# Semiosis and Interpretation in Ancient Egyptian Ritual

## Jan Assmann

The ancient Egyptian cult — both divine and mortuary — can be shown to be based on a tripartite distinction: that between action, iconic representation and recitation. Action can be said to be represented in relief and commented upon in language; representation can be said to be acted out through action and interpreted by recitation; and recitation can be said to be framed by a scene both represented in relief and enacted through ritual. However one chooses to view it, there is an interpretive relationship between language (recitation) and the other two modes of symbolization — action and representation. In what follows I attempt to investigate the function of language and interpretation in ancient Egyptian ritual.

## 1. *The Symbolic Structure of the Holy*

One of the first occurrences of the Egyptian word *ntr*, which we translate as "god," was found in a biographical inscription in a tomb that reads: "He made his gods in a form that cannot be erased."[1] What this text refers to are the inscriptions and representations in the tomb for which a new technique had indeed been invented. But, one may ask, what is so divine about hieroglyphs that they can be referred to as "gods?" To my way of thinking, it can only be their symbolic character. For hieroglyphs are symbols which represent meaning; in other words, they are visible signs that stand for something invisible, in the same way that sacred symbols stand for the divine — which belongs to another invisible, remote and otherwise unap-

proachable dimension. Although this definition overestimates the power of symbols and may also underestimate the power of the divine, it corresponds very closely to the Egyptian approach to reality, which is marked by a strong belief in the power of symbols. And the power of a symbol resides precisely in the fact that it is *not* what it represents. This is what imbues symbols with meaning. For, in itself, as a "fetish," a symbol is nothing — a piece of stone, or wood, or gold. It is as an element in a bipolar relationship linking it to an entity in the other dimension that it becomes powerful. Its power is, therefore, relational, contextual and conditional. And to receive and exert this power, it must be different.

To illustrate the above point, I shall refer to a development that took place in the same period to which the tomb inscription belongs. Parallel to the invention and elaboration of writing, the items with which tombs were equipped underwent a fundamental three-stage transformation:[2] (1) the burial chamber storerooms are filled with provisions of *real* food and commodities; (2) the real commodities are replaced by *models* made of imperishable material (stone); (3) the provisions are just *listed* in a stone inscription, and the mortuary cult consists primarily of the recitation of a menu comprising some 80 to 120 different dishes.[3] In other words, in the third stage, the real provisions and food offerings of the first stage are turned into a sacred text, the recitation of which is deemed far more efficient than the real thing: it has more representational power because it is more different, more symbolical, more divine.

We may assume that the cult underwent similar transformative stages during the same centuries. In a first stage (which, of course, is rather conjectural) the gods are embodied in those objects which later come to be regarded as their symbols, and the rites signify what is really being enacted. Thus, pulling a rope means pulling a rope, slaughtering an ox means slaughtering an ox, etc. Therefore, if one wants to offer water to the dead or to a deity, one just pours water on an offering plate. But in the ensuing process of transformation this primordial unity is split into two different dimensions, which are as carefully distinguished from one another as they are correlated by means of a very elaborate system of sacred symbolism: (1) the dimension of the here-and-now of the cultic action, and (2) the dimension of

the not-here and not-now of sacred meanings. The here-and-now of cultic enactment is viewed as a hieroglyph representing a meaning belonging to another dimension. The early sacred texts recorded in the pyramids — the oldest extant body of sacred texts in the history of mankind[4] — still show traces of this process, especially in the use of deictic pronomina.[5] The earlier texts use "this" and "here" to point to the actual cultic situation; the later texts use "that" and "there," "yon" and "yonder" to point to the remote sphere of sacred meaning. The establishment of this semiotic difference, the creation of this other dimension of sacred signification, is perhaps among the most typical and important features of Egyptian religion.[6]

## 2. *What is a Sign?*

Though I deal almost entirely with cultic symbolism in this paper, in Egypt, sacred semiosis — or the process through which something comes to acquire a specific meaning in a specific cultural context and comes to function as a "signifier" in relation to something "signified" — is by no means restricted to this area. Other spheres of signification include the cosmic sphere,[7] where the gods manifest themselves in form of what, in Egyptian, is called *hprw* or "transformations," "emanations," as well as the political sphere, where sacred meaning is acted out by the king through his official actions. In the latter, the king has a status similar to that of the cult image: he serves as a "living image" of the highest or "state-god."[8] Common to all kinds of sacred symbols — cult images, cosmic phenomena, royal appearances — is that they have a distinctive visible form. They are not the gods themselves, but "stand for" and "point to" the divine, serving as vessels for a divine presence which is never substantial but always relational and contextual. But they are not mere images of the bodies of the gods, with the same outward appearance; they are in fact *the* bodies of the gods. The gods are conceived as powers that are free to assume or inhabit a body of their choice, and the cult images may serve — for the time of sacred communication — as their body, as might also, e.g., a cosmic phenomenon such as the sun-disk, the inundation of the Nile, a tree, an animal or the king.

This function and understanding of the statue as a sacred symbol manifests itself most clearly in the funerary cult. Thus, while we take the thousands of these statues that fill our museums to be portraits or "likenesses" of the bodily appearance of their owners, they are in fact the bodies themselves — substitute bodies to be inhabited, in the context of cultic communication, by what the Egyptians called the *Ka* of the person. They are bodies for the *Ka*.[9]

But statues and symbols are not in themselves potential bodies of the divine; they have to be turned into bodies and made suitable for divine indwelling by being submitted to a ritual of purification, consecration and vivification called "the Opening of the Mouth,"[10] a very similar ritual practice that also existed in Mesopotamia.[11]   In Egypt, this vivification ritual is administered not only to statues but also to all kinds of sacred objects, including whole temples.[12]   This ritual is an actual *rite de passage* marking — and bridging — the decisive ontological distance between a material object, produced by craftsmen, and a sacred body, inhabited by the divine.   In a text called "The Teaching for Merikare" there is a passage which makes this distance and difference perfectly clear:

> While generation succeeds generation
> God who knows characters is hidden;
> One cannot oppose the lord of the hand,
> He reaches all that the eyes can see.[13]
> One should revere the god on his path,
> Made of costly stone, fashioned of bronze.
> A flood may be replaced by another flood,
> But no river allows itself to be concealed,
> It breaks the channel in which it was hidden.[14]

The distinction drawn in this text opposes god as a hidden power — invisible and irresistible — to a god made of precious stone or bronze, and compares the difference to that between an artificial watercourse and a living river.  A cult image, then, is like a channel in its function as a vessel of divine presence; and it can be replaced by another image, as one filling of an artificial

basin can be replaced by another one. But the hidden god is like a river, which may disappear for a while but then reappears to break all dams and channels. (Note that, for the Egyptians, the idea of "river" implies the notion of inundation; one should perhaps even translate "*the* river," because, for the Egyptians — at least until the New Kingdom — there was only one river in the world.) The difference between god and image is so carefully respected that there is no room for any "fetishistic confusion," in which the image might be taken for the god itself; but, even so, man is explicitly summoned to revere the image — not, to be sure, the image as such, but the god in the image, "the god on his path." This text refers to a processional image.

If man did not make vessels for the indwelling divine presence, and did not revere them, then the divine would withdraw from the sphere of human interaction and become unapproachable and indifferent to human concerns. The Egyptians experienced the Amarna period as such a case of divine absence, caused by irreverence for and even persecution of divine images. "If one cried to a god or a goddess, they would not listen; if an army was sent to Syria, it had no success," we read in the restoration stela of Tutankhamun.[15] The Egyptian, therefore, was convinced that the incessant service, feeding, dressing and adoring of divine images is of utmost importance. But, at the same time, he was perfectly aware of the fact that he was dealing with symbols, not with "real" gods or with gods in their "true" appearance.[16]

The status of the gods as hidden and remote powers, only to be made present on earth by means of symbolization, is explained by a myth which narrates how once the gods lived on earth among men and were ruled, together with them, by the sun god, Re. But, then, man planned a revolt, in consequence of which the sun god (after a series of events which are not important here) finally separated himself and other gods from man by raising the sky high above the earth and withdrawing to this new celestial abode. Re gave the government over to his son, Shu, god of the air between heaven and earth, and as such the ideal mediator between what now became divided into the divine and the human — the celestial and the terrestrial — spheres.[17] The withdrawal of the gods from earth to the heaven

meant, or was compensated by, the installation of the state. Thus, in a way, this withdrawal of the gods to heaven, and their separation from men, is a reassuring concept. For — in contradistinction to the Greek experience — the Egyptian gods are not to be encountered and experienced in everyday life. And it is this absence of the gods that makes room for a specifically human sphere of activity and responsibility — the state — which, despite or because of its being a divine institution, keeps the divine at a distance that must be bridged by "sacred signification." The installation of the state amounts to the same thing as the installation of the cult. For the cult has become necessary by the separation of gods and men, and the state is in charge of the cult. This is its main function, besides the installation of justice in the human sphere:

Re has placed the king
On the earth of the living
For all eternity,
Judging men, satisfying gods,
Bringing Ma'at into being, annihilating Isfet.
He gives divine offerings to the gods
And mortuary offerings to the dead.[18]

## 3. *The Cultic Scene*

Cultic communication is based on the principle that there is no direct confrontation between god and man. Everything in such communication must be symbolic. On the side of the divine, we have the image representing the god. The human — but not merely human — partner in what might be called "sacred communication" does not approach the godhead in his own behalf, i.e., in behalf of his own person or concern. This more human partner, who is the king, symbolizes or represents something beyond himself, which is humanity as a whole. The king is the sole terrestrial being qualified to communicate with the gods because, according to Egyptian belief, sacred communication cannot take place between a god and a merely human being, but only between god and god. By virtue of his divine nature, the king is the one person able to communicate with the

gods, and able, as well, to delegate his power of communication to the priesthood. Therefore, the priest entering into the divine presence affirms:

> I am a priest, son of a priest.
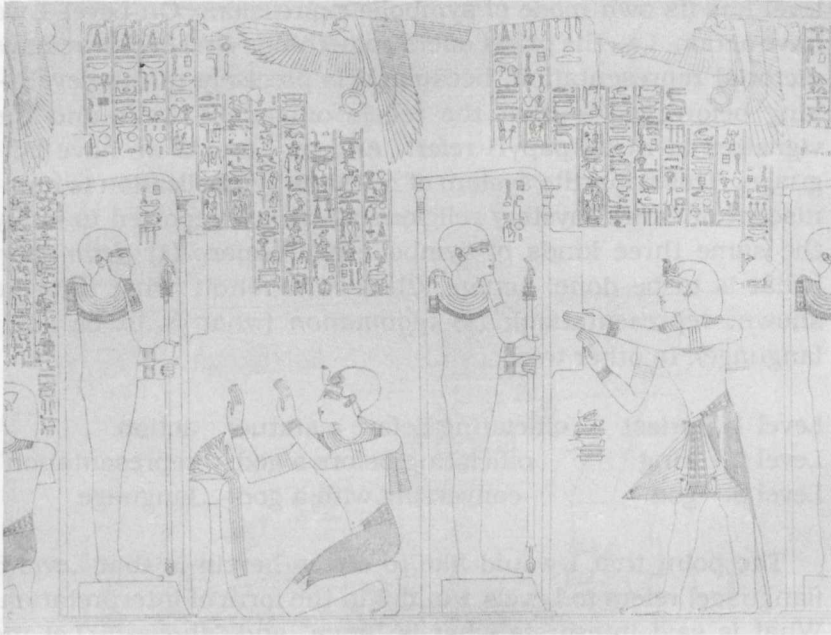> It is the king who sent me to see the god.[19]



Figure 1

But as soon as the priest begins to perform the fifty or more episodes of the daily ritual — offering oil, perfume, incense, libation, wine, milk, tissue, etc., to the cult image — and to accompany his actions with a spell, he introduces yet another level of symbolization and semiosis. And it is here that interpretation comes into play. For, here, the priest speaks not in the role of the king but in that of a particular god, whether Horus, Thoth, Anubis or any other.

> I remove the seal, I loose the lock,
> In order to offer the eye to its lord.
> I am Thoth, who brings the holy eye to its lord,
> Who satisfies Horus with his eye.[20]

It is in the role of the king that the priest is able to assume the role of a god. He plays the god because a cultic spell is divine utterance. The cultic scene, therefore, implies three levels of symbolization: (1) a priest confronting a statue; (2) the king confronting a god; (3) a god (whose role is played by the king represented by the priest) conversing with another god. Each level has its own mode of symbolic expression. On Level 1 we have action, i.e., the priest offers something. On Level 2 we have pictorial representation, because it is precisely to this level — king before god — that the reliefs on temple walls and the vignettes in ritual papyri refer. And on Level 3 we have language. This tripartite system of religious symbolization is reminiscent of Greek mystery religions which are reported to imply the same three kinds of symbolic expression: (1) *dromenon* (what is to be done: action; (2) *deiknumenon* (what is to be shown: representation); (3) *legomenon* (what is to be said: language). In other words:

Level 1.  priest      officiating before a statue:  action
Level 2.  king        officiating before a god:    representation
Level 3.  god         conversing with a god:       language

The point that I would like to stress herein is that Level 3 (language) refers to Levels 1 and 2 in the form of interpretation. What is said interprets what is "done" and "shown." Let me illustrate this through three examples:

### 3.1  *Example 1: Offering meat*

The breast is the eye of Horus,
The thigh is the testicles of Seth.
As Horus is content with his eyes,
Seth is content with his testicles,
So (the god) is content with these choice meats.[21]

On Level 1 a priest places slices of meat on a fire before the cult image, i.e., the action that actually takes place in the temple. On Level 2 the king is doing the same before the god, but in a scene represented in relief on the temple wall.[22] On Level 3 the priest recites the spell quoted above. The meat — pieces of

breast and thigh — is interpreted as the "eye of Horus" and the "testicles of Seth," in reference to the mythical combat between Horus and Seth in which Horus lost his eye and Seth his testicles.[23] The offering is interpreted as, and turned into, a reenactment of the mythical episode, in which both of the injured parts are restored.
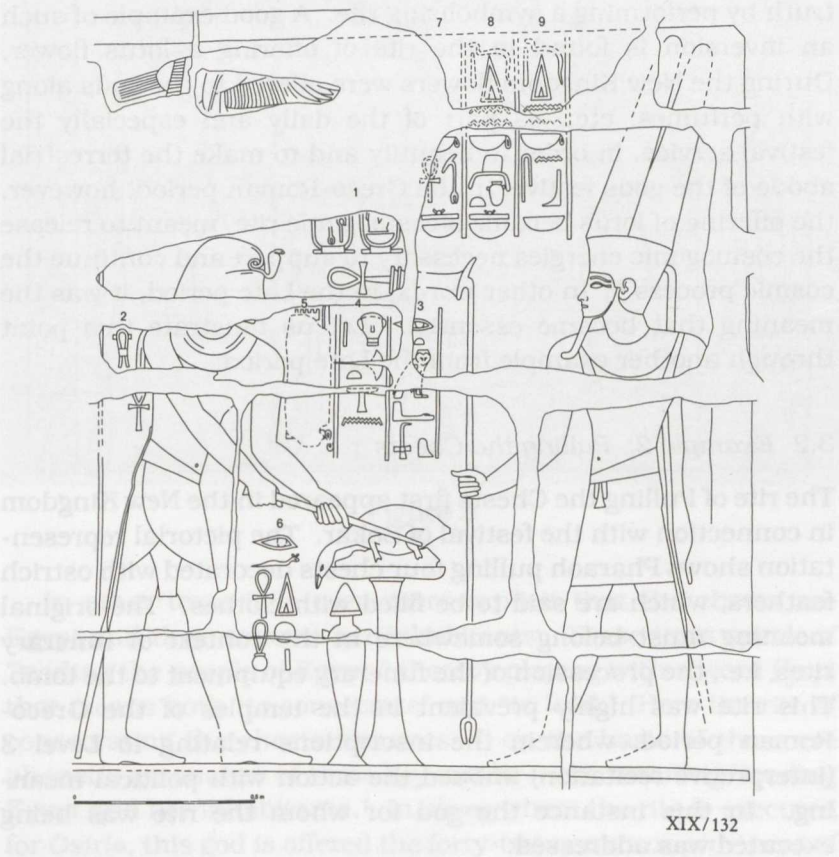


XIX/132

Figure 2

In this example, the original meaning of the action — feeding the god with roasted meat — is quite obvious, and the interpretation seems rather artificial. But there are other cases where the origin of the action is obscure, not only to us but already to the ancient Egyptians. This is particularly true for the cult of the Greco-Roman period, when both the repertoire of ritual actions and the methods of interpretive recitation became extremely enriched and elaborated,[24] and a kind of semiotic inversion seems to have taken place during the process. Thus, whereas in earlier periods the principle meaning of a rite seems to have resided in the action — serving the god with food and drink, incense, libation, clothes and perfumes, flowers, etc. — later on the principle meaning seems to have resided in the interpretation — enacting a certain mythological or theological truth by performing a symbolizing rite. A good example of such an inversion is found in the rite of offering a lotus flower. During the New Kingdom flowers were offered to the gods along with perfumes, etc., as part of the daily and especially the festival service, in order to beautify and to make the terrestrial abode of the gods festive. In the Greco-Roman period, however, the offering of lotus became a cosmogonic rite, meant to release the cosmogonic energies necessary to support and continue the cosmic process.[25] In other words, in the Late period, it was the meaning that became essential. Let us illustrate this point through another example from the Late period:

## 3.2  *Example 2: Pulling the Chests*

The rite of Pulling the Chests first appeared in the New Kingdom in connection with the festival of Sokar. The pictorial representation shows Pharaoh pulling four chests decorated with ostrich feathers, which are said to be filled with clothes. The original meaning must belong somewhere in the context of funerary rites, i.e., the procession of the funerary equipment to the tomb. This rite was highly prevalent in the temples of the Greco-Roman period, wherein the inscriptions relating to Level 3 (interpretive recitation) imbued the action with political meaning. In this instance the god for whom the rite was being executed was addressed:

Take Egypt united together.
You have conjoined the two lands as a whole.[26]

In this text, the word "Egypt" (*t3-mrj*) is a pun on "chest" (*mrt*). The idea of "uniting" and "conjoining" is taken from the bindings with which the chests are wrapped ("conjoined"). The notion of wholeness is derived from the function of the chests as containers filled with clothes.
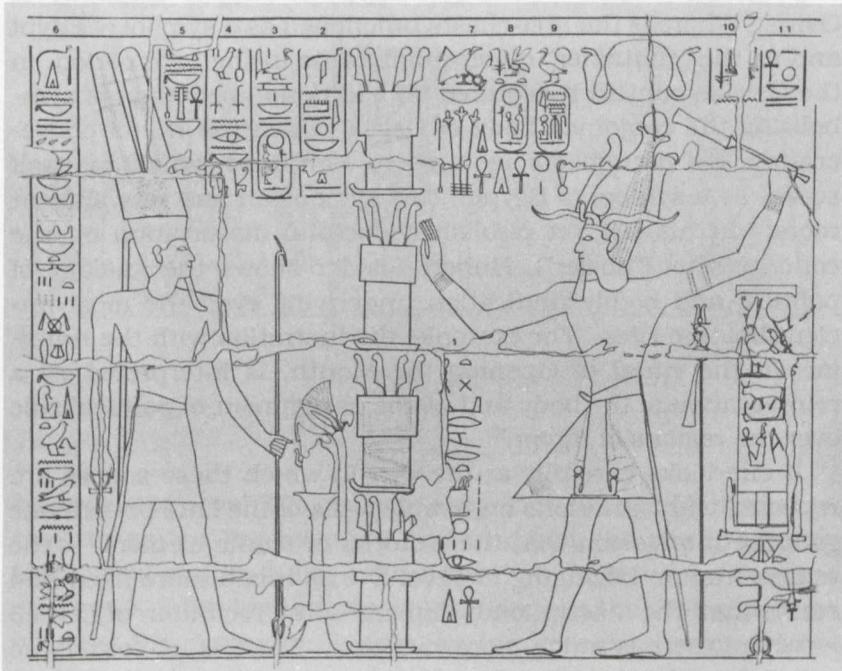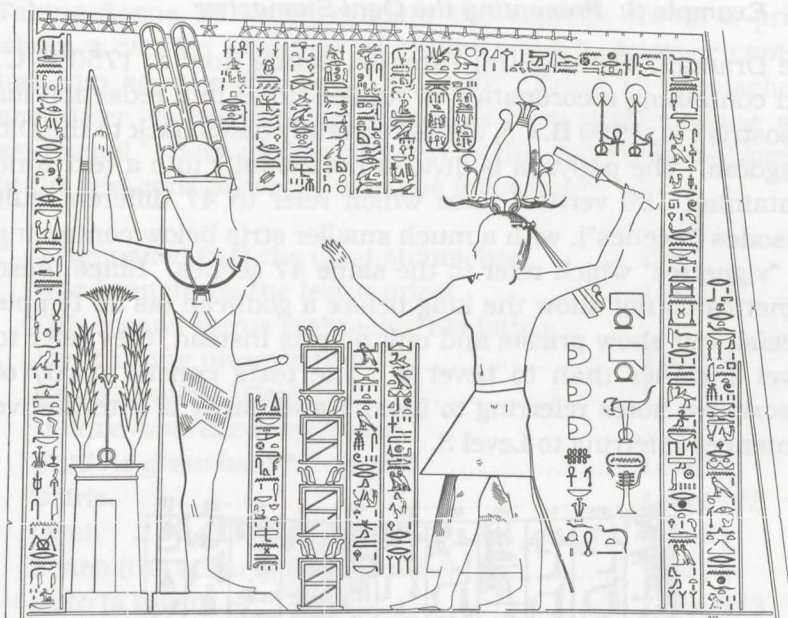


Figure 3

In other texts it is even more explicit that the chests are Egypt and their content her inhabitants. These texts speak of "leading the people of Egypt," thereby playing with a word (*ḥrp*) that means both "to consecrate" and "to lead." Here the rite of consecrating the chests assumes — on the basis of the mere phonetic assonance of some key words — the meaning "leading Egypt and her inhabitants." In cases where the rite is executed for Osiris, this god is offered the forty-two nomes or provinces of

Egypt, which are said to make up his body. This interpretation
refers to the myth of the dismemberment of Osiris, whose body
is said to have been torn apart after his death and his limbs
dispersed throughout Egypt, each nome receiving one of them.[27]
The myth seems to anticipate not only the cult of relics so
widespread in Early Christianity,[28] but also the Christian idea
of "ecclesia" — a new form of association and collective identity
that constitutes the spiritual body of Christ in much the same
way as the forty-two nomes of Egypt constitute the body of
Osiris. Whereas the *mrt*-chests functioned as a symbol of Egypt
and as the "container" of her inhabitants in the Late period, in
the Osirian context it acquired an additional meaning: of sym-
bolizing the conjoined body of Osiris, which the rite of conse-
crating the *mrt*-chests restores to him, and which in itself
serves as a symbol of Egypt. This symbolism has very ancient
roots. In his not yet published doctoral dissertation on the
concept *shm* ("power"), Hubert Roeder shows the analogy of
political and bodily unification underlying even the most an-
cient libation rites. For example, the lustration with the *nmst*-
jar, in the ritual of Opening the Mouth, is interpreted as a
reintegration of the body and as the assignment of political rule
over the regions of Egypt.[29]

If one looks carefully at the way in which these scenes are
repeated with variations on temple walls of the Late period, one
gets the impression that the pictorial or iconic element — the
representation belonging to Level 2 — is much more fixed and
stable than the inscriptional element — the recitation of Level 3
— where there is much more variation. There is, of course, no
possibility of comparing these with what went on in Level 1 —
the cultic performance itself.

Still, one gets the impression that it is the iconic element that
underwent a kind of canonization in the process of being trans-
mitted.[30] In the ritual scroll of the Egyptians the iconic element
of the cultic scene appears in the form of what is usually called
a "vignette," or an abbreviated form of what appears on the
temple walls — which we have identified as Level 2. If we take
these vignettes to constitute the constant and canonized ele-
ment, we realize that the actions of Level 1 are *enactments* of
the vignette, and that the recitations of Level 3 are its *interpre-
tations*. The priests obviously felt free to change the texts

INTÉRIEUR EST — MONTANT SUD — 3ᵉ REGISTRE

Figure 4

belonging to Level 3 in order to expand the range of interpretation, to enrich the meaning and to adapt the rite to specific theological and mythological contexts. In other words, the fixed element — following this reconstruction — is the *deiknumenon*, whereas the *dromenon* is only the concrete enactment of what is shown in the picture, and the *legomenon* is an interpretation which may vary from temple to temple, from god to god, and from feast to feast. The temple reliefs of the Late period reflect a full-fledged tradition of ritual exegesis, a culture of interpretation ("Auslegungskultur") applied not to texts — as in the more-or-less contemporaneous Alexandrian and Jewish institutions of interpretation — but to pictures. However, this culture of interpretation is anything but a symptom of Hellenistic influence; on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in the Egyptian cult. This point may be illustrated by our third example, from a very early Egyptian ritual.

### 3.3 *Example 3: Presenting the Qeni-Stomacher*

The Dramatic Ramesseum Papyrus, dating from c. 1750 B.C. and containing a coronation or jubilee ritual in a redaction for Sesostris I (c. 1950 B.C.), almost certainly dates back to the Old Kingdom. The papyrus is divided horizontally into a text zone containing 139 vertical lines which refer to 47 different cult episodes ("scenes"), with a much smaller strip below containing 31 "vignettes" which refer to the same 47 scenes. Since these vignettes do not show the king before a godhead (as do temple reliefs), but show priests and cult objects instead, they refer to Level 1 rather than to Level 2. The texts consist partly of descriptive notes referring to Level 1 and partly of interpretive sentences referring to Level 3.
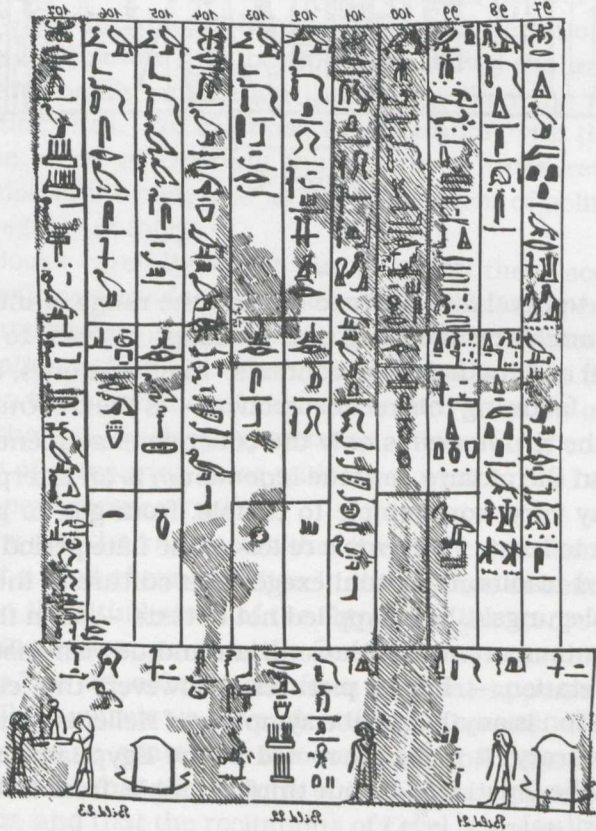


Figure 5

Taking Scene 33 in illustration, the vignette shows a priest whom a caption identifies as "lector-priest." Another caption has him say the following: "to recite: bring 12 stomachers, *srmt*-beer, 6-thread-tissue garments from purple tissue and *ssf*-tissue!." Both picture and text in this zone refer to Level 1. In the text zone above we read the following:[31]

It happened that the Qeni-stomacher
Was brought by the lector priest.    .................Level 1
This means Horus embracing his father
And turning towards Geb.    .............................Level 3
*Horus speaks to Geb:*    .....................................Level 3
*"I have embraced my father*
*Until he grew healthy again."*    .....................Level 3
Osiris.    .................................................................Level 2/3
Qeni.    ..................................................................Level 1
Seneb (the seam of the garment).    .................Level 1
Buto (a town).    ..............................................Level 2/3

The ritual spell proper (printed in italics) must always be recited as a divine utterance in order to be effective. It relates to Level 1 by means of puns: the verb *qnj* ("to embrace") is homophonous with the name of the *qnj*-stomacher, and the verb *snb* ("to grow healthy") is homophonous with the word for "seam." These key words are repeated in a series of concluding notes: Osiris, Qeni, Seneb, Buto (the town where the mythical embrace between Osiris and Horus is believed to have taken place).

Each of the forty-seven scenes on the papyrus is structured the same way, i.e., each contains the decisive interpretive statement "it means" to bridge the distance between the world of gods and mythical events and the world of priests and ritual actions. The event in the divine world is presented as the "meaning" ("it means") of the cultic scene. Thus, the Presentation of the Qeni-Stomacher is interpreted as the embrace (qeni) between Osiris and Horus. This interpretive link between myth and ritual — between divine event and human actions — is obviously not a secondary development, but constitutes a basic principle of the Egyptian cult.

To return to our original premise, this principle is rooted in the completely symbolic character of the Egyptian cult, i.e., in

the connection between semiosis and interpretation. For nothing in the Egyptian cult is just what it appears to be. The priest is not a priest; the statue is not a statue; the sacrificial substances and requisites are not what they are usually. In the context of the ritual performance all acquire a special "mythical" meaning that points to something else in "yonder world." Thus, the priest assumes the role of a god and the statue the role of something other than its literal self. Everything in this sacred game becomes a kind of hieroglyph. The function of reading and constructing the meaning of these cultic hieroglyphs is conferred upon language, to the words spoken during the sacred action that constitutes Level 3. The worship of images — "idolatry" in the terminology of its adversaries — and the interpretive character of the Egyptian cult in general as well as of the role of language within the cult in particular, seem closely linked and interdependent. Idols function within a system of semiosis and interpretation; they are not holy in themselves, any more than words have meaning outside the language to which they belong or letters outside their own script.

## 4. *Iconoclasm*

The critique with which the Israelites confronted the system of ritual semiosis and interpretation is well known.[32] If the whole system of symbolization is discarded, the statues lose their power of reference and turn into mere "matter." They are blind and deaf, completely dead, even when compared to the "living God," who is not to be represented by statues and not to be approached by means of sacramental magic or mythological impersonation. The ideas of a living God and of unmediated communication bridge the semiotic distance between the signifier and the signified. But Egyptian religion was confronted with the same kind of radical criticism from both without and within. I am referring here to the Amarna revolution of the fourteenth century B. C.,[33] when King Akhenaten founded the first new religion in the history of mankind. This religion was not, however, the invention or revelation of something completely unrelated to traditional Egyptian ways; it was primarily the transformation or even inversion of traditional religion, its negation in the form

of an affirmation of its opposite. Thus we again find, at the core of the new religion, the typical cultic scene — king officiating before god — with which we are already familiar. There we see the king, usually accompanied by his wife and daughters, his hands raised in adoration, before an altar heaped with offerings. From above, the solar disk dispenses sunlight, its downward-extended rays ending in hands which touch the offerings and give in exchange the signs of "life" and "dominion" to the noses of Pharaoh and the queen.

EL AMARNA IV.   MAHU—NORTH THICKNESS.   PLATE XV.



THE ROYAL FAMILY WORSHIPPING ATEN.

Scale ⅙

Figure 6

The difference between this and the traditional scheme does not seem very obvious. Also, in traditional religion the cultic scene is basically an exchange of some sacramental gift for some form of divine energy or blessing, such as life, health, stability, power, dominion or prosperity.[34] The difference lies in the complete abolition of the three-level-structure of symbolization. What is shown on the representational level (2) in the wall reliefs of tombs and temples seems a very faithful rendering of what happened on Level 1, ritual action. There is no delegation or substitution, neither of the king by the priests, nor — what is more important here — of the god by a statue. Level 3 seems altogether absent. There are no speeches or spells which transpose the cultic action into the realm of mythical events and signification by sacramental interpretation. We are left with one exclusive level of meaning, where the king officiates in person, and where the god is likewise present in real and non-symbolic form, viz., in the form of light.

This is because the god of the Amarna religion is not just the sun but the "living sun." The texts are precise in this respect. The word "Aten," in the Amarna texts, is not the name of the god but merely denotes the sun as a celestial body, here as every-where else in Egyptian texts. Where the god is meant, the texts add *cnḫ* "living." This addition might well have a similar polemical, anti-idolatric meaning as the divine epithet *ḥayyim* in Biblical texts. Compared to the "living sun," the statues and objects of the traditional cult appear dead, as inert matter: "They have ceased, one after the other, whether of precious stones, [gold], [...]." Thus reads a tantalizingly fragmentary text about the traditional gods, represented by statues and turned into dead matter,[35] whereas the "Aten," "[who himself gave birth] to himself, and no one knows the mystery of [his origin]" cannot be captured by means of iconic representation. The traditional gods were made of precious stones, and the craftsmen knew how to make them. The god of Akhenaten is his own maker and therefore unknown to human iconography:

> The One who built himself by himself,
> No craftsman knows him.[36]

In both Amarna and in Israel, the idea of "life" seems to exclude the use of intermediary symbolisms, which it reduces to

"dead" idols. However, the use of symbols seems to exclude the idea of a real or living presence of the symbolized. Symbolic presence presupposes real absence, and vice versa. The epithet "living" therefore points to a kind of presence which excludes and discards symbols: it has an unmistakably iconoclastic connotation. The living sun, as well as the living god, negates the indirect life of statues, of cult images and destroys the intermediary realm of symbolic action mediating between the here and the not-here, the now and the not-now, on which the traditional cult is based.

But what is perhaps more important in the context of "religion and interpretation" is the way in which this iconoclastic shift affects the third level of cultic symbolization, that of language. The change seems as fundamental here as on the level of iconic representation. For here the negation or rejection is directed against the magical power of language. Idolatry and magic seem to be closely interrelated.[37] The connection between magic and interpretation may not, however, be immediately self-evident. It has to be seen in the transformative power of interpretation. This power, for which the Egyptian language has a special word, *3ḥw*,[38] turns a piece of meat into the eye of Horus, the offering of a stomacher into the performance of a life-restoring embrace and the consecration of four chests into a confirmation of political rule. The object or the action becomes what it means. It is precisely this transformative power which requires that the words be spoken as divine utterance, in the role of a god. Interpretation means transformation.

Now we can understand that the specific negativity of symbols, which makes them seem "dead" to the iconoclast and which lies in the fact that they presuppose the absence of what they stand for and re-present, necessarily implies a strong belief in a particular representational and transformative power of language. In Egypt ritual interpretation is transformative interpretation. It is part of the ritual itself. Transformation, as well as interpretation, are based on analogy. If *A* is to be transformed into/interpreted as *B*, an analogy between *A* and *B* has to be established. Most frequently and typically (but by no means exclusively), this analogy is found on the level of language and in the form of assonance: between *mrt* "chest" and *t3-mrj* "Egypt," between *qnj* "stomacher" and *qnj* "to embrace," etc.

Language provides a network of connections and correspondences where everything coheres and which the priest and the magician use for the purposes of sacramental interpretation.

Over the course of time, sacramental interpretation developed into an art of considerable complexity. Above and beyond the surface structure of religion, actions and representations developed an immense universe of significations. At the end of this process, which was reached in the Greco-Roman period, cultic life turned into a mysteriously enigmatic game and the Sphinx became, very justly, the symbol of ancient Egyptian religion. The more there was to interpret, the more mysterious the rites became. The dialectics of interpretation and arcanization[39] led to a cultural split between a surface structure of religious practices of sometimes appalling absurdity (e.g., the burial cult of sacred animals) and a deep structure of religious philosophy, which finally developed into hermetism,[40] where the sacerdotal science of Egyptian paganism and the philosophical religion of neo-Platonism met to form the last stage of Egyptian religion.

## Notes

1.  Kurt Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reichs* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1932), p. 7.
2.  See W. B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).
3.  W. Barta, D*ie altägyptische Opferliste von der Frühzeit bis zur griechisch-römischen Epoche, Münchner Ägyptologische Studien* 3 (Berlin: Hessling, 1963).
4.  The earliest corpus of pyramid texts appears in the pyramid of Unas (c. 2400 C. E.). The authoritative edition of this text is found in Kurt Sethe, *Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908–1922).
5.  See S. Schott, *Mythe und Mythenbildung im alten Ägypten, Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ägyptens* 15 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1945), pp. 33 f.
6.  I have dealt at greater length with this dimension in my book, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1984), Chap. 4.
7.  Ibid., Chap. 3.
8.  See B. Ockinga, Di*e Gottebenbildlichkeit im alten Ägypten und im Alten Testament, Ägypten und Altes Testament* 7 (Wiesbaden:

Harrassowitz, 1984); E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt. The One and the Many* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 137 ff.

9. A. Shoukry, *Die Privatgrabstatue im Alten Reich*, *Annales du Service des Antiquités*, Suppl. XV (Cairo, 1951); E. Panofski, *Grabplastik* (Cologne: Dumont, 1964); idem, "The History of the Theory of Human Proportion as a Reflection of the History of Styles," in E. Panofski, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), pp. 55–107.

10. E. Otto, *Das Ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual*, 2 vols., *Ägyptologische Abhandlungen* 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960).

11. A. M. Blackman, "The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 10 (1924), pp. 47–59; S. Smith, "The Babylonian Ritual for the Consecration and Induction of a Divine Statue," *JRAS* (1925), pp. 37–60; A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 185 f.

12. S. Abd el-Azim el-Adly, "Das Gründungs – und Weihritual des ägyptischen Tempels von der frühgeschichtlichen Zeit bis zum Ende des Neuen Reichs," Ph.D. Thesis, Tübingen, 1981.

13. Or: "he strikes in the sight of the eyes." The god himself is hidden, only his blows are visible. The opposition between *jmn* "being hidden" and *m m3ᶜt jrtj* "in the sight of the eyes" is evident.

14. Transl. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* I (Berkeley: University of California Press , 1973), pp. 105 f., slightly modified.

15. W. Helck, *Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums IV: Urkunden des Neuen Reichs*, Vol. 22 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), p. 2027.

16. Cf. Hornung, op. cit. (n. 8), pp. 128 ff.

17. See idem, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen*, *Oriens Biblicus et Orietalis* 46, (Fribourg: Freiburger Universitätsverlag, 1982).

18. See J. Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester*, *Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abt. Kairo*, (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1970); idem, "State and Religion in the New Kingdom," in W. K. Simpson, ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, *Yale Egyptological Studies* 3 (1989), pp. 55–88.

19. A. Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin en Égypte*, *Annales du Musée Guimet* 14 (Paris: Leroux, 1902), §11, pp. 55 ff.; Papyrus Berlin 3055, IV, 6; Papyrus Berlin 3014+53, III, 10 – IV, 1; Abydos: A. Rosalie David, *Religious Ritual at Abydos* (Warminister: Aris and Philips, 1973), p. 98, episode 8.

20. M. Alliot, *Le culte d'Horus à Edfou au temps des ptolémées*, Vol. I (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1949), pp. 77 f.

21. Ritual for Amenophis I, Papyrus Turin xii, 7; see H. H. Nelson, "Certain Reliefs at Karnak and Medinet Habu and the Ritual for

Amenophis I," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (1949), p. 209, episode 5.

22. See Fig. 7 from the temple at Luxor, loc. cit.

23. See J. G. Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1960), pp. 2 f., 28 ff.

24. Cf. E. Otto, *Gott und Mensch nach den Tempelinschriften der griechisch-römischen Zeit, Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Heidelberg, 1964).

25. See M.-L. Ryhiner, *L'offrande du Lotus dans les temples égyptiens de l'époque tardive, Rites Égyptiens* VI (Brussels: Fondation Reine Élisabeth, 1986).

26. É. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou* V (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1930), pp. 183, 2–3. I owe this and the following references concerning the rite of pulling the chests to Arno Egberts (Leiden), who is writing his doctoral dissertation on "The Rites of Consecrating the Meret-Chests and Driving the Calves."

27. H. Beinlich, *Die Osirisreliquien. Zum Motiv der Korperzergliederung in der altägyptischen Religion, Ägyptolische Abhandlungen* 42 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984).

28. P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

29. H. Roeder, *"Mit dem Auge sehen. Studien zum Horusauge und den Begriffen shm und b3w*, Vol. I, *Das Horusauge und shm,"* Part I, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Heidelberg, 1990, § 1.2.3.

30. Erich Winter has been able to show that the theological work of the temple decorators resides in the inscriptions as the variable element, rather than in the representations; see his important study: E. Winter, *Untersuchungen zu den Ägyptischen Tempelreliefs der griechisch-römischen Zeit* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1968).

31. K. Sethe, *Dramatische Texte zu altägyptischen Mysterienspielen, Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ägyptens* 10 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1928), pp. 81 ff.

32. For a recent discussion of Biblical aniconism, see C. Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot. Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament*, 2nd. ed. (Frankfurt: Hain, 1987); idem and T. Sternberg, *... kein Bildnis machen. Kunst und Theologie im Gespräch* (Würzburg: Echter, 1987).

33. For recent treatments of this religious movement, see J. P. Allen "The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten," in W. K. Simpson, ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt, Yale Egyptological Studies* 3 (1989), pp. 89–101; J. Assmann, "State and Religion in the New Kingdom," ibid., pp. 55–88, esp. pp. 66–68; D. B. Redford,

*Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

34. See P. Frandsen, "Trade and Cult," in G. Englund, ed., *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians. Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions, Boreas* 20 (Uppsala, 1989), pp. 95–108.

35. D. B. Redford, "A Royal Speech from the Blocks of the Tenth Pylon," *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar New York* 3 (1981), pp. 87–102; idem, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King,* op. cit. (n. 33), pp. 172 f.

36. W. Helck, *Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums IV: Urkunden des Neuen Reichs,* Vol. 20 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1971), pp. 12–13. On this topic, see J. Assmann, *Sonnenhymnen in Thebanischen Gräbern, Theben* I (Mainz: Zabern, 1983), pp. 155 f.; J. Zandee, *De Hymnen aan Amon van Papyrus Leiden J 350* (Leiden: Brill, 1947), p. 82.

37. Cf. J. Assmann, "Die Macht der Bilder. Rahmenbedingungen ikonischen Handelns im alten Ägypten," in G*enres in Visual Representations = Visible Religion* VII (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 1–20.

38. See idem, *Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1984), pp. 102–177.

39. Cf. the contribution of Gedalyahu G. Stroumsa in this volume.

40. See G. Fowden, *The Hermes of Egypt. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).