Article Critique and/or Response

Afterword: Egyptological Anthropology

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Abstract

Building on the articles in this special issue, this afterword examines the place of comparison and defamiliarisation in the distinctive approach to Egyptology which is outlined in these pages. Noting that the articles make creative use of a number of theoretical devices from other disciplines, including social anthropology, the piece asks what social anthropology in turn might borrow back from this Egyptological conceptual moment. Rather than follow a traditional import-export model, trading ready-made theories between disciplines, the afterword argues for a different vision of interdisciplinarity, in which the disruptive potential of ancient Egyptian epistemologies plays a leading role.

Keywords: comparison, theory, anthropology

لكلمة الختامية: الأنثروبولوجيا المصرية

الملخص

استنادًا إلى المقالات الواردة في هذا الإصدار الخاص، تسلط الخاتمة الضوء على أوجه المقارنة في المنهج الفريد لعلم المصريات الذي تم استعراضه في هذه الصفحات. تُظهر المقالات استخدامًا مبتكرًا لعدد من الأطر النظرية المستمدة من تخصصات أخرى، بما في ذلك الأنثروبولوجيا الاجتماعية. وتتساءل الخاتمة عن الكيفية التي يمكن من خلالها للأنثروبولوجيا الاجتماعية أن تستفيد من هذه اللحظة المفاهيمية المميزة في علم المصريات. بدلاً من تبني النموذج التقليدي القائم على الاستيراد والتصدير النظري بين التخصصات، تدعو الخاتمة إلى تصور مختلف للتعددية التخصصية. في هذا التصور، يُمنح التراث المعرفي لمصر القديمة دورًا محوريًا في إحداث تحولات فكرية وتقديم رؤى جديدة عبر التخصصات المختلفة.

الكلمات الدالة مقارنة ، نظرية ، علم الانثروبولوجيا

1 Introduction

When I told friends and colleagues that I had been invited to give a keynote at an Egyptological conference on bodies, I got a few puzzled looks. One friend even asked whether perhaps they had got the wrong Matei Candea? For I am not an expert on bodies, and more to the point, I know near to nothing about ancient Egypt (beyond the memories of my slightly obsessive nine-year-old self). My presence at that event and in these pages is therefore a testament to the intellectual curiosity and generosity of the organisers. At the root of the present volume and the encounter from which it emerges, was a thoughtful and sustained programme of speaking across intellectual borders and reaching out to other disciplinary fields. In this afterword I will endeavour to speak to this programme from the perspective of one of the disciplines being reached out to—social

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anthropology. In my contribution to the conference, I sought to offer some glimpses from social anthropologists' varied and conflicted history of thinking about, practicing and failing at comparison (CANDEA, 2019). Rather than reprise this work in this afterword, I hope I can in some measure repay the intellectual generosity of the organisers by asking a different question, one which emerges directly from this collection.

Each and every one of these articles is concerned in one way or another with the delights and pitfalls of comparison across cultural, historical, or ontological settings. In the pursuit of these comparative endeavours, contributors to this volume demonstrate with brio how discussions in neighbouring fields can enrich Egyptological scholarship and help see anew ancient Egyptian concepts and practices. And so, the question of comparison is doubled up: it emerges not just across cultures, but also across disciplines. As an anthropologist reading these articles, I was fascinated to see the productive and sometimes unexpected use to which some concepts and analytical practices with which I am familiar have been put. At the same time, I was struck by the calls in some of these articles to introduce more of a theoretical two-way street between Egyptology and other disciplines.

The way the problem was put echoed an earlier discussion in a different setting. In an introduction entitled 'Archaeological anthropology' (GARROW & YARROW, 2010), archaeologist Duncan Garrow and anthropologist Tom Yarrow observed that archaeologists often imagine themselves as rich in material but poor in theory. For some this is a source of empiricist pride, for others, a reason to seek theoretical input from elsewhere, notably from anthropology. Hence the value of a more 'anthropological archaeology' has become fairly banal. In the volume and the conference which preceded it, Garrow and Yarrow sought to turn this assumption inside out, by asking what anthropology would look like if it imported conceptual moves from archaeology.[1]. In this afterword, I would like to ask a similar question: what can a consideration of Egyptological—and ancient Egyptian—concepts and practices, in turn, bring to anthropology? What, in other words, would a more Egyptological anthropology look like?

2 On cultural and disciplinary equivocation

While the comparative axes and approaches across these articles are extremely varied, one dynamic emerges centrally throughout these pages. This is the reflexive reconsideration of Euroamerican assumptions - particularly those baked into Egyptology itself. Thus Leire Olabarria deftly unpicks the contrast between 'real' and 'fictive' kinship in her re-examination of the notion of a 'bodily son'; Reinert Skumsnes dissolves the assumption of a distinction between 'empirico-rational medicine on the one hand and magico-religious texts on the other' (2); in order to excavate the ancient Egyptian meanings of nakedness, Dina Serova finds she has to clear away a host of engrained meanings of the couple nudity/nakedness in post 18th-century English. Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, in her discussion of the notion of 'aspective', points to the classic pitfall of defining others' cultural forms through what they seem to lack. Just as anthropologists once took the state for granted when they wrote of 'stateless' societies (FORTES & EVANS-PRITCHARD, 1940), the characterisation of ancient Egyptian art as lacking in perspective (a-spective) forgets that 'contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the outlier in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective.' (19)

Note the double use of the term perspective in this sentence—I will return to it below. Even more searchingly, Di Biase-Dyson suggests that characterisations of 'aspective' bodily representations as fragmented or disarticulated misses the point that Egyptian notions of bodily wholeness and fragmentation may not stand in the same relation to each other as they do in the Euroamerican case. Willeke Wendrich, in a move familiar to anthropologists, attacks Cartesian body-mind dualism. Yet Wendrich adds a refreshing and unexpected twist when she asks 'If we subscribe to the notion that body and mind are one, are we not making the same

[1]For instance, in my own paper for the conference, I had asked what anthropological fieldwork might look like if we imagined it through the lens of archaeological fieldwork (CANDEA, 2007)

mistake by now forcing another Western ontology onto ancient societies?' (13)

The call to suspend both of these assumptions is enticingly reminiscent of zen master Shunryu Suzuki's observation that 'Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think they are one, that is also wrong.' (SUZUKI, 2020: 7)

All of the moves above draw on the aesthetic of 'frontal comparison' (CANDEA, 2019). Some seek to clear the ground of our assumptions—zen-like—in order to see ancient Egyptian realities more clearly. Others foreground alternative ancient Egyptian realities as a destabilising device to challenge our assumptions about kinship or the body. These are the same move, inside out, as neatly illustrated in Rune Nyord's book *Seeing Perfection* (NYORD, 2020). There, Nyord draws on anthropology's ontological turn, whose core device is to allow indigenous concepts to transform the anthropologist's own analytical framework (HENARE et al., 2007). Rather than try to explain why Egyptian images don't conform to our own familiar representational norms, Nyord starts from Egyptian concepts such as *twt* ('resemblance') which might help us challenge our own representationalist assumptions and learn to start from elsewhere. 'The aim', Nyord writes

> 'is to show that, far from being an exceptional area of archaeology or art history, Egyptian images are amenable to similar perspectives to those under development in other parts of those fields, and with a mostly unexplored capacity for bringing new concepts and materials to such theoretical discussions.' (NYORD, 2020: 8)

Now, as a long-time fellow-traveller of the ontological turn (henceforth OT), I find these points very convincing. There is however the seed of a paradox in the ontological turn, which a number of critics have noted and which is neatly illustrated, or even amplified in this context. On the one hand the OT seeks to ground theoretical models in indigenous concepts by suspending our own ontological assumptions—this is why its proponents have often resisted the idea that the OT is itself a stable theory. On the other hand, the OT carries with it certain basic assumptions. Assumptions about how knowledge works—grounded in part in a distinctly anthropological vision of fieldwork-based disorientation and encounter. Assumptions also about what difference is (HEYWOOD, 2020) —including a characterisation of Cartesian dualism as the core of western thinking (this is where Wendrich's reminder is particularly timely).

These assumptions function, whatever its proponents say, as a basic framework within which the ontological turn's moves can be made, and this fact stands out most clearly when the ontological turn is drawn as in this case, into a neighbouring discipline. So Nyord's move is in a sense double. On the one hand, he suspends certain Euroamerican theoretical assumptions in order to make Egyptian concepts such as *twt* take centre stage. On the other hand, in order to do so he draws into Egyptological discussions a concept of ontology from anthropology. The anthropological concept of ontology enables the ancient Egyptian concept of *twt* to be heard.

I raise this point not as a critique of the OT or of Nyord's deployment of it, but in order to focus our attention on the diverse layers of conceptual transfer at work in these pages, as in Nyord's case. These borrowings work across ontological difference, perhaps, across disciplinary difference, also. On the one hand, frontal comparisons in this collection function as a kind of epistemological ground-clearing. On the other hand, they are accompanied and buttressed by an increase in theoretical frames, drawn from archaeology, anthropology, and philosophy. The articles collected here self-consciously set out to upend an older characterisation of Egyptology as anti-theoretical. Scrivens outlines in stark terms the status quo which this collection aims to challenge:

> 'Egyptology is notorious for its aversion to engaging with theoretical discourse. The foundational goal of amassing knowledge about ancient Egypt has largely retained primacy over more abstract discussions and methodological debate, to the extent that David Wengrow has remarked that "there is no strictly Egyptological way of researching or explaining anything"' (Wengrow 2020: 51).' (Scrivens 2024: 3; see also Whitehead, this volume 5, Howley and Nyord 2018: vi)

Author query: Wengrow 2020 not listed in bibliography. Scrivens 2024 and Howley and Nyord also not listed in bibliography

The articles above forcefully contradict the first sentence in this quote. Archaeological concepts of body worlds (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013) and negotiation (Sørensen 2007) or chaîne opératoire (Dobres 2010, cf. Leroi Gourhan 1966), anthropological discussions of relational thinking (STRATHERN, 2020), equivocation (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004), ontology (DESCOLA, 2005), philosophical discussions of assemblage theory (Delanda 2006, cf Whitehead, this volume), are all put to great use here.

Of course this importing of theoretical frames brings its own challenge when it comes to marking the distinctiveness (contra Wengrow) of Egyptological perspectives. Whitehead notes that Egyptological engagements with frameworks from other disciplines has too often been a 'one-way street' (5). From this perspective it might seem ironic that the one article here which deals with a concept forged within Egyptology itself—Di Biase-Dyson's discussion of 'aspective'—argues rather conclusively that the concept, at least in its original form, ought to be abandoned. As an outsider encountering Egyptology for the first time, the notion of aspective (as rendered in BRÉMONT, 2016; NYORD, 2013) had captured my imagination. The thought of an ancient Egyptian alternative to 'perspective' opened up a range of musings, echoes and parallels—some of which I return to below. I had thus come to the conference prepared to suggest some of the ways in which this Egyptological concept might in turn enrich anthropological theorising—my sense of what a 'two-way street' might look like. Di Biase-Dyson's chilling excavation of the racist and evolutionist character of early invocations of aspective certainly gave me pause.[2]

But perhaps this false start can prompt us to imagine an alternative kind of two-way traffic between Egyptology and other disciplines. Maybe an anthropologist seeking to be transformed by Egyptology should look beyond the conventional vision of disciplinary theory that can be 'imported'. Perhaps, following Nyord's lead, Egyptology's structure as a discipline enables and requires a different form of theoretical production: 'the potential to build models grounded in ancient Egyptian culture.' (Scrivens 4). This after all has always been key to the way anthropology itself has operated: wherever anthropology has produced its own theory (rather than importing it from philosophy, for instance), this has always been as an effect of allowing the conceptual worlds it studied to distort and reshape its own.

Author query: Sorensen 2007 not listed in bibliography

Author query: both not listed in bibliography

Author query; Delanda 2006 not listed in bibliography

Re footnote: Janowski 2012 not in bibliography

3 Ancient Egyptian epistemics

For me as an anthropologist, some of the most fascinating moments in this collection are those in which the reader glimpses something like the echoes of ancient Egyptian epistemologies. Those are the moments when we see an encounter not between material and analysis, but rather between two expert cultures, two 'originating institutions, that is the modern academy and ancient groups of religious initiates' (Miller 16).

Di Biase-Dyson's evocation of ancient Egyptian meta-categories ('none of which have been adequately translated by terms like "(hieroglyphic) script", "teaching", "secret" or "wisdom"' pp) is one example. Richard Bussmann's work back and forth across the category of the 'non-elite' is another. At the outset, the non-elite might seem to be a projection of contemporary analytical concerns, since in ancient Egyptian representations 'the "non-elite" were not lumped together as one group but were distinguished according to performed activities and bodily characteristics.' (10). And yet Bussmann shows the progressive constitution of a typological visual language for characterising non-elite bodies, in 'an attempt to classify, codify, and interpret society for the benefit of high-ranking officials' (12). Similarly, in Serova's article the relational nature of semiotics and the relational characterisation of bodies in ancient Egyptian deployments of nakedness echo back and forth until the analysis and the material seem on the verge of collapsing into each other. This epistemological

[2] Those who would retain the term aspective to point to an 'analytical talent' or 'regulative idea' (Di Biase Dyson, citing Janowski 2012), rather than an essential characteristic of the ancient Egyptian mind, might counter that concepts are not bound to their origins. The anthropological concept of 'animism' for instance has been put to productive use, despite having a similarly disturbing essentialist and evolutionary origin (BIRD-DAVID, 1999). However, the fact that aspective's origins are so recent does make this a particularly 'hard case'.

encounter is drawn out most explicitly however in Jordan Miller's comparison of Egyptological and ancient Egyptian comparisons. Whether ancient Egyptian experience would have been better characterised as animism, perspectivism or analogism is a question which may feed productively into the comparative practices of Egyptologists. But 'syncretic' god-forms and their fused names provide, to the anthropologist, a more direct provocation as they map a distinctive ancient Egyptian form of comparatism:

> 'Fused names identify metapersons through comparison with others. Each deity possesses a set of qualities or relations. Since the same divine force could be encountered through many, often recurrent, forms, fused names represent not the merger of entities but the linking of associations, even though the resulting bundle is conceived as a discrete subject' (Miller 7)

What would Egyptological (or anthropological) comparison look like if it tried to emulate or learn from this type of syncretistic comparatism? Imagine 'cultures' or 'institutions' treated in this way, as collective subjects and simultaneously accretions, or as forms which replicate inside and through each other. Or what if, returning to Nyord's discussion of ancient Egyptian visual concepts, we took *twt* as a device for rethinking anthropological comparison?

For Nyord, thinking ancient Egyptian images through terms like *twt* forces us to let go of what we thought we knew:

> 'Against this background, the apparent paradox between images as "something which resembles", on the one hand, and the various Egyptian image practices that go strongly against a mimetic ideal, on the other, begins to dissolve, as it turns out to be heavily dependent on our representationalist intuitions about what "resembling" entails. [...] the Egyptian notion of *twt* does not refer to a mimetic copying of a visual impression. Rather, the idea of "resemblance" refers to a correspondence with a deeper nature (such as Hatshepsut's divine origin) or the defining features that make one a member of a particular category.' (NYORD, 2020: 12)

But what would happen if we added *twt* to the panoply of analytical terms such as resemblance and relation? What if we asked, in our comparisons, not just whether two things resemble one another, or whether they are related, but whether one somehow corresponds to the deeper nature of another? I suspect a rather different range of ways of envisioning comparison would begin to emerge.

Perhaps in the end, this is also where something like 'aspective' might fit in, not as an Egyptological concept, but as the echo of an ancient Egyptian epistemological device. As noted by Di Biase-Dyson, it is difficult to disentangle the term 'aspective' from Brunner-Traut's initial account of Egyptian images as lacking in perspective and totality. The notion of a lack is built into the term (a-spective)—even if we were to reject the more obviously problematic implication that such a 'lack' relates to an earlier evolutionary stage of development. Yet the observation that ancient Egyptian art challenges contemporary expectations of 'perspective' remains undeniably productive. I would like to pick up on Di Biase-Dyson's suggestion that we attend to more radical reworkings of aspective, such as Axelle Brémont's notion of 'multi-spective' (BRÉMONT, 2016). Brémont rejects the earlier thought that so-called aspective art is uninterested in the perspective of the viewer. Rather, she argues that one can detect at the heart of the Egyptian visual forms characterised as aspective (which she renames 'multi-spective' or 'bi-spective') a tension between two perspectives, which the artist is seeking to simultaneously attend to and satisfy. On the one hand, the perspective of the viewer, seeing objects and persons from the front, and on the other hand, the perspective of the patron, who is depicted within the picture, and therefore watching it from the side. Brémont argues that both the standard features of Egyptian depictions, and the occasional exceptions, speak of a productive tension in the heart of each image, between this view from the front and this view from the (in)side of the picture.

I am of course not in a position to assess the validity of Bremont's analysis from an Egyptological standpoint. But it proposes a suggestive analogue for thinking about anthropological comparison. Perhaps one

might find here a clarifying restatement of the sorts of tensions I have tried to characterise elsewhere between frontal and lateral comparison (see also Miller, this volume). Bi-spective might speak to the way in which anthropological texts seek to provide both an illumination for their reader and a faithful reorientation of the description in light of the perspective of people studied—'the people in the book', as it were. As in ancient Egyptian art in Brémont's characterisation, anthropological attempts at 'bi-spective' denote not a settled ontology but a struggle, an attempt to hold diverse principles and aesthetics in tension—in pursuit of particular ends.

One might go further and query the widespread tendency to reach for 'perspective' as a characterisation of a broad comparative view. Consider again the final use of 'perspective' in the quote above: 'contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the outlier in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective.' (Di Biase-Dyson 19)

The thought of 'a pan-cultural and pan-historical multi-spective' provides a bracingly suggestive vision for anthropology.

4 Distortion and incorporation

In his account of depictions of the 'foreign' goddess Qadesh in Egypt's imperial age, Edward Scrivens writes:

> 'On the one hand, we have a goddess who is imagined as foreign, as coming from outside of Egypt and being outside of convention, one 'of whom there is no equal'. On the other is the representational system with which she is depicted, a system whose very frameworks are infused with androcentric hierarchies. These understandings or priorities are negotiated within the triadic stelae, rendering Qadesh's body and her interactions with the surrounding figures in a way that holds them in balance. The extent to which this negotiation is a conscious effort of the artists or more of a cultural reflex response is a matter for debate. Perhaps such an outcome is an inevitability of attempting to represent something outside of the norm; whatever we describe, we can only do so with the language available to us' (Scrivens 14)

I would like to place this vision of incorporation and tension alongside a classic account of tension and incorporation in anthropology. This comes from Marilyn Strathern's book *The Gender of the Gift* (1988)—perhaps the Ur-text of relational anthropology:

> 'In comparing "our" categories to "their" categories, one is, of course comparing two versions of our categories, the latter being derived from what we take to be salient or relevant to them, even as the ideas gained from what we take to be their categories come from "our" encounters. To extract certain distinct ideas out of the encounter is not to judge the people as distinct, nor necessarily entail a comparison of whole societies.' (STRATHERN, 1988: 349 n. 10)

Drawing ancient Egyptian concepts and epistemic devices into Egyptology is less a matter of conceptual borrowing and more a matter of attempting to negotiate distortions of the discipline's conceptual norms. The same is true, on a smaller scale, when these devices in turn are drawn into the conversations of another discipline. We may never know to what extent these incorporations are faithful to the original. But the distortions of our frameworks are productive nevertheless.

5 Acknowledgements

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