

THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT EGYPT

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF GODS

BEFORE dealing with the special varieties of the Egyptians' belief in gods, it is best to try to avoid a misunderstanding of their whole conception of the supernatural. The term god has come to tacitly imply to our minds such a highly specialised group of attributes, that we can hardly throw our ideas back into the more remote conceptions to which we also attach the same name. It is unfortunate that every other word for supernatural intelligences has become debased, so that we cannot well speak of demons, devils, ghosts, or fairies without implying a noxious or a trifling meaning, quite unsuited to the ancient deities that were so beneficent and powerful. If then we use the word god for such conceptions, it must always

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be with the reservation that the word has now a very different meaning from what it had to ancient minds.

To the Egyptian the gods might be mortal; even Ra, the sun-god, is said to have grown old and feeble, Osiris was slain, and Orion, the great hunter of the heavens, killed and ate the gods. The mortality of gods has been dwelt on by Dr. Frazer (*Golden Bough*), and the many instances of tombs of gods, and of the slaying of the deified man who was worshipped, all show that immortality was not a divine attribute. Nor was there any doubt that they might suffer while alive; one myth tells how Ra, as he walked on earth, was bitten by a magic serpent and suffered torments. The gods were also supposed to share in a life like that of man, not only in Egypt but in most ancient lands. Offerings of food and drink were constantly supplied to them, in Egypt laid upon the altars, in other lands burnt for a sweet savour. At Thebes the divine wife of the god, or high priestess, was the head of the harem of concubines of the god; and similarly in Babylonia the chamber of the god with the golden couch could only be visited by the priestess who slept there for oracular responses. The Egyptian gods could not be cognisant of what passed on earth

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without being informed, nor could they reveal their will at a distant place except by sending a messenger; they were as limited as the Greek gods who required the aid of Iris to communicate one with another or with mankind. The gods, therefore, have no divine superiority to man in conditions or limitations; they can only be described as pre-existent, acting intelligences, with scarcely greater powers than man might hope to gain by magic or witchcraft of his own. This conception explains how easily the divine merged into the human in Greek theology, and how frequently divine ancestors occurred in family histories. (By the word 'theology' is designated the knowledge about gods.)

There are in ancient theologies very different classes of gods. Some races, as the modern Hindu, revel in a profusion of gods and godlings, which are continually being increased. Others, as the Turanians, whether Sumerian Babylonians, modern Siberians, or Chinese, do not adopt the worship of great gods, but deal with a host of animistic spirits, ghosts, devils, or whatever we may call them; and Shamanism or witchcraft is their system for conciliating such adversaries. But all our knowledge of the early positions and nature of great gods shows them to stand on an

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entirely different footing to these varied spirits. Were the conception of a god only an evolution from such spirit worship we should find the worship of many gods preceding the worship of one god, polytheism would precede monotheism in each tribe or race. What we actually find is the contrary of this, monotheism is the first stage traceable in theology. Hence we must rather look on the theologic conception of the Aryan and Semitic races as quite apart from the demon-worship of the Turanians. Indeed the Chinese seem to have a mental aversion to the conception of a personal god, and to think either of the host of earth spirits and other demons, or else of the pantheistic abstraction of heaven.

Wherever we can trace back polytheism to its earliest stages we find that it results from combinations of monotheism. In Egypt even Osiris, Isis, and Horus (so familiar as a triad) are found at first as separate units in different places, Isis as a virgin goddess, and Horus as a self-existent god. Each city appears to have but one god belonging to it, to whom others were added. Similarly in Babylonia each great city had its supreme god; and the combinations of these, and their transformations in order to form them in

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groups when their homes were politically united, show how essentially they were solitary deities at first.

Not only must we widely distinguish the demonology of races worshipping numerous earth spirits and demons, from the theology of races devoted to solitary great gods; but we must further distinguish the varying ideas of the latter class. Most of the theologic races have no objection to tolerating the worship of other gods side by side with that of their own local deity. It is in this way that the compound theologies built up the polytheism of Egypt and of Greece. But others of the theologic races have the conception of 'a jealous god,' who would not tolerate the presence of a rival. We cannot date this conception earlier than Mosaism, and this idea struggled hard against polytheistic toleration. This view acknowledges the reality of other gods, but ignores their claims. The still later view was that other gods were non-existent, a position started by the Hebrew prophets in contempt of idolatry, scarcely grasped by early Christianity, but triumphantly held by Islam.

We therefore have to deal with the following conceptions, which fall into two main groups,

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that probably belong to different divisions of mankind:—

{ Animism.
 { Demonology.

{ Tribal Monotheism. { Combinations forming tolerant Polytheism. { Jealous Monotheism. { Sole Monotheism.	}	At any stage the unity of different gods may be ac- cepted as a <i>modus vivendi</i> or as a philosophy.
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All of these require mention here, as more or less of each principle, both of animism and monotheism, can be traced in the innumerable combinations found during the six thousand years of Egyptian religion: these combinations of beliefs being due to combinations of the races to which they belonged.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF MAN

BEFORE we can understand what were the relations between man and the gods we must first notice the conceptions of the nature of man. In the prehistoric days of Egypt the position and direction of the body was always the same in every burial, offerings of food and drink were placed by it, figures of servants, furniture, even games, were included in the grave. It must be concluded therefore that it was a belief in immortality which gave rise to such a detailed ritual of the dead, though we have no written evidence upon this.

So soon as we reach the age of documents we find on tombstones that the person is denoted by the *kh* between the arms of the *ka*. From later writings it is seen that the *kh* is applied to a spirit of man; while the *ka* is not the body but the activities of sense and perception. Thus, in

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the earliest age of documents, two entities were believed to vitalise the body.

The *ka* is more frequently named than any other part, as all funeral offerings were made for the *ka*. It is said that if opportunities of satisfaction in life were missed it is grievous to the *ka*, and that the *ka* must not be annoyed needlessly; hence it was more than perception, and it included all that we might call consciousness. Perhaps we may grasp it best as the 'self,' with the same variety of meaning that we have in our own word. The *ka* was represented as a human being following after the man; it was born at the same time as the man, but it persisted after death and lived in and about the tomb. It could act and visit other *kas* after death, but it could not resist the least touch of physical force. It was always represented by two upraised arms, the acting parts of the person. Beside the *ka* of man, all objects likewise had their *kas*, which were comparable to the human *ka*, and among these the *ka* lived. This view leads closely to the world of ideas permeating the material world in later philosophy.

The *lhu* is figured as a crested bird, which has the meaning of 'glorious' or 'shining' in ordinary use. It refers to a less material conception than

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the *ka*, and may be called the intelligence or spirit.

The *khat* is the material body of man which was the vehicle of the *ka*, and inhabited by the *khru*.

The *ba* belongs to a different pneumatology to that just noticed. It is the soul apart from the body, figured as a human-headed bird. The concept probably arose from the white owls, with round heads and very human expressions, which frequent the tombs, flying noiselessly to and fro. The *ba* required food and drink, which were provided for it by the goddess of the cemetery. It thus overlaps the scope of the *ka*, and probably belongs to a different race to that which defined the *ka*.

The *sahu* or mummy is associated particularly with the *ba*; and the *ba* bird is often shown as resting on the mummy or seeking to re-enter it.

The *khaybet* was the shadow of a man; the importance of the shadow in early ideas is well known.

The *sekhem* was the force or ruling power of man, but is rarely mentioned.

The *ab* is the will and intentions, symbolised by the heart; often used in phrases, such as a man being 'in the heart of his lord,' 'wideness of

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heart' for satisfaction, 'washing of the heart' for giving vent to temper.

The *hati* is the physical heart, the 'chief' organ of the body, also used metaphorically.

The *ran* is the name which was essential to man, as also to inanimate things. Without a name nothing really existed. The knowledge of the name gave power over its owner; a great myth turns on Isis obtaining the name of Ra by stratagem, and thus getting the two eyes of Ra—the sun and moon—for her son Horus. Both in ancient and modern races the knowledge of the real name of a man is carefully guarded, and often secondary names are used for secular purposes. It was usual for Egyptians to have a 'great name' and a 'little name'; the great name is often compounded with that of a god or a king, and was very probably reserved for religious purposes, as it is only found on religious and funerary monuments.

We must not suppose by any means that all of these parts of the person were equally important, or were believed in simultaneously. The *ka*, *khu*, and *khat* seem to form one group; the *ba* and *sahu* belong to another; the *ab*, *hati*, and *sekhem* are hardly more than metaphors, such as we commonly use; the *khaybet* is a later idea