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A Rebirth for the Pharaoh*

Reflections on the Classification of the New Kingdom Divine Birth Cycle as a Ritual

The interpretation of rituals enacted, or *represented*, in the temples of Egypt is limited by the often sparse survival of evidence; most of our knowledge of the Egyptian temple cult comes from the temples of the Graeco-Roman period. This paper deals with an aspect of ancient Egyptian divine kingship, the divine birth cycle, and the question of its rituality. The focus is on the well-known but somewhat enigmatic event of engendering the divine child (i.e. the king), as depicted during the New Kingdom period. Following the various types of ritual classification, one might be tempted to interpret the divine birth cycle as a political ritual designed to legitimize the pharaoh's rule. At the same time, it coequals with various aspects of religious renewal, such as the annual re-creation, and rebirth of the pharaonic state through its socio-ideological self, represented by the king. In this respect, one might categorize divine birth as a festival or calendrical rite. The purpose of this paper is to explore various ways of interpreting the divine birth cycle as a ritual, or as a religious representation of a different type. The first part of the paper focuses on the setting and particularities of the divine birth cycle and its relationship to certain Theban festivals during the New Kingdom period, thus creating a basis for the discussion of its rituality, which forms the second part of the paper.

Part I

The pharaoh had a central role in ancient Egyptian society, for he was perceived as a divine ruler. This divinity referred, among other things, to the *ritual status* of the king as the sole mediator between gods and men and his responsibility for the maintenance of the cosmic order, which the Egyptians called *maat*. It has been argued that the king, by being ritually

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his mythical counterpart (i.e. the demiurge), ensured that the primeval pattern of creation was reproduced to uphold and renew the world. This cosmology of Egyptian kingship drew from divine genealogy. Traditionally (from ca 2450 B.C. onward), this meant that the king was both the god Horus and the Son of Re, the former identifying the king with Horus, son and heir of Egypt's mythical ruler, Osiris, and the latter representing his position within the divine hierarchy as the creator's son (cf. Assmann 1991: 240ff.). However, during the New Kingdom (1539–1075 B.C.) the importance of the local Theban god, Amun, acquired universal significance, and the state god of Egypt became Amun-Re.

The setting

For reasons yet to be determined, several New Kingdom rulers – starting in the reign of Hatshepsut – depicted their divine engendering by Amun-Re in the birth cycle represented in temples in the modern Luxor area (there is evidence from Hathsepsut/Deir el Bahri, Amenhotep III/Luxor, Rameses II/Ramesseum, and a king from, presumably, the 20th Dynasty/Karnak). The pictorial and textual composition presents the divine descent of the royal child, showing Amun engendering the mortal queen with the royal child. This sacred union, *hieros gamos*, resulted in the birth of the royal child, who was recognized by the supreme deity as his own. The highly idiosyncratic preserved copies of this story include narrative captions at the beginning, as well as the words exchanged by the deities throughout the cycle, which is divided into fifteen or seventeen scenes.

The form of representation is similar to a play, with deities taking their typical roles in the framework of established groupings, and thus seemingly alluding to a sacramental interpretation of a ritual. Here we see the supreme god, Amun-Re, who visits the queen in the guise of the living pharaoh; at Deir el Bahri, it is Hatshepsut's mother, *Jahmes*, and at Luxor, Amenhotep III's mother, *Mutemwia*. As a result of his visit, the queen conceives and gives birth to the future pharaoh. Other gods participate in the event. Khnum sits at his potter's wheel and forms the body of the infant with its *ka*, its double, according to Amun's specifications, and in Amun's image. Thoth informs the queen of the pregnancy and the impending birth of the royal heir, much like the angel did to Mary in Christian tradition. The subsequent scenes include the birth, the nursing of the baby and his or her recognition by the divine father, who appoints the child as his successor on earth. Amun-Re then announces his decision to the gods, who approve of the choice and give the child their blessings throughout the course of the following scenes. (For a fuller description, see e.g. Brunner 1986; L. Bell 1985; Naguib 1990.)

Divine birth cycle at Luxor

Presented here in chronologically reverse order is the second – and the best studied – of the cycles, located near the sanctuary in the temple of Luxor, in the Birth-room of the temple (room no. XIII, NW wall; Porter and Moss 1972, II: 326). Adjacent to this depiction, which runs along three registers, there are scenes concerning the so-called *sed*-festival (this was the king's jubilee, typically celebrated after thirty years of rule, in which he re-establishes his supremacy by performing certain rites; we have, however, examples of multiple *sed*-festivals by prominent pharaohs, so that the thirty-year schedule was only the ideal). The Luxor cycle was published by Hellmut Brunner in the monograph *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs* in 1964 (2nd and revised edition 1986). The Birth Room's location near the sanctuary, where it has limited access, indicates the room's sanctity. This, of course, is a phenomenon typical of sacred areas everywhere. The "grammar" of Egyptian temples shows that it is customary to have increasingly mythological scenes the closer one gets to the sanctuary, as opposed to the more secular events (e.g. war campaigns of the pharaoh) depicted, for instance, at the first pylon and thus accessible to the common people (for the decorative programme of ancient Egyptian temples of the New Kingdom, see e.g. de Rochemonteix 1894).

Divine birth cycle at Deir el Bahri

The first known copy of the text – and "text" is here meant in a very broad sense – incorporating both the inscriptions and the depictions, comes from the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri, which is situated on the west bank at modern Luxor. A large portfolio of facsimiles of the temple's reliefs was published at the end of the 19th century by Edouard Naville's team (*Deir el Bahari II*). New publications, save a couple of renderings of individual scenes, have not been attempted, although the physical condition of these reliefs is deteriorating rapidly. The divine birth reliefs are situated in the upper register of the middle colonnade on the north side (there are two registers: the lower level contains the so-called youth and coronation inscriptions of Hatshepsut). The southern side of the colonnade contains scenes of the famous Punt Expedition ordered by the pharaoh during his reign *ca* 1473–1458 B.C. The divine birth at Deir el Bahri differs from those of Luxor only in the first and last scenes. In the first episode, instead of the queen embracing Hathor as she is seen doing at Luxor, the Theban gods sit before Amun-Re who announces his amorous intentions and his plans to beget the next ruler. The last scene is only slightly different from its parallel at Luxor Temple in that it includes a larger selection of gods, but in essence the textual content is the same.

Hatshepsut's version of the divine birth cycle is the earliest known pictorial representation of an event of this kind, even though the theme of divine parentage is already known from a papyrus containing five distinct tales referring to the reign of the Old Kingdom ruler, Khufu (commonly known by the Greek version of his name, Cheops). This thematic parallel is a story recounted in *Papyrus Westcar* (Berlin 3033) dating back to the Middle Kingdom: the magician Djedi, after being summoned to court by Prince Hardjedef, Khufu's son, gives a prophecy of the miraculous births of the kings who will compose the next dynasty. These children are begotten by the sun god, Re, to a wife of one of his priests. (For a translation, cf. Lichtheim 1973: 219–22.)

A brief description of some Theban festivals

The following is a very brief description of a few festivals and when they were celebrated during the year. "Seasonal festivals" (*ḥbw tp trw*) were celebrated according to the calendar of three four-month seasons – Inundation (*Akhet*), Emergence (*Peret*), and Harvest (*Shemu*) – as opposed to "festivals of heaven" (*ḥbw nw pt*), which were celebrated according to the astronomically determined sidereal calendar, or according to the lunar calendar derived from the phases of the moon (cf. Shafer 1997: 25). Thus, it can be seen that the Egyptians had civil, astronomical, and lunar calendars. In principle, the king led all festival celebrations, although someone else presided at most non-royal festivals. Most festivals also featured a joyful procession of gods. (Shafer 1997: 27.) The reason for presenting selected festivals here is their relationship to the study of divine birth and the goddess Hathor.

The Opet festival

Since the New Kingdom, Luxor Temple (called *Ipt rsy*, "Southern sanctuary", in Egyptian; hence the name of the festival) was the mythological power base of the living, divine king and the foremost national shrine for his cult. The *Opet* Festival, which took place during the second month of the inundation season, *Akhet*, was the longest in the Theban festival calendar. *Opet* lasted eleven days at first, but was gradually lengthened to 24/27 days under the Ramessides. (Naguib 1990: 71ff.) During the festivities, the reigning monarch was identified with the royal *ka*, the divine kingship was reborn and the individual king's right to rule was reconfirmed (L. Bell 1997: 157ff.). During the festival, Amun of Karnak, accompanied by his consort Mut and their son, the moon god Chons, journeyed to his southern sanctuary at Luxor Temple in a procession headed by the pharaoh. The

key elements of the festival were the procession, the king's meeting with his divine father, Amun-Re and his subsequent procession back to Karnak.

The records of the procession are sketchy but complemented by a fair amount of early pictorial and textual material surviving from the reigns of Hatshepsut, Amenhotep III, and Tutankhamun. There is also additional architectural evidence provided by the monuments, particularly from the reign of Ramesses II. (L. Bell 1997: 157ff.) At first, the journey from Karnak to Luxor was made by land, and the bark shrine containing the cult-image of the god was carried on the shoulders of priests, who stopped at six rest stations situated on the road connecting Karnak and Luxor, the so-called Sphinx Alley partly visible even today. The return to Karnak was made by river, but the itinerary was later changed so that both journeys were made on the Nile, as shown by the reliefs of Tutankhamun's reign. These reliefs also show the presence of four bark-shrines, three to the Theban triad, Amun-Mut-Chons, and one for the cult-statue of the royal *ka*. (Naguib 1990: 71.)

Beautiful festival of the valley

The Valley Festival (*ḥb n int*, or *ḥb nfr n int*; also known by the name, "Ferrying of Amun-Re to the West", *ḥni r imntt n Ḳmn-R*) was a Theban version of a popular Hathor festival celebrated throughout Egypt from at least the Old Kingdom; the earliest mentions of the Valley Festival date to the Middle Kingdom (i.e., in the Mentuhotep II temple at Deir el-Bahri). While some temple reliefs record moments of the festival (Hatshepsut's Red Chapel at Karnak and her temple at Deir el Bahri), most of our knowledge of the different sequences is based on *Papyrus BM 10209* (Haikal 1970–72). The time of the year for this two-day celebration was the second month of Shemu (10th month of the year, also known as *Payni*) and the appearance of the new moon (Naguib 1991: 21–22).

In keeping with the theological system of Thebes, the major role in the Valley Festival was played by Amun-Re, the king of gods, who was also the national god in the New Kingdom. During the festival, Amun-Re's bark shrine (called the *userhat*, "powerful is the head of Amun") was transported aboard his riverine barge from Karnak Temple (which was on the east bank) to the west bank of the Nile. There, in his chapel near a limestone bay of Hathor at the sacred mountain at Deir el Bahri, Amun-Re took up residence. From there he visited the royal cult complexes of the west bank, especially the temple of the reigning king. (L. Bell 1997: 136–37). At first, Amun journeyed alone, but during the Ramesside era he was accompanied by his family, i.e. Mut and Chons, as well as his female double, Amanuet. Naturally the retinue was led by the pharaoh with his entourage. (Naguib 1991: 21–22.) The populace of ancient Luxor participated in this

festival in a joyful manner; this included, among other things, visits to the tombs of their relatives and feasting there (an occasion for the cult of the ancestors). In fact, Egyptian society has been described as consisting of the gods, the king, the blessed dead and humanity (Baines 1991: 129). Thus, the honouring of ancestors was also the king's duty and the procession on the west bank visited the mortuary temples of past kings (however, the main emphasis seemed to be on the temples of the ruling house).

Some Hathor mythology

The mythology behind the deities involved in these festivals might provide some clues as to why these festivals had major cosmological importance, while at the same time, it seems to be the general theme of any religious rituals: maintenance (the repelling of chaos) and renewal. According to Heliopolitan cosmogony, the creator god Atum (usually identified with the solar deity) begot the world by masturbation and ejaculation (see e.g. PT 600; Sethe 1987: 1652–59). Apparently, the cosmic order, *maat* (*m³'t*) was a bi-product of this event, and Maat as a goddess was also considered to be the creator's daughter. There is also the *Eye of the Sun*, his daughter Hathor. There is a group of texts or narratives involving Hathor in the form of the Eye (to be found in certain Graeco-Roman temple texts and the Onuris myth; e.g. Junker 1911, 1917). According to these, Hathor becomes furious after another eye took her place and she retires south, into the Nubian desert where she becomes a fierce lioness who destroys all life. This resulted in a series of natural catastrophes that fell upon Egypt, where perpetual night prevailed. The sun god, unable to survive without his daughter, sends his herald, the ibis-headed Thoth, to appeal to the angry goddess to return. She agrees and returns with her retinue of musicians, singers and dancers. The return was marked with joyous inebriation by the people. Another story recounts the *Destruction of Mankind* (in the Underworld book called the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, known from several New Kingdom royal tombs) in which people rebelled against the ageing creator. Upon the advice of his council of gods, the Sun God sends his daughter, Hathor, to take his revenge on the people. Hathor is transformed into the fierce lioness, Sakhmet/Tefnut, and performs a horrible massacre. Fearing that the lioness would destroy all mankind, the Sun God sends Shu/Onuris and Thoth, once more, to bring back the goddess. They manage to calm the fury of the goddess by spilling red beer on the ground. Mistaking this for blood, the lioness drinks large quantities and becomes "appeased". The Sun God then orders mankind to celebrate the goddess with joy, dance, music and the drinking of beer (i.e. inebriety).

Part II

Religious representation of divine birth

Discussion of the nature of the cycle has usually been within the parameters of the myth-ritual school, perhaps largely due to the unwillingness of Egyptologists to engage in the development of a holistic theory which would involve a certain amount of speculation, largely unacceptable within the exacting disciplines of archaeology and linguistics which still dominate the field. However, Comparative Religion shares some of the blame, and a focus on ancient Egypt has been pretty much lacking since the days of Claas Jouco Bleeker and Gerardus van der Leeuw, as if the material were somehow exhaustively dealt with. There are a couple of exceptions, most notably the work of Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (e.g. 1986, 1994, 1999). This is not surprising, as the difficulties involved in an interdisciplinary approach are well attested. However, interdisciplinary methods are more common in recent scholarship, and fortunately this is true also of current research in Egyptology and Comparative Religion.

While typically perceived simply as a ritualized myth, some Egyptologists have suggested the interpretation of divine birth as a *fictional ritual* (cf. Assmann), since it is unlikely that events such as engendering and birth were ritually enacted (Assmann 2001: 118). Statements such as this are surprising, especially considering the evident cosmological significance associated with the cycle (e.g. the presence of the supreme god, the demiurge Amun-Re), a fact itself alluding to a ritual interpretation. However, in defense of the "fictional ritual" view, it has to be stated, for instance, that the presence of the royal *ka* as a significant part of the cycle was recognized as late as 1985 when Lanny Bell published his seminal article concerning the nature of Luxor Temple.

The preferred interpretative method is an *analysis of the religious discourse* using intertextuality (we have a great number of interrelated sources, comprising parts of the entire theological discourse of 3000-year-old pharaonic Egypt) and the definition of a genre; here then the ritual can be treated as a language (cf. Lawson and McCauley 1990). However, it must be said that a *multiplicity of approaches* is needed (cf. Frankfort 1948; Podemann Sørensen 1994). This, however, is often the case when we are dealing with ancient and largely incomplete material. We now also know about the character of the temple of Luxor as the place of veneration not only of Amun but more significantly, of the royal *ka* (cf. L. Bell 1997; i.e. the immortal creative spirit of divine kingship, the divine aspect of the mortal king). Finally, while certainly interesting, the emotional aspects involved in this ritual are very much beyond our reach.

A. Criteria for a ritual interpretation of the cycle

It seems improbable that divine birth was merely a mythological depiction on a temple wall. Here I am taking a cognitive approach to the ritual theory and defining religious ritual according to E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley as “those religious *actions* whose structural descriptions include a logical object and appeal to a culturally postulated superhuman agent’s action somewhere within their overall structural description” (1990: 176). This tripartite focus on superhuman agent – action – logical object presents independent grounds for ascertaining the religious rituals that constitute a religious system in terms of the historical continuity of religious traditions and the participants’ sense of their religious identity (even though the latter postulate does not seem meaningful here in the absence of the participants) (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 176). Critical to this is the understanding that all ritual acts have a characteristic structure (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 85). The structural description, reminiscent of the schematic presentation of linguistic phenomena, characterizes the relations of agents, their actions and those actions’ objects. According to this, central to understanding the dynamics of a religious ritual are its universal principles, or functional universals as defined by Lawson and McCauley (1990: 123ff.).

First there is the *Principle of Superhuman Agency*, which refers to the superhuman agent’s position in a ritual’s structural description. Basically, all rituals involve superhuman agents at some point in their representation. Those rituals where superhuman agents function as the agent in the ritual (i.e. Jesus institutes the church) are always more central to a religious system than those where the superhuman agents serve in some other role, for instance as the recipient of a sacrifice. (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 124–25.) Secondly, there is the *Principle of Superhuman Immediacy*, which relates to the application of the first principle. This concerns the immediacy of the superhuman agent’s involvement in the ritual, rather than the character of the involvement as in the first principle. This means that “rituals in which the superhuman agent is directly involved even in some other role than that of agent are more essential to the religious system than are those where the superhuman agent appears in the structural description only in some embedded, enabling action that has occurred previously” (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 126–27).

In other words, superhuman agents, i.e. the gods, always partake in the ritual, whether directly, or through preceding rituals. Finally there is the *Principle of Action*, which states that there must be a logical object to all ritual action. Something is always done to somebody or something in religious rituals, so that this somebody/something has been transformed into something else. In that sense, rituals have a certain instrumental dimension. The action itself can consist of complex elements and might be governed by conditions.

The application of these principles to a structural description of divine birth is the focus here and in my ongoing research. Even though divine birth, whether a ritual or commemorative ceremony, is now unobservable, most of the *functional universals* seem to be present or at least implied by the context of this representation. First, the *Principle of Superhuman Agency* in divine birth is represented by Amun-Re, who is in the position of the logical agent. He acts by bestowing godhood on the king, his son; the king is being deified. This is a clear marker of the fundamentality of divine birth as a religious representation. The presence of the supreme god in this rite denotes its centrality to the culture. It is a fundamental concept resulting in the fact that the king is divine and his father's representative on earth, i.e. it is another way of expressing his divine genealogy: the creator – his son. Amun-Re acts once, and the result should be permanent; so there is no logical need to repeat this action, other than commemoratively. Second is the *Principle of Superhuman Immediacy*: in this case, the superhuman agent's involvement is immediate and prevailing. Thus the relative centrality of the ritual within the Egyptian religious system must be emphatic. Lawson and McCauley assert that rituals in which superhuman agents are immediately involved enjoy a more prominent place in the religious system than those in which these agents only appear within an embedded, enabling action (regardless of their roles in the action). (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 126.)

Third, the *Principle of Ritual Action* is implied but as precisely what, or how, or by whom exactly, it is difficult to attest to. The premise is highly suggestive. The focus seems to be on the god, perhaps played by the king himself, and possibly on the queen taking the role of Hathor, Amun's consort (the primacy of Mut/Hathor as the consort of Amun as opposed to Amanuēt is well attested: the role of Hathor seems to be more sexually stimulating whereas Mut denotes fertility, universality and sociality [te Velde 1997: 455–62]). This is not really a problem in the flexible mythology of ancient Egypt, since the concept of the goddess as the female engendering principle is present in all these female deities; however, it seems to be somewhat secondary to the male, e.g. the sex of the earth as male in ancient Egypt *versus* female in the other Mediterranean cultures. The symbolic role of the Egyptian queen as the "hand" (e.g. *drt*, "hand", is grammatically feminine) of the creator and the inspiration of the demiurge (e.g. references to such events as Hathor showing her vulva to her father, Re, in order to improve his mood) has been the focus of some recent studies, as is the role of both non-royal and royal women as the God's Wife of Amun (e.g. Robins 1983; Naguib 1992). Either way, the king is the object of the ritual, the divine newborn king, but it could be that he is also the agent, acting as Amun-Re on earth (the god took the king's form in order to gain access to the queen), and therefore being his own begetter. This would also coincide with the

Egyptian deity associated with Amun, *Kamutef*, “the Bull of his Mother”, and the idea of Amun as the self-created demiurge (e.g. *Papyrus Leiden I 350*, Hymns to Amun, see Zandee 1948). Support for the ritual interpretation is provided *not only* by the husband–wife relationship between Amun and Hathor – two of the prominent actors in divine birth cycle, and a link to the Beautiful Feast of the Valley during which Amun visited Hathor in Deir el-Bahri – *but also* by the recitation phraseology *ḏd mdw in*, “utterance by” used throughout the text, and universal in liturgical speech/texts. (Egberts 1995: 402–03.) It is difficult to ascertain the particularities of the divine birth ritual which might have amounted to no more than the recitation of the text (Egberts 1995: 403).

B. Criteria for defining the ritual type of divine birth

Certain elements in the divine birth seem to denote rituality. Within the range of ritual genres presented, for example, by Catherine Bell (1997), divine birth could, by its character, belong to several categories: *calendrical rite* (both seasonal and commemorative), *rite of passage* (initiation, even) for the pharaoh and a *political rite* (legitimacy). Elaborating further, one observes that the annual repetition of the above-mentioned Theban festivals at a specific time of the year denote *calendric interpretation*. Also present are both types of calendrical rites: seasonal as in seasonal and annual repetition, as well as commemorative as in commemorating the first event, *sp tpy*, the creation of the world, the regeneration of the demiurge. The timing of the *Opet* Festival was the inundation season and this ideally coincided with the retraction of the Nile waters so that the land reappeared but could not yet be cultivated (incidentally, Egyptian cosmogonies describe the birth/appearance of the demiurge happening like that, hence, the concept of “the first time” referring to the event of creation when waters receded and revealed land after the domination of chaotic waters). Thus, the earth was still dormant and needed revivification. Saphinaz-Amal Naguib points out that the action of the joint renewed energies of the country personified by the pharaoh and of the demiurge was regarded as beneficial to the growth of crops and the prosperity of Egypt (1990: 73). Divine birth was a *rite of passage* for the king. The deification of the king meant *a rebirth for the pharaoh*; a re-creation of his divinity and a merging with the royal *ka* since his father Amun bestowed on him the “throne of the living *kas*”; the sacred union of Amun (father-son) and the Queen (mother-daughter) aim at the birth of a divine king, thus the focus is on the end result. Having received the recognition of his divine father, and the choice having been ratified by the gods, the king was in reality reborn (Naguib 1990: 73.) Divine birth was a political rite as well, since it legitimized and renewed the cosmic order,

helping in the realization of *maat*, whereby the king rules as the heir and deputy of the creator. It was the murgence of the king and his royal *ka* into one entity. The cosmic order was thus being realized on earth, giving the king the right to rule as his two bodies came together, *body natural* and *body politic* (cf. Kantorowicz 1957).

In conclusion, the present argumentation interprets the New Kingdom divine birth cycle as a commemorative ritual or ceremony. Also established here is the centrality of divine birth in the ancient Egyptian religious system. All action in the cycle is aimed at passing the authority of Amun-Re to the king. The condition for this action is the conception of the divine child and the preceding union of Amun-Re and the queen mother. Furthermore, the illustrious festivals related to this phenomenon seem to underline the cultural importance of this central theme in the religious system of ancient Egypt. The importance of the annual repetition of this event, unique in itself, which coincided with joyful festivities and the ferrying around of the images in splendid processions must have instilled both factual and emotional experiences serving to reinforce the king's divinity in its social reality: it is manifested in the activities of the Egyptian community which aimed at creating and maintaining the life of the Egyptian world (Finnestad 1989: 90).

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