

Teachings in the Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthropological View

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Abstract: *This article presents an anthropological analysis of the Ancient Egyptian teaching “The Instruction of king Amenemhet I for his son Sesostris I”. This literary genre was used as a way of transiting cultural virtues through the society of that time. According to Geertz (1973), culture needs to be understood in its environment because it forms interconnected relationships with social elements. Our purpose in this text is to discuss the possibility of identifying evidences in the Egyptian teaching of how the Ancient Egyptians approached social and cultural values of that time.*

Keywords: *Egyptian teachings, anthropological perspective, culture, Egyptian literature.*

Introduction

*“Culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves”
(Geertz, 1973:448)*

The idea that culture should be seen as a construction which we all participate and that it will never be ready to be possessed since we have an active cooperation in this process, is defended by Clifford Geertz. The American anthropologist defines this concept as: “culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (1973:448). This way, the knowledge of a certain culture can be constructed through the stories that societies tell each other, so it is never finished. In this sense, the present work aims to trace a brief analysis about the anthropological and interpretative perspective of culture, offering an anthropological approach in relation to the Egyptians’ Teachings¹.

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¹ *Teachings* can also be named *Didactic Literature*. The Ancient Egyptian word means “*Instruction*”.

As culture is conceived an *ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves*, we can affirm that the genre of teaching is capable of demonstrating the ethics and the everyday conduct of Egyptian society in that period. Thus, it can be said that these embodied narratives can transmit the culture and the values of such civilizations through the act of storytelling. However we cannot be restricted to a simplistic reduction like that, because is not possible to analyze Egyptian culture or any other culture through a simple analysis of its literature. This way, the purpose of this study is to extract evidences of how Egyptian life might be from a literary text, taking into account the anthropological and interpretative perspective of culture.

Ancient Egyptian Literature

The “literature” of the Ancient Egyptians is not a well-known subject by the general public of our time. For a long time, the study of Egyptian literature made a link between historical events and the literary creation, as it can be seen in many narratives. Another way of textual approach is to put the character implied *ad hoc* on the foundation of individual analysis or applied to categories of Egyptian fictionality. It was just in the Seventies that Egyptian texts started to be classified as literary discourse, having a detailed perspective focused on the Ancient Egyptian point of view, investigations of their social context and new approaches that replaced the fragmentary way of dealing with these texts.

It is important to say that all textual genres are fundamental for the reconstruction of Egyptian history and religion. In Egyptian literature, a theory derived from internal evidences given by Egyptian documents is crucial, because no text “speaks for itself”. The Egyptologist Antonio Loprieno suggests that:

“an Egyptian text can be assigned to the domain of literature on the basis of the combination of three heterogeneous criteria: (a) *fictionality*, with the problem of the distinction between referential and self-referential discourse; (b) *intertextuality*, connected with the question of literary types; (c) *reception*, which touches on the concepts of authorship and the classics” (1996:45).

The concept of fictionality is described as the creation of a mutual understanding between the author and the reader to the effect that the world presented does not need to be the same as the real world. Egyptian fictional texts may allow denotative and

connotative readings and can be addressed to more than one contextual sphere. There are two highest literary genres: “the wisdom literature”, which represents compliance between ideology, and “the narrative literature”, with the rise of the individual hero (Loprieno, 1996:46).

It is believed that most of the Ancient Egyptian texts have *intertextual relations*, because they form a dynamic range of manuscripts, which is never a truly original creation of its authors. These texts became accessible beyond the time and the space of their composition, appearing outside the contextual frame. There are three periods in the Egyptian history which display intertextual dialogue: 1) the *mythical* Old Kingdom (about 2686 to 2613 B.C.), 2) the *canonical* Middle Kingdom (about 2040 to 1782 B.C.) and 3) the Ramesside era with its dialog between *scriptores classici* and *scriptores proletarii*.

For an Ancient Egyptian text be considered “literature”, according to Loprieno, it has to have *reception*. We need to have evidences about the readerships the text had within the Egyptian cultural history. If a text is documented in hundreds of copies or if it echoed later on in other compositions, it is likely to have belonged to the literary sphere. However, there are some unquestionably literary texts that were transmitted by single evidence. The nature of Egyptian literature is metaphoric in the sense that it demonstrates the author’s point of view of the reality as a whole, in opposition to the metonymic sense, which concentrates on the exploration of a segment of reality.

An Anthropological View

“The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions but to make available to us answers that others . . . have given, and thus to include them in the consultable trend of what man has said.”
(Geertz, 1973:30)

In the citation above, Geertz affirms that in order to understand the other, we need to think as the other. However, it depends on our interpretation to understand the meanings constructed by the other. That is the reason why culture needs to be understood in its environment, taking into account all symbolic dimensions of social action, as art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality and common sense.

It is not possible to regard Egyptian literature out of the cultural system it is inserted. For example, Ancient Egyptian tales had an important role for young scribes' formation, since these narratives were used as models to be copied in order to train handwriting and also to transmit ethic and moral values. One of the main points in an anthropological approach that it is necessary to know the culture that is being analyzed in order to describe their practices accordingly. In this particular case, we need to understand what was happening in Egyptian society at the time the text were written to interpret the author's ideas.

According to Geertz, the modern concept of culture is not defined anymore (and only) as a fixed set of customs, beliefs and artifacts that can be stored and safeguarded in museums or books, regardless of people. This way, the science which studies culture focuses on the study of a code of symbols socially shared by members of that culture. There are no laws to describe culture. However, if something is described according to someone's eyes, it will not be possible to know if it is true or not. We will never be totally sure if the truths and denounces exposed in Ancient Egyptian tales were really true or mere ideas defended by an author or some group.

In this context, an event will never be truthfully reproduced because it is always an interpretation of someone else, and every interpretation carries ideology. The linguist Norman Fairclough adds the notion of ideology of discourse, defending that everything we think is natural, in fact it is ideologically constructed. Fairclough states that, "Ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible" (2001:71).

The fact is that ideology was always present in literature and there is no alternative to escape from it. The philosopher Louis Althusser adopted Freud's expression concerning the fact that ideology is eternal and "omnipresent in its immutable form throughout history" (1971:174). This process occurs because the individuals are questioned by ideology and then they are transformed into subjects (positions). In the words of the author: "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (ibid).


It will always be difficult to interpret a cultural text, since they are integral parts of the social webs of significations that can be termed culture. According to Geertz, culture is:

“a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life”. (1973:13)

This way, texts embody a system of ideas promulgated by the elite, the forms and ways in which meaning serves to sustain relations of dominance. For Geertz, each culture is dominated by *mechanisms of control* or regulating ideas that govern the human behavior.

Ancient Egyptian Teachings

The genre of *teaching* is considered to be an important vehicle of transmission of conduct rules, pondering and formulating problems of life and death and the search of their solutions. Well attested in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, this genre was also practiced among the Mesopotamians and subsequently by the Hebrews. Through the *teachings* it is possible to observe how the ethics, morals and ideologies of Egyptian society of that time were approached. This genre does not belong to a specific period, being found during all the Egyptian history.

The *teachings* can inform and rise up preoccupations at the same time that suggest alternatives to deal with their problems. “*Teaching*”  *sb3iit*, in Egyptian, also named “*Wisdom Literature*”, can be classified in three categories, according to Lichtheim:

“the didactic speech of a father to his son; the admonishing or prophetic speech, or speeches, whose speakers may be sages or other people in the role of defenders of the public good; and the dialogue in which two speakers defend contrasting points of view.” (2006:134)

One of the main characteristics of this *Wisdom Literature* is the density of utterance and the vibrancy of thought, given that they were produced for a sophisticated audience. This genre had a direct relationship with scribal training and can be classified primarily as an educational text. Their aim was to teach throughout the past, present and future. The obedience to ideology was an essential element, because the objective of these texts was to convert ignorance into wisdom. However, there is a tension between ideology and individual embodiment. According to Parkinson:

“they formulate the interplay of ideal and actual in terms of personal conduct and ethical choices, and the settings act as fictionalizing devices”. (2002:235)

In order to illustrate an Egyptian teaching we selected one example of royal testaments from a king to his son and successor, being known as **The Instruction to King Amenemhet I for his son Sesostris I**. Amenemhet teaches what is necessary to do in order to become a king. However, the audience is not limited to the royal context. As kingship is an ideological center to the whole culture, the subjects discussed are relevant to a wider audience. The main issue pointed by Amenemhet is that a king should not trust people and should be morally good. Parkinson says:

“the royal teaching is reflective as well as didactic, and in many places are didactic by example, through implication, and by extension rather than directly.” (2002:236)

The literary genre of teaching is characterized by placing wisdom into question, making it problematic and fictionalized. Teachings often refer to a hegemonic authority that defines the rules and values of how to behave and think correctly. It can be said that cultural education and entertainment can stay together, because another manner of learning is also through plays. Despite the aim of constructing cultural norms and affirming ideological values, these teachings remain contemporaneous manuals of ethics.

The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for his Son Sesostris I²

This instruction was written in Papyrus Millingen, dated of the Eighteenth Dynasty. A. Peyron made a copy in 1843, but subsequently the original papyrus was lost. There are fragments of this work preserved in wooden tablets of the Eighteenth Dynasty, papyrus fragments and ostraca of the New Kingdom.

This poem was firstly regarded as a composition made by King Amenemhet I after he had escaped from an attempted murder. But it is believed that the King was in fact assassinated in the third year of his reign and this text ended up being written by a royal scribe at the behest of Sesostris I, now the king. The poem is constituted of 15 stanzas divided into three thematic sections (1-5, 6-9, 10-15). The atmosphere is

² Amenemhet I and Sesostris I lived in the Middle Kingdom. Amenemhet I reigned from about 1991 to 1962 B.C.

dramatic, being created by the imagination of the dead king who addresses to his son, like in a revelation, alerting to the dangers of his succession in the throne. The setting is located soon after Amenemhet's death and Sesostris accession.

At the beginning of the poem, its didactic purpose is explained early on:

“Risen as god, hear what I tell you,
That you may rule the land, govern the shores,
Increase well-being!” (l. 1-3)

Its aim is to teach how to be a king and it also explains how he becomes a divine being. Throughout the poem the son rises while the father descends, like the Egyptians' concept of the god Re who travels in his Sun-barque. According to the Egyptologist Antonio Brancaglione (2003:97), the Mandjet Barque is used by the sun god Re in his journey through the day after going out of the Underworld, here expressed by the son who rises. And the Meseket Barque is used by the god Re in his night journey through inferior sky, here represented by the father who descends.

In the first section, it is warned that the king should not trust unreliable people. The dead king also insists that his assassination should be revenged, being so a fundamental element to guarantee his future memory.

“If one fights in the arena forgetful of the past,
Success will elude him who ignores what he should know.” (l. 19-20)

Amenemhet points out that it was his lack of awareness about the people he trusted that led him to death, teaching through shared experience and not through instruction and command. It can also be said that “sleep” is a central element in this poem, taking into account that the king is speaking to his son in a dream. The king and his son are not allowed to “sleep until dawn”, as a sign of responsibility.

According to Parkinson:

“The king describes his half-sleep state as being a ‘worm’, and this image may evoke the potential crises of the solar cycle: in the later Book of the Dead³ spell 87, the deceased wishes to identify himself with a ‘worm’ which ‘sleeps and is (re)born daily’, like the Sungod. The simile also alludes to burial, since the

³ *The Book of the Dead*, a compilation of approximately 192 chapters, is a kind of a manual of the Other World for the use of the dead. (Brancaglione, 2003:105).

worm belongs to ‘the necropolis’: the ruler of the land of the living is now a son of the land of the dead”. (2002:244)

Teachings’ description possesses an ethical implication about the personification of virtue.

“Made for eternity, prepared for all time” (l. 45)

Another aspect is that the fools are opposed to the wise man, as royal power does.

“The wise say ‘yes’, the fool say ‘no’” (l. 48)

At the end of the poem, Sesostris is represented as a fulfiller of Amenemhet’s aims:

“You wear the white crown of a god’s son,
The seal is in its place, assigned you by me” (l. 59-60)

Here we can see the awareness of human fallibility and the importance to attain the divinity potential. The king is characterized as “wise-hearted” but fallible. Parkinson points out that “the wisdom comes from another world and from the past (2002: 246).

In this sense, we can affirm that culture is also a process that accumulates through the ages, and does not disappear completely since it conserves the traditions, behaviors and values of a society, or as the king states: “comes from another world and from the past”. The way Amenemhet presents the kingship or the cultural values, being associated with an educational manner, is problematic because the audience already knows the ideas and values taught here. However, for each member of this audience the poem gains a different significance.

Summing up, the main cultural values and ideologies supported in Amenemhet’s teaching of how to be king are: 1) the king should be morally good; 2) the king should not trust unreliable people; 3) the king is not an ideal example of wisdom; 4) the king should be aware of his responsibilities. In this sense, the teaching provides descriptions rather than didactic information. In other words, as a performance, it does not present to the audience the facts in an educational process, but by showing the problematic and experience.

Conclusion

The anthropological and interpretative cultural perspectives that permeate the area of language and culture studies can help us to understand the ethics and everyday conduct of Egyptian society and also the ethics, moral and principles that the Egyptian society had preserved, through its literary production. As advocated by Geertz (1973), a culture cannot be studied outside the context that surrounds it, due the fact that it must acknowledge all symbolic dimensions of social action as art, religion, common sense, ideology, science, law and morality.

In this sense, the study of a culture is therefore the study of a code of symbols socially shared by members of that culture. In our view, through the Ancient Egyptian Teachings it is possible to recognize the manner in which the principles, ethics, morals and ideologies of Ancient Egyptian society were approached. However, as anthropology seeks interpretations, every interpretation of a cultural text will always be a difficult and slow task.

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Appendix

THE INSTRUCTION OF KING AMENEMHET I FOR HIS SON SESOSTRIS I

Miriam Lichtheim

(I, 1) Beginning of the Instruction made by the majesty of King Sehetepibre, son of Re, Amenemhet, the justified,ⁱ as he spoke in a revelation of truth, to his son the All-Lord. He said:

Risen as god,ⁱⁱ hear what I tell you,
That you may rule the land, govern the shores,
Increase well-being!
Beware of subjects who are nobodies,
Of whose plotting one is not aware.ⁱⁱⁱ
Trust not a brother, know not a friend,
Make no (5) intimates, it is worthless.
When you lie down, guard your heart yourself,
For no man has adherents on the day of woe.
I gave to the beggar, I raised the orphan,
I gave success to the poor as to the wealthy;
But he who ate my food raised opposition,
He whom I gave my trust used it to plot.^{iv}
Wearers of my fine linen looked at me as if they were needy,^v
Those perfumed with my myrrh 'poured water while wearing it'.^{vi}
You my living peers, my partners among men,
Make for me mourning such as has not (10) been heard,
For so great a combat had not yet been seen!
If one fights in the arena forgetful of the past,
Success will elude him who ignores what he should know.

It was after supper, night had come. I was taking an hour of rest, lying on my bed, for I was weary. As my heart (II, 1) began to follow sleep, weapons for my protection were turned against me,^{vii} while I was like a snake of the desert. I awoke at the fighting, 'alert',^{viii} and found it was a combat of the guard. Had I quickly seized weapons in my hand, I would have made the cowards retreat 'in haste'. But no one is strong at night; no one can fight alone; no success is achieved without a helper.

(5) Thus bloodshed occurred while I was without you; before the courtiers had heard I would hand over to you; before I had sat with you so as to advise you.^{ix} For I had not prepared for it, had not foreseen the failing of the servants.

Had women ever marshaled troops?
Are rebels nurtured in the palace?
Does one release water that destroys the soil
And deprives people of their crops?^x
No harm had come to me since my birth,
No one equaled me as a doer of deeds.

(10) I journeyed to Yebu, I returned to the Delta,
Having stood on the land's borders I observed its interior.
I reached the borders of 'the strongholds'^{xi}
By my strength and my feats.
I was grain-maker, beloved of Nepri,
Hapy honored me on every field.
None hungered in my years,
None (III, I) thirsted in them,
One sat because I acted and spoke of me,
I had assigned everything to its place.
I subdued lions, I captured crocodiles,
I repressed those of Wawat,
I captured the Medjai,
I made the Asiatics do the dog walk.

I built myself a house decked with gold,
Its ceiling of lapis lazuli,
Walls of silver, floors of [acacia wood],
(5) Doors of copper, bolts of bronze,
Made for eternity, prepared for all time,
I know because I am its lord.
Behold, much hatred is in the streets,
The wise says "yes," the fool says "no,"
For no one knows it 'without your presence',^{xii}
Sesostris my son!
As my feet depart, you are in my heart,
My eyes behold you, child of a happy hour
'Before the people as they hail you'.
I have made the past and arranged the future,
I gave you the contents of my heart.
You (10) wear the white crown of a god's son,
The seal is in its place, assigned you by me,
Jubilation is in the bark of Re,
Kingship is again what it was in the past!
.....^{xiii}
Raise your monuments, establish your strongholds,
Fight.....^{xiv}

Reference:

LICHTHEIM, Miriam. "The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for his Son Sesostris I". In: *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings. The Old and Middle Kingdoms*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, Vol. I, p. 136-139, 2006.

Notes

ⁱ In Papyrus Chester Beatty IV, a New Kingdom scribe drew up a list of famous authors of the past and assigned the composition of the Instruction of Ammemhet to a scribe by the name of Khety. Whether or not his attribution was correct, it reveals that the New Kingdom scribe understood the pseudepigraphic nature of the work (see Posener, *Littérature*, p. 67). But as regards the audience of the Middle Kingdom, it seems to me probable that it took the work to be the genuine testament of King Amenemhet; for pseudepigrapha would lose much of their effectiveness if they were not, at least initially, believed to be the works of the men whose name they bore.

ⁱⁱ The much debated introductory passage was reexamined by Goedicke, *loc. cit.*, who made a case for taking Dd.f xa m nTr as a single sentence, in accordance with the verse-points, and having it refer to the dead king who is "risen as god," rather than to the accession of Sesostris I. If so taken, however, the address to Sesostris becomes very abrupt, consisting only of "listen to me," and the sentence lacks balance. Helck has summarized the previous renderings and has preferred to take xa as imperative, "rise", rather than the participle, "risen".

ⁱⁱⁱ As Helck and Goedicke observed, the two tmmt refer back to smdt. I take the passage to mean that subjects who are unknown are dangerous because they can plot in secrecy. @rw in the sense of "plot" is well attested. (see Volten, *op. cit.*, p. 108).

^{iv} Literally, "he whom I gave my hands."

^v Following Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 483, I read Swyw, rather than Sw, "grass".

^{vi} %ti mw has generally been interpreted as an act of disrespect or defiance, e.g. Helck: "spuckten vor mir aus." The inner logic of the composition requires, however, that the king, looking back on the treacherous behavior of the plotters, should describe it in terms of covert acts, since any open defiance would have drawn immediate punishment. The "pouring water" in Admonitions, 7, 5, suggests a menial task.

^{vii} I take sprx in the literal sense of "turn around."

^{viii} The meaning of iw.i n Haw.i, "I being to my body" is uncertain. Gardiner's "by myself" was disputed by Anthes and Helck; the latter suggested "kam zu mir," i.e. "became alert."

^{ix} I.e., the old king was prevented from "sitting together" with his son in a formal ceremony of abdication.

^x The context here, and in *Neterti*, line 46, suggests that iryt means 'produce' and 'crop'.

^{xi} For xpSwt Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p.493, proposed "frontier-strong' holds," while Helck assumes a corrupted writing of xpS, the constellation 'great bear'.

^{xii} The three sentences recur in *Admonitions*, 6, 13. Helck has pointed out that msyt is a corruption of msD, "hatred." The third sentence is obscure.

^{xiii} A garbled sentence, not preserved in P. Millingen.

^{xiv} The two concluding sentences are corrupt.