PART I

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN KINSHIP IN CONTEXT

ONE

INTRODUCTION: ANCIENT EGYPTIAN KINSHIP BETWEEN RELATEDNESS AND MATERIAL AGENCY

ANTHROPOLOGY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND EGYPTOLOGY

In the preface of *Egyptology and the Social Sciences*, Kent Weeks (1979: v) wrote:

> we consider extremely encouraging the fact that Egyptologists are now, after half a century of reluctance, beginning to approach such fields as anthropology for ideas, while anthropologists are also beginning to realize that, beneath Egyptology's staid and sometimes formidable exterior, there lies a wealth of data of great value for their studies.

In the almost forty years since that publication, the dialogue he hinted at has not been as lively as he anticipated. Many authors have successfully incorporated theoretical models from the social sciences into Egyptology (Baines 2011: 576–8), but very few of those proposals have been followed by engaged discussions in the literature.[1] Whether this is due to discomfort with rapidly changing disciplines (Weeks 1979: 21) or to mistrust of studies that go beyond a narrowly evidential basis (Baines 2011: 575), many Egyptologists remain reluctant to integrate theoretical approaches into their work. In contrast, in this book I advocate that a productive dialogue between Egyptology, anthropology and archaeology is not only possible but necessary. The rich dataset provided by Egyptology could be invaluable for anthropologists and archaeologists, while the methods and theoretical approaches of the latter disciplines may offer fresh insights into Egyptian material.

Anthropology, with its aim of facilitating a holistic study of humanity, is more commonly concerned with existing societies that can be objects of participant observation, yet many anthropologists also need to rely on archives (cf. ethnography of the Nayar combining interviews and British archival material: Stone 2006: 152) and incorporate ethnohistorical methods (e.g. Carmarck 1972: esp. 229–36; Abler 1982; Trigger 1982; Silverman and Gulliver 2005; Harkin 2010). Ancient cultures, which have traditionally been explored through archaeology, may also be suited to anthropological analysis, as for instance a long tradition of scholarship on Maya studies demonstrates (e.g. McAnany 1995; Robin 2000; Joyce 2003). Consequently, anthropological archaeology has become more popular over the last decade as a result of a growing awareness that anthropology and archaeology are 'inextricably bound together' (Gosden 1999: 11). The distinction is blurred between those societies that are prone to being observed through the anthropological lens and those that are not. Thus, my point of departure is that it is possible to study aspects of ancient Egyptian culture based on an archaeo-anthropological approach.

As with other social sciences, there has been a history of missed opportunities in the relationship between anthropology and Egyptology. Judith Lustig (1997b: 7) stated that anthropologists view Egyptology as an 'antitheoretical, descriptive field' in the same volume in which William Y. Adams (1997: 32) ruled out the possibility of a total reconciliation between Egyptology and anthropology:

> While there is at present some reconvergence of interest between Egyptology and anthropology, the basic personalities of the two disciplines remain far apart. I see no reason to expect that this will change; the two fields simply appeal to people with different backgrounds, different interests and different ideological commitments.

There have been other, more optimistic accounts regarding the relationship between Egyptology and anthropology. For example, at his inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford, Francis Llewellyn Griffith noted the inextricability of these two disciplines when he proposed that: 'Egyptology is, as I have already stated in other words, a prolific branch of the great science of anthropology, probably destined to illuminate the general history of mankind more searchingly and powerfully than the anthropology of a hundred other countries' (Griffith 1901: 9). While such an assertion should be framed within the drive for the institutionalisation of Egyptology as a subject of study in its own right at the beginning of the twentieth century (Stevenson 2015: 19–20), Griffith is not alone in highlighting an engagement of Egyptology and anthropology (see e.g. O'Connor 1997: 18–22). Several authors acknowledge the influence of anthropology openly (e.g. Meskell 1999; 2004; Lehner 2000; Nyord 2009; Bussmann 2010), although, as Richard Bussmann (2015) points

out, many others are not explicit about the anthropological models from which they take inspiration. The Lady Wallis Budge Symposium on *Egyptology and Anthropology: Historiography, Theoretical Exchange, and Conceptual Development*, held at the University of Cambridge in July 2017 (Nyord and Howley 2018), constitutes a prime illustration of a renewed interest in bridging the gap between the study of Egyptology and the use of broader anthropological interpretative models. It still remains an open question how and when such initiatives may crystallise in the scholarly literature.

Egyptology ultimately entails the investigation of ancient Egypt, and as such it is defined by its focus rather than by a unified approach. As an area study, Egyptology needs to rely on methods developed by various disciplines, such as philology, art history or historiography, to articulate the analysis of its wealth of data appropriately. Given this historical borrowing of methods from other disciplines, it is striking that archaeology and anthropology struggle to be regarded as promising sources of productive methodological approaches for Egyptology.

The material culture of Egypt is incredibly rich, comprising a vast corpus of both inscribed and uninscribed artefacts. While the latter have received some attention, it is the former that were, and are still, regarded by many as the main source of information for decoding life in the past. In terms of approach, Egyptology has conventionally shown a preference for philological methods, a choice that is deeply ingrained in the tradition of Orientalism. Orientalists have had a tendency to favour the authority of texts over that of any other sources, displaying what Edward Said (2003 [1978]: 92–3), the main proponent of Orientalism, described as the 'textual attitude'.

The birth of Egyptology is indeed tied in with Orientalism (e.g. Thompson 2010; Thomasson 2013; Riggs 2015; 2017: 188–9). As a fascination for Egypt has existed since classical times (Olabarria 2019), the idea of an exotic, enchanting Orient of which Egypt was an important component is not exclusively a product of modern imperialism.[2] The geographical definition of Egypt as a confined space, however, and how this becomes the object of an entire area of study is very much in line with the Orientalist treatment of the East as an allegedly homogenous unit.

Edward Said (2003 [1978]: 2–3) defined Orientalism as a threefold enterprise. First, it is an academic discipline that is based on European knowledge of the Orient. Starting from the Foulcaudian premise that knowledge is not discovered but is created, Said (2003 [1978]: 21–4) claims that a pre-existing European imagery about the Orient influenced the demarcation of what the Orient was and how it could be analysed. In this sense, Egyptology itself – or rather, Orientalist scholars working on this region – would have created Egypt as an object of study that is artificially delineated in geographical terms.[3]

Second, Orientalism is a particular mindset that is based on an East–West dichotomy. These two abstract entities are presented as being in binary opposition, and defined by virtue of 'tropes of difference' (Mitchell 2009 [1989]: 409) that are not based on observation or academic enquiry but rather on a self-affirmation of Western identity as the opposite of the East. Egypt is included within an undifferentiated East that is portrayed as a static, oppressive and over-spiritual setting in contrast with the forward-thinking and liberating West.

Third, it entails an idea of domination and subjugation. Said (2003 [1978]: 177) is concerned with the process of creation of knowledge, which he thinks cannot be separated from the effect of power relations and hierarchy. Studying the origins of a civilisation was essentially seen as a means of understanding it, and hence subjugating and dominating it. Egypt received special attention from both French and British scholars during the time of colonial rule, and much has been written about the effect that imperialistic yearnings had on the study of Egyptian antiquities during the nineteenth century (e.g. Mitchell 1988). The race towards the deciphering of hieroglyphic writing, for example, can be understood as an imperialistic effort to claim dominion over the Egyptian past (Hassan 2010: 265–6).

The textual attitude exhibited by early Orientalists definitely guided the study of ancient Egypt. Since Champollion cracked the code with the help of the Rosetta stone (Parkinson 1999), many researchers directed their efforts towards editing texts that had been waiting to be translated for thousands of years. Meanwhile, the material culture was not deemed in need of so much attention. Excavations continued, but archaeological data were regarded by many as merely a secondary source to support information obtained through texts (Wendrich 2010: 1; Bussmann 2015). Instead of an integrated analysis, archaeological data acquired a subordinate role that in many cases persists today.[4]

Willeke Wendrich (2010: 1) also claims that this focus on textual and iconographic sources has led many authors to believe that the abundant archaeological data from ancient Egypt just speaks for itself. A misunderstanding of archaeology as an exclusively descriptive discipline results in a dearth of references to archaeological theory in most publications about the material culture of ancient Egypt (Meskell 2004: esp. 15). A methodological drive, unwittingly or not, motivates the collection and interpretation of data (e.g. Shanks and Hodder 1995). Accordingly, when the nature of such an underlying model is not stated explicitly, the possible biases of the work may go unnoticed. Archaeological interpretation is first and foremost a creative academic endeavour that should acknowledge that the elucidation of meaning is multivocal and subjective. In this sense, it should be essential to state the

methodological foundations of any piece of interpretative analysis in order to place it within a corpus of scholarship and to assess its wider implications.

Kinship and marriage in ancient Egypt provide a fascinating case study that showcases how a framework that combines archaeology and anthropology can yield productive results in the investigation of social fabric. The subject of kinship has traditionally been approached from sociocultural anthropology, while the types of sources that we may use to decode kinship in ancient Egypt are often treated archaeologically. This book focuses on how forms of kinship are displayed on monuments in the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom (ca 2150–1650 BCE) and on the role that those monuments have played in constructing and reinterpreting what it meant to be related.

Archaeology and anthropology are not monolithic disciplines, and there is a wealth of different approaches that one could adopt to study ancient material. The specific theoretical models that inform my work draw on postprocessual trends and are anchored in the firm belief that social phenomena need to be defined and analysed within their own unique cultural context. Such a non-essentialist approach reminds us that categories like kinship and marriage, often regarded as universal, should never be taken for granted. On the contrary, a contextually driven definition may show that the parameters that determine who is a relative are culturally constructed. The tracing and characterisation of sociocultural facts, however, are notably challenging tasks in the study of ancient cultures, not least because the available sources present a view of society that might not correspond with lived experience. Material culture need not be read as a static descriptor of life in ancient Egypt, but could rather be assessed in terms of the impact it had on audiences.

The next two sections develop my two principal theoretical approaches, kinship as a process and material agency, illustrating how they can be articulated successfully using the ancient Egyptian evidence. The notion of performativity permeates both these models, under the assumption that daily practice constructs and gives meaning to sociocultural phenomena such as kinship and marriage.

PROCESSUAL KINSHIP: UNDERSTANDING RELATEDNESS

Kinship and marriage are components of daily life, and it is all too easy to take their meaning and the processes of their construction for granted. They are, however, culturally driven and socially contingent phenomena. The analysis of families and social structure of any time period must therefore take into account the variability of these categories, since they adapt to their social environment(s). As I mentioned earlier, anthropology is not a unified body of theory, and definitions of kinship and marriage have been attempted from the perspectives of a number of theoretical approaches, leading to various

interpretations of what kinship is and what it does. In the following paragraphs I outline a brief intellectual history of kinship theory, but it should be borne in mind that the trends described are not mutually exclusive. Instead, some of them developed simultaneously and are still being reinterpreted and readapted in the multifaceted discipline that is kinship studies.[5]

Kinship was historically regarded as one of the pillars of anthropological research since its inception, and, in a way, to write a history of kinship studies is to write a history of anthropological thought. As a matter of fact, kinship was long regarded as an essential part of any respectable ethnographic work (Carsten 2014: 207–8). As anthropologist Robin Fox (1983 [1967]: 10) put it, 'kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject'.

The main reason for this early interest in kinship is perhaps that it was considered the preferred organisational principle in stateless societies. Thus, in the absence of governmental structures, individuals would resort to kinship and marriage as a way to determine and construe their social roles. Evolutionary anthropologists saw this kinship-dominated society as an initial stage that would then advance to allegedly more sophisticated forms of social control, leading to the nineteenth-century Western nuclear family as a superior organisational principle (Fox 1983 [1967]: 16–20). While an evolutionary model would facilitate comparison between different societies, the approach was entirely teleological, as it traces a unidirectional development line towards the conventional family prototypes of the time. In addition, evolutionary schemes were plainly speculative, since several of the stages they postulated were not based on any type of recorded ethnographic evidence. A well-known example is the myth of primitive matriarchy, conceived as an intermediary stage between primitive promiscuity and patriarchy, in which women held authority over men (e.g. Bachofen 1861; Morgan 1998 [1877]; on the influence of Bachofen on Morgan, see Trautmann 1987: 191–4).[6] The matriarchal phase was a scholarly projection intended to round out the evolutionary fallacy. Even though cultural evolutionism is largely discredited nowadays, many of the assumptions to which it gave rein persist in the academic imagination.[7] For example, the idea of a dichotomy between a kinship-based society and a more advanced state-based society is to some extent still present in the work of some authors (see Campagno 2002: 57–77 for a criticism of the persistence of institutional evolutionism).

Two main approaches, functionalism and structuralism, dominated the anthropological discourse until the mid-twentieth century, and both had their roots in the study of kinship. Functionalism claimed that any given aspect of a culture had a purpose that contributed to its maintenance as a whole. Popular among anthropologists of the British school such as B. Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown or M. Fortes, functionalism was preoccupied with the role

that kinship played in the political organisation of societies in the absence of a central government. Meyer Fortes (1958: 2) proposed a distinction between the 'domestic' and the 'politico-jural' domains of kinship. The former was considered almost universal, and hence less interesting, while the latter was seen as prone to variability and, as such, a fascinating target of study for cross-cultural anthropological comparison. This focus on the 'politico-jural' domain might be regarded as a legacy from sociocultural evolutionism but should instead be framed within the search for the optimal manner of political organisation in the context of colonialism. Functionalists considered that in order to achieve internal stability, stateless societies would require well-defined and distinct groups, which they identified as unilineal descent groups (Carsten 2012). Descent theory explored the formation of such groups, paying attention to discrete norms of inclusion and exclusion.

Structuralism, on the other hand, was less concerned with descent and more with alliance. Inspired by Marcel Mauss's (2002 [1969]) theories on gift-giving, Claude Lévi-Strauss focused on affinal relations as an expression of relationships among groups. Due to the universality of the prohibition of incest, exogamous groups would exchange women for survival and perpetuation, thus giving cause for marriage rules that he regarded as 'elementary structures' (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949]). The main purpose of structuralism was not to decode kinship per se but to assess the mechanisms by which the human mind constructed categories that were recurrent in most societies. Lévi-Strauss regarded kinship as the prime case study in approaching the transition from nature to culture, since the taboo of incest is universally accepted yet susceptible to cultural variation.

While entirely different in scope, these approaches share some common ground. Both the analyses of specific descent units and of general elementary structures are essentially ahistorical endeavours with a tendency to decontextualise their object of study. In addition, their focus on normativity omits the variability of personal experience from the equation. Thus, functionalism and structuralism are both deeply interested in classification and abstraction. This consideration led to the use of complicated formulae and diagrams that made kinship obscure to the non-initiated; as a consequence, kinship started to be regarded by many as an obsolete discipline that was unable to reflect the flexibility of lived experience as perceived by the social actors.

In a scholarly context where the anthropology of kinship was losing momentum, David Schneider delivered the *coup de grace* that almost definitively displaced this discipline in the 1970s. Schneider was one of the first authors to successfully examine kinship from the point of view of the symbols on which it is constructed. His well-known analysis of American kinship (1968) demonstrated the essential role that the concept of blood plays in the understanding of family relations in that culture.[8] Deriving from the

importance of the biological metaphor of blood, he posited the existence of a 'doctrine of genealogical unit of mankind' (Schneider 1984: 119–20) that was used as a basis for cross-cultural comparison of kinship. Such a model was, however, fundamentally flawed, as it was grounded on the pervasiveness of the symbol of blood among anthropologists.

Schneider's devastating critique of kinship led him to claim that kinship is a 'non-subject' (Schneider 1972: 51) because it was based on assumptions about family that are essentially Western and, hence, cannot be taken as universal.[9] Kinship, however, has proven to be a phoenix rising up from its ashes and new interpretative frameworks were developed in response to these criticisms (Godelier 2011 [2004]: 21–2).

One of these approaches arising from Schneider's critique is that of so-called new kinship studies, with Janet Carsten, Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and fellow of the British Academy, as one of its main proponents. She did fieldwork on Langkawi (Malaysia), where she approached relatedness from the point of view of commensality, showing that the repeated sharing of rice within a domestic space creates a shared substance, which may be the basis for kinship in that local culture (Carsten 1995; 1997). It is by being in the field that she realised to what extent 'being kin' was embedded in everyday life for the Malay actors (Edmonds and Warburton 2016).

The book *Cultures of Relatedness* (Carsten 2000b) could be considered a sort of manifesto of new kinship studies, with an introductory chapter outlining the main features of this theoretical approach (Carsten 2000a).

To start with, new kinship studies should be understood within a culturalist framework drawn from Schneider's critique of kinship. The authors of these studies are deeply influenced by Clifford Geertz, who claimed that the interpretation of meaning is the essential endeavour that any anthropologist needs to undertake in order to understand a culture. He famously stated that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz 1973: 5). The effect of focusing on the domain of cultural symbols in this anti-universalist manner is that many classical categories of analysis are diluted. For instance, if kinship is regarded as part of the dense web that is culture, then it will be understood as a non-essentialist phenomenon: that is, one that needs to be analysed and defined contextually.

Second, it is an anti-dualist model that rejects traditional dichotomies such as biology–culture. In a conventional understanding, kinship involves relationships between people based on descent and/or marriage. As Fox (1983 [1967]: 27) said alluding to T. S. Eliot, 'kinship and marriage are about the basic facts of life. They are about birth, and copulation, and death'. This type of biologicist