

SECOND WORLD BLACK AND AFRICAN FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE

LAGOS, NIGERIA

15TH JANUARY - 12TH FEBRUARY, 1977

5c

COLLOQUIUM

MAIN THEME: BLACK CIVILIZATION AND EDUCATION

SUB-THEME: BLACK CIVILIZATION AND PHILOSOPHY

AN APPRAISAL OF AFRICAN SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT:

SOME ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT.

by J. V. B. Danquah

University of Lagos, Nigeria

English Original

COPYRIGHT RESERVED: Not for publication without written
permission from the author or through
International Secretariat.

AN APPRAISAL OF AFRICAN SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

Some Ancient Egyptian Systems of Thought

by Joseph V. B. Danquah

The beginnings of African systems of thought date from Pharoanic times with the production of the Memphite Drama (4,500 B.C.) which was described by the late American Egyptologist, J.H. Breasted, as the "earliest known discussion of right and wrong in the history of man".

The unique character of the ethical portions of the systems which will be presented is that they represent a body of thought for practical guidance and action invented at least one thousand years before the Old Testament Bible was written, and blazed new paths in man's moral growth long before the historical advent of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Hebrews, it must be noted, make their first entry into the theatre of history in the Tell-el-Amarna letters, the earliest of which are to be dated not long after 1,400 B.C., i.e., from a period far older than any surviving Hebrew literature, including the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran caves.

Running through these systems is a highly sensitive, moral and social philosophy which ripened into fruition without the overt intervention of either the mono-theistic, intellectualised God of Christian theology or the Compassionate and Merciful Allah of Muslim theology, and without a fully conscious divinely inspired messianism of the three religions earlier mentioned. In this sense these systems could be looked upon as evidence for the view that

God did not sleep before the advent of these three world religious but had influenced man in earlier epochs; or, as evidence for man's own evolution of a moral kingdom of high values which were later borrowed by Hebrews during their 400-year sojourn in Egypt. Moses, their first and chief law maker, was, according to the Old Testament, 'learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians'.

The oldest known Indian philosophico-religious literature, the Rig-Vedas of Hinduism, were written between 1,200 B.C and 1,500 BC. Yet if we orient ourselves to Egyptian history, by 1500 B.C two long and eventful civilised epochs, the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, had passed away, leaving in its wake an extensive and profound philosophical literature. By 1200 B.C., to take the lower base-line, Ikhnaton's revolution, with its great innovative moral efforts, had come and gone. In Western Asia, to change our tack, by 1500 B.C. the Hammurabi Code was established over the present Middle East and Abraham had transformed his family into a "portable fatherland".

Our philosophical systems were erected and enunciated by our forbears in north-eastern Africa, Egypt, when the lands north of the Mediterranean had not received the Greek and Roman enlightenment which was yet to be born. And this superclassical, ancient Pharoanic civilisation, as the great polymath and historian, Cheik Anta Diop, has proved with a wealth of incontrovertible evidence, was undoubtedly a Negro civilisation.

*

*

*

The Memphite Drama (from Memphis, the ancient capital of Egypt) expresses some of the most profound metaphysical and ethical truths which were later borrowed and circulated in the civilisations of the ancient Near East and Western Asia.

The supreme god in this drama is Ptah, an ancient Egyptian sun-god, whose original qualities are "Command" (i.e., Power or Authority) and "Understanding".

This system stresses that thought and its expression are the origin and sustaining power of both the divine and earthly order. Ptah is in the 'heart' (mind) and 'tongue' of every living thing. All other gods are the offspring of Ptah who created sight, hearing and speech.

The earliest hint of recorded reflective morality is enshrined in that part of the text which reads: "(As for him) who does what is loved and him who does what is hated, life is given to the peaceful and death to the criminal". Two thousand years before the Old Testament creation story was put down our Drama declares: '.... Ptah was satisfied after he had made all things and every divine world'.

Mind or Thought, our Drama affirms in its most fundamental assumption yet, is the source of all things. Here we have a concept which is an essential attribute of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover (4th - 5th century B.C.) and the deity of Christian theology. In the qualities of Ptah the idea of a supreme personality derivative out of kingship was for the first time dawning upon the human mind, and in its ethic, the priority of social values - itself a product of long social evolution - over those of all others.

The Ethical System of the Pyramid Texts. The Pyramid Texts refer to writings on the walls, passages and chambers in five pyramids at Sakkarā which cover one and a half centuries from about 2,625 B.C. to 2,475 B.C. In the Pyramid Ethic we have one of the two original ethics of African civilization. Some of its

rules of conduct are;

1. Never pay a man below his just deserts.
2. The lord of a manor has an obligation to shelter and protect his followers, to deal justly with them and to defend the rights of the weaker against the stronger.
3. A man must act so as to be beloved of his parents and his kinsmen.
4. Never seize another man's property.
5. Never do violence to others.
6. The demands of righteousness and justice are higher than the king himself.

Of course, what the 'just deserts' of a man are cannot, in the present state of knowledge, be determined for all time under all varying circumstances by any set of well-defined criteria. The just deserts of a healthy and shiftless beggar are as different from those of a healthy, widowed and unskilled housewife with five children as the spiritual needs of a poet are from those of the harsh rigors of a pure mathematician. The injunction that the weak must be protected against the strong cannot be accepted without qualification. What appears even more ethical is that the weak should be taught to rely on his own devices to resist the oppressor; otherwise he becomes a perpetual crutch and realises little of his quality as a man. Similarly, while it is true that in general one may not seize another man's property the state must do just that in the various taxes it levies if it is to function effectively as a state.

The Maxims of Ptahotep (3,400 B.C.), our third body of doctrine, handed by a vizier to his son, crystallizes the unspoken and unconscious wisdom of that age. It entered that part of Egyptian heritage to which the Hebrews were exposed during their stay in Egypt.

In accents reminiscent of the later Proverbs Ptahotep proclaims:

- Canon 1: Be not proud because of thy learning.
- Canon 2: Take counsel with the unlearned as with the learned; for the limit of a craft is not fixed and there is no craftsmen whose worth is perfect.
- Canon 3: "Worthy speech is more hidden [sought after] than greenstone, being found even among slave women at the mill stone."
- Canon 4: How able is the youth who harkeneth to his parents.
- Canon 5: It is the understanding which makes its possessor a harkener or not.
- Canon 6: A wise man rises early to establish himself while the fool is in trouble.
- Canon 7: Stare not at one's superior officials at dinner; but look into thy dish.
- Canon 8: Seek not to know the former low estate of thy superiors.
- Canon 9: Silence is better than tef-tef flowers.
- Canon 10: If thou wert little before thou has attained position and wealth, be not boastful of thy wealth and position. Beware of the days that may come after.
- Canon 11: Establish thy house and take to thyself a wise woman as the heart's mistress if thou art a successful man
(Mohammed in the Koran, nearly thirty-five hundred years later.)

Canon 12: Be thou cheerful as long as thou livest; and be gracious to the petitioner if thou art an administrator. Let him speak until he has cleaned out his belly.

Canon 13: The power of righteousness endureth although misfortune carry away wealth.

Canon 14: Hold fast to the truth or righteousness and transgress not even though the report (which thou art delivering) be not pleasing.

Canon 15: The wise man heareth what is profitable for his son. It is he who does righteousness and is free from lying.

These moral dicta of 5,400 years ago enunciated before Biblical times inculcate the primary virtues: moderation, gentleness, kindness, self-effacement, discretion, cheerfulness, moral courage and justice. What is their internal structure? They may be categorised into a three-fold schematism: the morality of the individual, the family and the state. Of family morality, the system specifically enjoins filial duty to parents, matrimonial fidelity, and parental duty to offspring. Of State morality, it urges respect and devotion to superiors, right conduct before them, silence about one's superior's low origins, and justice for all. The principles of individual morality are expected to filter through to the practices of state and family morals in a dynamic and interstitial relationship. This troika order of the verities has a structural parallel in the ancient Egyptian representation of the human personality as body, soul and genius (double or 'ka').

In superclassical Egypt from 3,000 B.C. the great men of the Old Kingdom began to discern the meaning of Maat (i.e., justice or righteousness) - the key concept in Egyptian moral philosophy - in terms of their impressive, national experience. Among the thinkers of that time Maat became expressive of a sense of national order, the moral order of the nation, and of the national cosmos under the Sun-god. Three phases clearly emerge in the development of Maat in which the Egyptian thinkers summarise the order born of both state and social influences. It designates right conduct for the individual, right conduct for the family or immediate neighbourhood, and the method and spirit of national guidance in which orderly administration is suffused with moral conviction.

The Merikereic system is based on the "Instructions addressed to Merikere", issued around 2,500 B.C. at the fall of the Second Union of Lower and Upper Egypt. It was a treatise written by a king for the guidance of his son, Merikere. This system to some extent therefore parallels Michiavelli's Prince in the broad outline of intent: both are devoted to the stateman's craft, though the older tract takes the higher moral stance.

The main doctrines of the Merikereic system include the following:

1. Be a craftsman in speech "for the strength of one is the tongue and speech is mightier than all" fighting.
2. Be conciliatory in your dealing with the nobles, co-operate with them and exercise restraint. (This cautionary principle was urged because the king recognised the great power of the nobles).

3. In religious sacrifices the character of the giver is more important than the gift. In his actual words, as this is translated: "More acceptable is the virtue of the upright man than the ox of him that doeth iniquity". (This saying establishes the origin of the oft-repeated saying from the Old Testament).

4. "Do righteousness that thou mayest be established. Comfort the mourner; afflict not the widow; deprive not a man of the possession of his father; injure not the nobles in their possession".

5. "The court of judges who judge the unworthy, thou knowest that they are not lenient on that day of judging the wretched, in the hour of executing the writ.... A man surviveth after death and his deeds are placed beside him like mountains. For it is eternity, abiding yonder (in the next world), and a fool is he who disregards it."

Unlike the system of Ptahotep which is, at some places, concerned with the future in this world Merikere's father admonishes his son to think of the future in the next world.

At this early age in the development of man's moral discernment the king emphasizes that the most notable fact in a man's life is his relation with his god, whether here or the hereafter.

6. "One generation passed on to another among men, and God (the Sun-god) who knoweth character hath hidden himself..... He is one who confoundeth by what is seen of the eyes. Let god be served in this fashion, whether made of precious stones or fashioned of copper, like water replaced by water.

There is no stream that suffereth itself to be hidden; it bursteth the dyke by which it was hidden.

This insightful, remarkable religious philosophic statement of an Egyptian thinker of 4,000 years ago is an attempt to distinguish between god and his representations in conventional temple images. Here we have a profound theme which was rediscovered or which found varying development in Judaic, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim theologies on the nature of godhead. God cannot be confined within any tangible material object: god is a thing that mystifies when we try to approach it through material objects while the "invisible god who knoweth character (the true nature and hidden motives of men) hath hidden himself". In these references to the sun-god "this thinker is close to monotheism", James Breasted and Alan Gardiner both acknowledged.

The meaning of this crucial passage becomes unmistakably clear if one makes a logical analysis of it. "The court of judges" need not be a court of gods at the same level with the Sun-god. They could be the servants, judicial ministers, lesser gods of the sun-god. In the king's perception of the godhead as a hidden, non-material deity who cannot be represented in any tangible image he throws overboard the identification of the sun-god with the visible sun. If a concretal image cannot represent a god because of the latter's hidden nature neither can any other material thing. The bidding, 'Let god be served in this fashion' follows the dictum on the hidden being of the deity: a call to serve the deity without fanfare.

Scepticism, as a philosophical creed, was known to thinkers of the 11th dynasty, about 2,100 B.C. Its early origin is wrongly attributed to the Syrians and the Greeks. Scepticism as a societal force is nearly always preceded by a long experience with inherited

beliefs and much rumination of what had hitherto received automatic acquiescence; it is itself a product of a mature civilisation and involves a deliberate recognition of the personal power to doubt. It is thus a distinct step forward in the development of self-consciousness and personal initiative. On an individual level it may be found in both ripe and unripe civilisations. Excerpts from the mortuary song from the tomb-chapel of King Intef (circa 2,100 B.C.) show this attitude of mind:

Song of the Harp Player

".....

.....

The generations pass away,

While others remain.

.....

The gods who were aforetime

Their place is no more.

.....

.....

None cometh from there

That he may tell us how they fare;

.....

That he may content our heart

Until we too depart

To the place whither they have gone"

The last section of the Song is re-echoed three thousand years later in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Persian poet. In the following lines from the latter part of the Song we have

a clear statement of Epicurean philosophy.

"

.....

Follow thy desire and thy good,
Fashion thine affairs on earth
After the mandates of thine heart.

.....

.....

Celebrate the glad days, [mourning days]
Be not weary therein.
Lo, no man taketh his goods with him
Yea, none returneth again
that is gone thither."

In a papyrus which, following Breasted, we may call
"The Dialogue of the Misanthrope with his own Soul", an
ancient Egyptian thinker treats of the despair which results from
decaying Egyptian society, and turns to death as the only
escape. It is the earliest known literary work which expresses
the "inner experience of an afflicted soul unjustly suffering"
It is our earliest book of Job written over 1,500 years before a
like experience brought forth a similar agony of soul. The
following strophes from it convey the whole mood.

"To whom do I speak today?
Brothers are evil,
Friends of today are not of love

To whom do I speak today?
Hearts are thievish
Every man seizes his neighbour's goods

.....

.....

The gentle man perishes,
The bold-faced goes everywhere
....."

The Rise of Monotheism

In Amenhotep IV, better known as Ikhnaton (which means literally 'Aton is satisfied') who succeeded to his father, Amenhotep III around 1,375 B.C., we have a personality who has been described as the world's second individualist. The first historical individual was Imhotep, the stone architect and medical scientist of around 2,980 B.C.

Ikhnaton is the earliest known monotheist. His individualism is expressed partly by his innovative introduction of a natural realism in art: instead of the idealized and heroic proportions in which previous artists were wont to cast the Pharaoh-king he commanded that he should be depicted as he really was. It was shown in his rejection of tradition by ordering frescoes depicting scenes from his family life. It is his universal religious philosophy with which we are mainly concerned. In Ikhnaton's new monotheistic religion, the sun-god, Aton, is symbolised by a new symbol which depicts the sun as a disk from which diverging beams radiate downwards and with each ray terminating in a human hand. In the older Egyptian religion the most ancient symbols of the sun-god are a pyramid and a falcon. The new symbol suggests a power issuing from its celestial source, and putting its hand upon the world and the affairs of men. This is expressive in the following lines of the sun-hymn.

".....

Creator of all and giver
of their sustenance

Who beholds that which he has made

Sole lord, taking captive all lands every day

As one beholding them that walk therein;

.....

Like Merikere's system in which men are called the
"flocks of God" the Sun-Hymn's epithet for Aton is: "A
mother, profitable to gods and men".

This carries with it the idea of a similar solicitude. For
Aton, the supreme god, is creator of himself ["O God who
himself fashioned himself"], creator of the rest of creation,
filled with "a great and mighty love" for all his creatures,
the constant source of life and sustenance [in the sun's
rays] bringing heat and light to men. The discernment of God's
universal presence is revealed in the sun-hymn's picture of lily-
grown marshes, where the flowers reel hither and thither in the
vibrant radiance of Aton, and where birds unwind their wings
and flap them in adoration of the living Aton. This
represents an appreciation of the revelation of the living god
in the visible world such as is found in the Hebrew psalms seven
or eight hundred years later.

The spiritual nature of the new Sun-god, Aton, is shown
in a badly broken passage in the Sun-hymn interpreted by Sethe
as indicating that although darkness had fallen in those times
and men had slept Ikhnaton could feel: "Yet are thou still in
my heart".

Ikhmaton continued to be the official representative and supporter of the great moral and national order conceived by the solar priests at Heliopobis as far back as the Pyramid Age, which was given even deeper ethical significance by the social thinkers and prophets of the feudal age. Yet as Ikhmaton made unqualified claim to universal dominion he clearly meant to extend the old national moral order to the greater international world of which he was Lord.

The final philosophical system which we shall describe and consider is one which has had great direct impact on Western civilisation. It is the "Wisdom of Amenemope," 10th century B.C. The papyrus which was published in 1923 by Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri, is in the British Museum. Paradoxically enough Amenemope's wisdom has descended to the world and western civilisations in the Bible's "Book of Proverbs" and is attributed not to Amenemope, the Egyptian sage, but to King Solomon of Israel. How did this wrong attribution come about?

It is now widely acknowledged by competent and unprejudiced Egyptologists and archeologists that the Wisdom of Amenemope was translated into Hebrew, it was read by Hebrews, and an important part of it found itself into the Old Testament's Hebrew Book of Proverbs. Some examples of the evidence on the origin of Proverbs is presented below.

AMENEMOPE: III, 9-12

Incline thine ears to hear my
sayings,
And apply thine heart to their
comprehension.

PROVERBS 22: 17-18

Incline thine ear, and hear
the Words of the Wise,
And apply thine heart unto
my knowledge.

For it is a profitable thing
to put them in thy heart,
But woe to him who
transgresses them.

AMENEMOPE VII, 12-15

Remove not the landmark on the
boundary of the fields,

.....

Be not greedy for a cubit
of land

And trespass not on the
boundary of the widow.

AMENEMOPE IX, 14-X,5

Weary not thyself to seek for
more,

When thy need is (already)
secure.

If riches be brought to thee
by robbery,

They will not abide the
night with thee.

When the morning cometh
they are no longer in
thy house.

.....

They have made themselves
wings like geese,
And they have flown to heaven.

For it is a pleasant thing
if thou keep them within thee,
If they be established together
upon thy lips.

PROVERBS 23: 10

Remove not the ancient land-
mark;

And enter not into the fields
of the fatherless.

PROVERBS 23: 4-5

Weary not thyself to be rich
.....

Wilt thou set thine eyes upon
that which is not?

For riches certainly make
themselves wings, they fly away
Like an eagle
toward heaven.

AMENEMOPE IX, 5-8

PROVERBS 15: 16-17

Better is poverty in the hand
of God
Than riches in the storehouse.
Better are loaves when the
heart is joyous,
Than riches in unhappiness.

Better is little with the fear
of the Lord than
great treasure and trouble
therewith.
Better is a dinner of herbs
where love is, than a
stalled ox and hatred
therewith.

The deep conclusions that form the bedrock of moral principles, and continue to do so in civilised life at the present time, were reached in Egyptian life long before the Hebrews began their social experience in Palestine, and those Egyptian moral principles had been available in written form in Palestine for centuries when the Hebrews settled there.

Civilisation is not only based on character but on the inspiring nationalism that has shone like a lonely beacon through the centuries in the rise and decline of ancient Egypt. And contrary to unconscious assumptions of the popular mind, God had inspired other prophets and man had discovered enduring moral laws long before the beginnings of Hebrew Palestine.