern science as exemplified by Isaac Newton also involved references to ancient Egypt. The proponents of the new scientific paradigm were keen on recovering or learning from the "scientific" wisdom of ancient civilizations, among which Egypt was at the forefront, and were sceptical of certain interpretations of the Bible and Church doctrine (Haycock 2003:138). Newton believed that the divine-inspired, true theology was brought to Egypt by Noah's son Ham, who was venerated by the Egyptians as their god "Amon." In 1683–1684, Newton wrote in the first version of his "Philosophical Origins of Gentile Philosophy," "Ye Mosaical religion concerning ye true God contains little else besides what was then in use among the Egyptians" (Haycock 2003:138). The Egyptians passed their knowledge of the true god to Socrates, Confucius, Moses, and Christ. Newton noted that "it's certain that ye old religion of the Egyptians was ye true [Noachian] religion tho corrupted before the age of Moses by the mixture of false Gods with that of ye true one" (Haycock 2003:139). The corruption of true religion also entailed a corruption of scientific knowledge, to which the priests, who were in charge of both scientific, philosophical knowledge and theological teachings, contributed. Newton was concerned with chronology, and, like many others before him, did not believe the biblical account of the age of creation. He became convinced that the Egyptians understood the heliocentric system, though they disseminated their knowledge under the veil of religious rites and hieroglyphic symbols (Haycock 2003:142). Newton's Fellows of the Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, were also interested in hieroglyphs as a possible route to finding a "natural" or "universal" language.

Thus as Europe began to establish the scientific foundations of its modern civilization, the lore of Egypt was in the minds of the great thinkers who were instrumental in shaping the new world order and its paradigmatic outlook. Entrenched in the scientific, humanistic, and theological armature of European civilization, the lore of Egypt was readily accessible to modern minds in all fields of intellectual pursuits. The memory of Egypt thus survived because of the alleged and legendary wisdom of ancient Egypt, which was perpetuated not only in the writings of classical authors and Jewish and Christian philosophers who have never ceased to influence European intellectuals, but also because the "glory" of ancient Egypt was manifest in the magnificence of its pyramids, obelisks, and other monuments that have defied time and resisted decay and destruction. The construction of such eternal edifices was a declaration of the great advances made

by Egyptians in masonry, geometry, mathematics, and astronomy. The secrets of this advanced knowledge and wisdom were believed to be encoded in the mysterious hieroglyphic inscriptions. The search to decipher the hieroglyphs was finally crowned by the successful efforts of Jean-François Champollion around 1822, providing for the first time an enviable access to the accounts of Egyptian civilization by the Egyptians themselves.

Egyptology, Colonialism, and Nationalism

The fascination with the Rosetta Stone (Walker 2003) implies an admiration for the triumph of the West in appropriating the civilization of ancient Egypt by deciphering its mysterious text. In the context of colonial rivalry, much has been made of the extent to which Britain and France contributed to the decipherment of hieroglyphs, which was the key to understanding the wisdom of ancient Egypt. Paradoxically, the decipherment of the hieroglyphic signs instigated in the first place by Arab scholars and subsequently Europeans in the eighteenth century (El-Daly 2003a) with the desire to gain knowledge of Egyptian wisdom was achieved at a time when the paradigm of the superiority of "Western" scientific knowledge had displaced sympathetic views of Egyptian know-how.

Ancient Egypt was essential for the new colonial paradigm because by possessing the antiquities of Egypt, the colonial powers inherited the claim to cultural hegemony (Hassan 2003). The French or the British acted as legitimate heirs of the Roman Empire, which manifested its own hegemonic triumph by appropriating Egyptian obelisks to be erected in Rome, which has become known as the "eternal city" on account of its archaeological treasures. Paris, London, and later New York could not have become world cities without Egyptian obelisks (Hassan 2003). In the meantime, ancient Egypt was romanticized as a land of mystery, an exotic destination for the rich, where adventurers could come upon fabulous treasures. The discovery of the treasures of Tukankhamun in 1922 added to the lore of Egypt because it was the subject of sensational newspaper reports.

As an Islamic country, modern Egypt was regarded as a separate entity from Pharaonic Egypt. Most Egyptian intellectuals in modern times have been introduced to ancient Egypt through European scholarship and in the context of the political, military, and intellectual hegemony of the West. Unlike the Europeans, Egyptian intellectuals emphasized the continuity of Egyptian civilization, the survival of many Egyptian conceptions from Pharaonic times to the present, the maintenance of an Egyptian identity (mostly because of the particular Nile setting), the intertwining of Egypt's various cultural strands through its long historical course, the values and virtues of ancient Egypt, and the persistence of the dynamic interplay of ideals, especially between old and new, with an emphasis on the social history of Egypt. Alienated from their own Pharaonic past, Egyptian intellectuals beginning with Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) and well into the 1950s struggled to introduce the Egyptian public to the information they gleaned from European sources (Hassan 1998; Reid 1985, 2002). The politics of "Arabic nationalism" and the economic and ideological troubles and dilemmas of

development under neo-colonial regimes were not conducive to the emergence of a viable Egyptian nationalism within a Pharaonic paradigm. This was compounded by the strong affiliation of Egypt with Arabic civilization, the prevalence of religious traditions that denigrate the pharaohs, and the diminution of Arabic scholarly interest in ancient Egypt since the fifteenth century. Moreover, the rhetoric of "nationalism" has now been undermined by globalization.

As movie-making became an attractive medium, the lore of Egypt became one of its favorite subjects. In the 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, Cecil B. DeMille, exploited the biblical accounts of the Exodus and Moses to portray Egyptians as villains and Hebrews as heroes (Serafy 2003:84) at a time when Egypt under Gamal Abdel-Nasser had won independence from the British and had vowed not to recognize the state of Israel and to support the rights of the Palestinians for their homeland. In the newer medium of television, a series of documentaries in the 1960s–1990s began to yield to sensational mythologizing of ancient Egypt. One such series, *Pharaohs and Kings* (1995), speculative and biased, conceived and fronted by David Rohl, presented Egypt as a sinister and eerie place (Schadla-Hall and Morris 2003). It also became fashionable in Hollywood movies and on TV to orientalize Egypt in a variety of ways, including the staging of lewd, sensuous women. Cleopatra became an icon of the oriental femme fatale.

Until the 1970s Egyptology maintained a peculiar position in academia, refusing to interact actively with either the social sciences (Weeks 1979) or the physical and natural sciences (Säve-Söderbergh 1976). The Egyptian past has been reduced to the non-contextualized aesthetics of art and architecture and the unending discourse on "peculiar" magic, the cult of the dead, ritual, and religion, with references to pyramids, mummies, tombs, and temples. There is hardly any interest in the scope and perspectives of Egyptian knowledge, technology, and sciences. Also, there is neither a serious attempt to show how Egyptian knowledge has been perpetuated in European civilization nor a keen interest to expound or explore the intricate subject of the relationship of Greek philosophy and Egyptian Wisdom. Having appropriated the decipherment of Egyptian texts as its founding charter, Egyptology has even resisted an integration of archaeology in its paradigmatic scheme (Bietak 1979; O'Connor 1990). Texts are interrogated to contribute to a construction of "cultural history" based on a dynastic sequence of kings and pharaohs, a parochial perspective that has not yielded, except in a few rare exceptions, to an examination of the social dynamics of Egyptian civilization. In the use of archaeological interpretation for nationalistic purposes Egypt is not an exception (Kohl 1998), but Egyptologists have contributed especially to the perpetuation of a mythical discontinuity between ancient Egypt and modern Egypt (El-Daly 2003b:148). Ancient Egypt has thus been encapsulated as an "ahistorical" fossil – the exclusive preserve of Western scholarship to the extent that Egyptians who aspired to become Egyptologists were systematically dissuaded from doing so (Reid 1985, 2002).

The manipulation of national/colonial memories in modern society is most evident in school teaching and in the media (now expanding beyond movies and television to websites). Not unlike professional historians, Egyptologists' function, whether conscious or subconscious, is, more often than they realize, less to analyze the "pastness" of the past than to give an authoritative seal of approval to the

preoccupations and self-legitimization of the dominant elite (cf. Fentress and Wickham 1994:127).

Egyptomemes and the West

Egypt remains as mysterious, fascinating, and captivating as ever. I would argue that today we are witnessing another turn in the reformulation of Egypt and the cultural capital that has agglutinated around it over 2000 years. A proliferation of stories, anecdotes, memorabilia, and other material mementos have been integrated in the cultural fabric of European cultures and intellectual epistemes encompassing the full range from rationalism to esotericism. No longer just the subject of scholarly pursuits, *Egyptomemes* (ideas and constellation of ideas related to or affiliated with ancient Egypt) are now marketable items in consumer-oriented societies. The U.S. led the way by using the occasion of erecting an Egyptian obelisk (Needle) in New York to advertise a certain brand of needle and thread (Hassan 2003:64–65, fig. 2.40). The success with which Egyptomemes are propagated and perpetuated by successive generations is not on account of the abstract notions of Egyptian thought or wisdom, but rather by the emotive and affective aspects of the various cultural productions of ancient Egypt. In addition, the complex tapestry of Egyptian civilization, and its rich intellectual and social fabric, its historical transformations and transitions have repeatedly been reduced to a few prominent iconic images, texts, and formulae. The reduced, distorted, and abbreviated versions of ancient Egypt become a historical mask through which the present is viewed and imagined (Anderson 1992).

The ideas and practices of ancient Egypt are psychologically potent and engaging because they deal with anxieties, fears, aspirations, and hopes that cross-cut cultural boundaries and ethnic divides. Such potent, emotionally engaging elements include death, birth, illness, and harm, life after death, control over chaos, mitigation of loss, love, and curiosity. These elements are reinforced by captivating genres of discourse that vary from biblical anecdotes to fantasy fiction, non-fiction, and conspiracy theories (Wynn 2008). The emotional appeal of Egyptian memes is enhanced by practices that range from secret rituals (namely Freemasonry) to theatrical performances, musical scores, and Hollywood movies (Hall 1965; Leadbeater 1986; MacDonald and Rice 2003; Piatigorsky 1999). The association of Egypt with death and immortality leads to the use of Egyptian motifs, such as obelisks, in many cemeteries in Europe and all across the United States (Brier 2004). Mummification has a transcultural appeal because of the primacy of death in human thoughts. However, with a mounting interest in "horror" as a genre of modern European "entertainment," the mummies have become a notorious element of the legacy of ancient Egypt.

Linked cognitively with death are the practices of transcultural social significance such as conception/sterility, healing, and protection from illness and harm. Egyptian wisdom is not just a matter of rarified metaphysical speculation, it is also believed to be of immense utilitarian benefit. Egyptian medicine and magic are means by which people hope to overcome debilitating diseases and undertake actions and gain control over the world. Magic (Pinch 1994) played a prominent

role in the medical texts of the New Kingdom (Hornung 2001:56). Magical love charms were also very common in the Greco-Roman world. Isis as a transfiguration of Hathor is the goddess of love, happiness, music, and dance. This association of the Egyptian goddess with the pleasures of life is another hook by which Egypt became entangled in the web of cultures across the ages. Any casual search of the Internet will reveal how the lore of Isis is connected with both wisdom and pleasure. A website under the title "Isisbooks" provides a series of books on love, healing and sexuality, love potions, and love herbs (www.isisbooks.com). Upon placing an order you will be sent a free love spell.

Commercializing Ancient Egypt

The media and the burgeoning tourist industry select and iconicize a few super-kings and -queens (Tutankhamun, Ramesses II, and less so Akhenaten, with Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, and Cleopatra as female celebrities). In addition, a selection of monuments, namely the Pyramids, the Sphinx and Abu Simbel, became the hallmarks of tourist brochures. As Egyptologists and Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities appropriate ancient Egypt and leave modern Egypt to its wretched inhabitants, the tourists are encapsulated in a bubble that minimizes their interaction with the natives. This has come to the fore in debates on the recent relocation of the inhabitants of the village of Qurna, and the subsequent destruction of most of the houses built over the Tombs of the Nobles. Addressing the complex problems of tomb robbery, damage by waste water, and aggressive sales methods, considered as harassment by many tourists, the authorities provided a sweeping solution that, however, also destroyed a part of the history and cultural landscape of the West Bank of Luxor, and the informal economy of the local population producing and selling souvenirs (Van der Spek 2008).

   Ancient Egypt is fast succumbing to a bizarre parody of its various historical constructions (MacDonald and Rice 2003). In movies, commercials, and tourist brochures, ancient Egypt is trivialized and debased. Tourism and the industry of art and entertainment are robbing this generation as well as future generations of the fruits of knowledge of one of the world's great civilizations. Ramesses, Nefertiti, and Cleopatra are fast becoming "trade-marks" in commercial enterprises (Hassan 1994:664). We have lost sight of Egypt so many times and have cast its character in the theater of history in various roles ranging from Hermes, a champion of wisdom, to Aïda in an opera about love and nationalism, but now we risk reducing Egypt to statuettes of cats and lunatic fabrications to sell books and produce TV "documentaries."

Towards a Theory of Cultural Memory

My own position consists of a nested explanatory strategy that centers upon influential agents (with the potential to command communication and action) in society who are the inheritors of a socially constructed past, and who are dynamically engaged in reworking their social milieu to further their own views, position,

or gains. Such agents are the source of "innovations" and the masters of social memory. Although there is most likely an element of repressed personal and social memories in the mind of each person, there seems to be also a dynamic interplay between memory and inputs from encounters with the present. Such encounters entail opportunities, fears, and anxieties that may reshape, delete, or restructure memory. Influential agents in a society may succeed in creating a hegemonic memory by various means of persuasion. They rarely, however, succeed in totally eliminating rival or "neutral" memories. Even if they succeed, there are always other societies where rival memories may thrive or merely persist in the form of secret lore, beliefs held by a marginalized "ethnic" or "occupational" group. At certain points in time, group may come in contact and the memories suppressed or deleted in one society may flow from another society through various mechanisms of cultural transmission.

The written word in books and tomes curated and stored in libraries is one of the great legacies of ancient Egypt. The Egyptians venerated writing and books and regarded them as one of the most fitting legacies of a person. Libraries, from those that were attached to Egyptian temples to the Library of Alexandria, the libraries of Greece, Baghdad, Cairo, and medieval Europe, and our own libraries, hold treasures of past knowledge. However, libraries, as Montaigne remarked, are places of collective forgetfulness; their value lies in the chances they provided for serendipity – the discovery of unsuspected pieces of forgotten knowledge (*Essais*, ii, ix cited in Fentress and Wickam 1994:15). Forgotten or suppressed knowledge may also survive outside libraries and the dominant modes of discourse in oral folk traditions and practices. It is in such traditions that French-educated Germans looked for "memories" to fortify the idea of a German "*Kultur*" and a sense of national identity when they became disenchanted with Napoleon's ideals. Egypt thus survived because it was often referred to in both sacred and profane books.

Introducing the topic of social construction of the past, Bond and Gilliam (1994) posit that there are periods during which the dominant rendering of the past ceases to be efficacious. Other social constructions emerge as contenders for the past with their own interpretations and counter-proposals. The constructions of the past, old and new, are brought into the arenas of politics of knowledge. The past, already socially constructed before any one confronts it, may be re-appropriated, negated, modified, or tweaked to serve individuals and groups in their claims for political power or economic gain. The past may be deployed to assert an identity, legitimize a political agenda, or win support for economic projects.

The potency of the past lies in objects, images, and narrative accounts (oral or textual) that have gained a prominent or sacred status in the social memory as elements of ancient traditions, sacred ritual, or secular practices. Intellectuals play a key role in the construction, appropriation, sanctification, and presentation of the past. My views on this converge with those of Gramsci: "Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (Gramsci 1971:5). I would, however, extend Gramsci's notions to those of any major cultural development, whether religious, sectarian, ethnic, or occupational. Religious

movements, the "revival" of ethnic identities, or even social movements create (organically) together with their activities intellectuals who give it character, temperament, disposition, and image. Egypt was at the center of the encounter between the intellectuals of Christianity and the "traditional" intellectuals of the classical world (see below). The elaboration of Jewish identity was also inexorably linked by Jewish scholars to a specific social construction of Egypt (Assmann 1997).

Beyond History: Into the Future

Embedded in successive hegemonic cultural paradigms of European civilization from Hellenistic Hermeticism to consumerism, the parodies of Egypt form a genealogical chain of transformations that now structure and inform our own notions of ancient Egypt. They inform a broad spectrum of conceptions that bolster and substantiate a broad range of schemas (a structured configuration of related ideas and practices) that currently contribute to the transformation and re-appropriation of Egyptian texts and icons either for personal satisfaction, academic achievement, or corporate profits. All such schemas, from New Age mysticism (Picknett and Prince 2003) to Egyptology, are embroiled in European hegemonic paradigms.

To counteract the onslaught of "Egyptomania" (Brier 2004), Egyptologists ought to seek a genuine engagement with the public to foster an appreciation of those aspects of Egyptian civilization that may positively contribute to our appreciation of art, politics, and knowledge and to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world as human beings. The pull of ancient Egypt and its powerful icons is useful for gaining the attention of the public to explore with them the deeper meanings of writing, art, and the rituals of death and resurrection. We may recall that we are still in the grip of "national" memories, which have been tinged with "colonial" memories, and that such memories have been "organically" developed and manipulated in rhetorical discourses directed at internal or external opponents, which is also evident in the nationalistic/colonialist domains of Egyptology within Europe and *vis-à-vis* Egypt (cf. Hassan 1995; Reid 1997). Accordingly, Egyptologists should begin to critically re-examine the scope and structure of Egyptological discourse and academic curricula and dissertation topics in order to guard against the misuse of Egyptian past for the perpetuation of inequality, injustice, and neo-colonial exploitative strategies.

We have emerged from the twentieth century with serious environmental, economic, and social problems (Ponting 1998). The current situation provides fertile grounds for alternate ideologies that aim to resist the perceived hegemony of the West (Tibi 1998). As long as ancient Egypt is a Western preoccupation and enterprise, many Egyptians will not be able to reconcile their worldview with the Pharaonic past. On the other hand, there is the danger of a naïve call for "Pharaonism," isolating Egypt from its Arabic circle and rich historical involvement in the affairs and civilization of the Arab world. The massacre at Deir el-Bahri in 1997, when a small group of middle-class Egyptian youths gunned down mostly Swiss tourists and Egyptian guards and policemen (Hassan

forthcoming), is a ghastly reminder of the dark forces that exploit ignorance and fuel fanaticism (cf. Aziz 1995). The question perhaps is not who owns the past, but how we can make use of the past to redress inequalities and promote peace and prosperity without the blinkers of chauvinistic nationalism or the conceit and arrogance that comes with political power. In Egypt and elsewhere, economic and political forces have rapidly destabilized traditional systems, seriously dislocating and disintegrating the forces that have created the cultural identities of the past (Friedman 1994:249). *Ad hoc* and expedient psychological mechanisms to restore coherence and mental security entail the revival of imagined pasts, violent antagonism with an "Other" to one's acquired identity, affiliation with cults and disciplined groups, and narcissism. The "past" as a source for legitimizing identities may lead to factions within society (e.g. between those who choose a strictly "Coptic" heritage and those who develop a strong, fanatical adherence to an Islamic tradition).

The road ahead must lie in a reconsideration of the information to be gained from a study of ancient Egypt for the benefit of humanity, enriching the human experience by explaining how, barely out of the Stone Age, small communities on the banks of the Nile succeeded in developing a sustainable political system that lasted for more than 3000 years. Egyptologists should aspire to revise their research agenda and teach curricula which focus on the social and cultural dynamics of Egyptian civilization, with an emphasis on an understanding of the social processes by which Egypt was transformed several times throughout its long history from most ancient Egypt to the present. Policy makers and the public need to be informed of the factors that contributed to the special character of Egyptian knowledge and the social context of Egyptian worldview. The philosophical reflections of Egyptians on ethics, good governance, and society surely deserve a prominent place in our map of ancient Egypt. Egyptology needs to become actively engaged not just with current theories in archeology and anthropology, but with the new directions in history, cultural studies, the social sciences, and the humanities.

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