

FUNERARY SYMBOLS
AND
RELIGION

Essays

Dedicated to Professor M. S. H. G. Heerma van Voss on the occasion of
his retirement from the Chair of the History of Ancient Religions at the
University of Amsterdam

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Some Remarks on the Mysterious Language of the Baboons.

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One of the pronouncements of a deceased and resurrected human being could be according to the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Chapter 100)¹:

I have sung and praised the Sun-disc

I have joined the baboons

and I am one of them.

This Ancient Egyptian ideal to join - after death - the baboons and to become one of them might strike us as rather strange from a modern western point of view. Western culture has become more and more exclusively humanistic and ideas of ancient cultures, such as that of Ancient Egypt that man and animal are partners and, to some extent, equals as living beings are largely forgotten and neglected².

Not to mention the idea that certain animals, such as baboons, might be superior to man, possess hidden knowledge and even the right words to converse with the Creator, so that men could sincerely hope to become one of them. An Ancient Egyptian could hope to become a baboon int. al. because baboons were considered to be the ideal adorers of the Sun-god.

Herodot's words that the Egyptians were the most pious of all people are well-known and often repeated³. It is less known that the Egyptians themselves considered not human beings, whosoever, but baboons as the ideal and true performers of religion. A human being, even the pharaoh, was at the best only an imitator of baboons in that respect.

In another Chapter of the Book of the Dead⁴ (Ch. 126) one may read the following invocation-prayer of the deceased and resurrected person:

O you four baboons,
who sit in the bow of the bark of the Sun-god,
who raise up truth to the Lord-of-All,
who judge poor and rich
who propitiate the gods with the breath of your mouths
who give god's offerings to the gods
and invocation-offerings to the blessed dead
who live on truth
and feed on truth
whose hearts have no lies
who detest falsehood

A variant of this text, not said of baboons, but of the ideal and righteous king, was discussed in recent years to elucidate what true religion was according to the Egyptians⁵. Religion in a broader sense is morality: Detesting falsehood and creating justice by judging poor and rich alike. Religion in a narrower sense is: Not to neglect, but to maintain the relationship with gods and ancestors. In short: To raise up truth to the Lord-of-All. What we want to stress here is that in the text cited above it is said of baboons, because they are recognized as the true performers of religion. If the same is said of the king in another text, then it means that he can join the baboons, that he is one of them already on earth. A stage that a non-royal Egyptian hopes to reach after death.

Cultic deeds and words in the temple were in essence an earthly imitation and repetition of what the baboons did in honour of the Sun-god in the morning when he arose on the horizon from the mysterious Netherworld where he had spent the night. At sunrise they gesticulated with their paws or "arms"; they adored, they jumped and danced. They shouted, jubilated and sang⁶.

A good example of the Egyptian material in texts and images since the New Kingdom seems to be the following quotation that is known in many variants:

The baboons that announce Re when this great god is to be born again about the sixth hour in the Netherworld.

They appear for him after they have come into existence.

They are at both sides of this god until he rises in the eastern horizon of the sky.

They dance for him, they jump gaily for him, they sing for him, they sing praises for him, they shout out for him.

When this great god appears before the eyes of the rekhyt-people and the henmemet-people then these hear the speech of jubilation (*mdt hnw*) of the Wetenet-country.

They are those who announce Re in heaven and on earth⁷.

Not only the actual description of the singing and dancing of the baboons, and especially the combination of shouting, dancing, singing and giving praises is interesting, but also the fact that it is mentioned that mythical beings called rekhyt and henmemet hear and that means understand, the jubilating speech (*mdt hnw*) of the baboons.

This speech or language⁸ of the baboons is not simply spoken, but is shouted out in combination with singing and dancing. It is not a normal language with which human beings usually communicate with each other and hardly comparable with one of the languages of mankind. It would be

too far-fetched to define this jubilating speech of the baboons as a form of xenoglossy⁹, although the singing, dancing and shouting suggest a behaviour that could be termed extatic. Moreover, the male baboons were often represented as ithyphallic, particularly when they were standing in the adoring attitude, with raised forepaws. This might be an iconographic indication of the excitement or even religious ecstasy with which they sang and danced out their praises¹⁰.

The speech of the baboons was suitable as is written at the end of the text: 'to announce Re in heaven and earth in order that he may give all life, prosperity and health to the king of Upper and Lower Egypt'. The announcing (*sr*) that the baboons do for the Sun-god has the connotation to make known¹¹. The singing, dancing and shouting of the baboons was obviously considered not only as an adequate means to communicate with the Sun-god and to adore him in an ideal way, but also as an adequate means to reveal the Sun-god and his mysteries. Whoever understood the language of the baboons had access to religious knowledge, that was hidden from common beings. Mankind, also in Egypt, had a longing for that sacred knowledge, with which one can get behind the truth and with which one can understand gods, men and the cosmos. It was, of course, not easy for ordinary human beings to understand the language of the baboons that could cope with gods and their mysteries. In the text cited above it is said that the baboons were understood not by ordinary human beings, but by groups of people with a mythical reputation, such as rekhyt and henmemet. During the New Kingdom baboons did not live anymore, if ever, in the wild, in Egypt¹². They had to be imported. Practical knowledge of the exotic baboons must have been rather limited. Nowhere in Egyptian texts do we find doubts expressed about the existence of a language of the baboons. One can expect to find such a critical attitude to myth and nature with the Greeks, but not with the Egyptians. The Egyptians rather mystified the problem. In the Magical Papyrus Harris a baboon is invoked 'whose lips are fire and each of whose words is a glowing flame'¹³.

The Greek author Aelianus, born in Praeneste ca. 170 A.D., still felt compelled to mention - and to criticize - the idea of a meaningful baboon-language:

And in the same part of India as the beetles, the 'Dog-heads' (Cynocephali, baboons) as they are called, are born - a name which they owe to their physical appearance and nature. For the rest they are of human shape and go about clothed in the skins of beasts; and they are upright (*dikaios*) and injure no man; and though they have no speech (*phtheggontai men oude hen*) they howl; yet they

understand the Indian language. Wild animals are their food and they catch them with the utmost ease, for they are exceedingly swift of foot; and when they have caught them they kill and cook them, not over a fire but by exposing them to the sun's heat after they have shredded them into pieces. They also keep goats and sheep, and while their food is the flesh of wild beasts, their drink is the milk of the animals they keep.

I have mentioned them along with brute beasts (tois alogois), as is logical, for their speech is inarticulate, unintelligible, and not that of man (enarthron gar kai eusemon kai anthroopinen phoonen ouk echousin)¹⁴.

A remark by Horapollo (5th century A.D.) is also not without interest. He wrote a book on hieroglyphs. So it is understandable that he does not write of the language that was spoken or sung by the baboons, but limits himself to the written language and baboons:

In Egypt a race of baboons exists who know their (i.e. of the Egyptians) letters in accordance with which, when a baboon was first cared for in a temple, the priest handed him a tablet and pen and ink. This was done in an attempt to find out whether he was of the race which knew its letters and whether he could write. Moreover the animal is sacred to Hermes, the god of letters¹⁵.

Here we find indicated the possible conflict between the Egyptian tradition of the learned baboons or myth and reality. The reality was, of course, that the gestures and noises are incomprehensible to human beings. The mythic idea that baboons knew a sacred language and script was, therefore, given a more differentiated approach. It was maintained that a special kind of baboon knew it. The priests tried to find confirmation of the old myth by trying out experimentally whether a baboon could write hieroglyphs by giving him pen, ink and a writing-tablet. One may assume that they also tried to discover, in an experimental way, the famous capacities of the baboons to sing and dance and, by doing so, attempted to get information on the mysterious language of the baboons.

Aelianus, indeed, tells us:

Under the Ptolemies, the Egyptians taught baboons their letters, how to dance, how to play the flute and the harp¹⁶.

The reason that the Egyptians taught, or at least tried to teach, baboons to read written language, to dance and make music is to be explained by their belief that the baboons had a special capacity for that and that this hidden knowledge simply could be evoked. The Egyptian tradition was that the god Thoth¹⁷, the baboon par excellence had given language and script

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(*mdw drf*). to the Egyptians as e.g. is written in a hymn to Thoth on a statue of Kheruef, time of Amenhotep III:

Hail to you, lord of divine words (language)

Master of the mysteries which are in heaven and earth

Great God of primeval times, the primeval one who has given language and script.

Who hands over houses and establishes temples

who makes known the gods and what is theirs,

every craft and what belongs to it,

the lands and their boundaries and fields likewise¹⁸.

The divine language (*mdw ntr*) is indeed the language of the baboons. It is named divine because it is an adequate means of revealing the mysteries which are in heaven and earth. It is not one of the languages of mankind or even the language in which the Egyptians communicate or talk with each other. It is the original language. To say it in German: Göttersprache ist Ursprache. It is Thoth who has given this language (*mdw*) and this script (*drf*) i.e. the old script and language that was handed down from generation to generation, the classical script and classical middle Egyptian idiom that Egyptians of the New Kingdom had to learn in school. This script and language are the official script and language for juridical transactions, theological treatises etc.

Without going into historical details, it may be well to note that this hymn to the divine baboon, Thoth, the lord of the divine words in which the divine origin of classical language and script is stressed, is found on a statue of Kheruef. Kheruef lived in the time of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten. It is well-known that the classical Middle-Egyptian language was given up in the reign of Akhenaten and that official documents were written in Late-Egyptian. One could read this hymn as a defence of tradition against revolutionary innovations. One can also think of comparable objects in Egyptian art dating from the same time: The small statues of seated scribes under the supervision of a baboon¹⁹.

The connection between Sun and baboon is old in Egyptian mythology. In the Pyramid-texts baboons are called the oldest or beloved son of Re²⁰. The deceased and resurrected king may sit among them and give praises²¹. In the Coffin-texts it is said that the inhabitants of the mythical eastern solar country Kenset, i.e. the baboons, 'roar'²². But it is since the New Kingdom and later, when the Egyptian had to learn the old sacred language for ritual and literary purposes in school, that one finds a specific allusion to the mysterious language of the baboons.

In a temple-text, that is known from several versions, it is said that it is the king who knows the secret language of the baboons. Gestures

and noises of the baboons may seem utterly incomprehensible to ordinary human beings, but the king i.e. the mediator between the divine and the human world knows that secret language. In the following text the baboons are called 'Souls of the East', but the baboon-determinative with which this is written ensures that, indeed, baboons are meant:

The king N. knows

this secret language (*mdw pn št3*) that is spoken (*ldd*) by the Souls of the East,

When they sing praises, shouting out towards Re,

When he rises and appears in the horizon,

When they open for him the leaves of the four doors of the eastern horizon,

When he begins sailing on the ways of heaven ...²³.

It seems that it is meant that the king has not only a passive, but also an active knowledge of the language of the baboons. It is not written, as was said of the rekhyt-people and the henmemet-people, that he hears or understands the jubilating speech or language of the baboons. He knows this secret language. That must mean that he is able to sing the songs of the baboons.

The cited passage is part of a text, at the beginning of which it is said that the king worships the Sun-god. This worship consists int. al. in the recital of Sun-hymns in that secret language of the baboons. As already stated that language of the baboons should not be conceived as a kind of xenoglossy. More acceptable is that the king recites the phrases and formulae in the sacred and classical Middle-Egyptian language. Middle-Egyptian had become a sacred language that was used in the context of temple-cult and funerary cult and was recited or sung by specialists.

This language of the baboons is called secret (*št3*) but this word has also the meaning mysterious and even inexplicable or unintelligible. It may be well to realize that only few Egyptians - a good estimation might be not more than one percent of the population²⁴ - could read and write, and sing traditional Middle-Egyptian texts. Because 99 percent of the Egyptians had not been taught the Middle-Egyptian language in school, the recitation of Middle-Egyptian texts or the language of the baboons was unintelligible to most Egyptians. As we saw, Aelianus also called the noises of the baboons unintelligible.

The language of the baboons was termed secret or mysterious probably not only because of its form, but also because of its content. The mysteries of the Sun-god were revealed in the old or divine language given by Thoth. Because of its nimbus of holiness the old language was

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considered to be effective. The doors of the horizon were opened by singing the divine words. And the king and his priests on earth took part in the mystery play of the sunrise or creation by reciting the traditional Sun-hymns. This mysterious language (*mdw pn št3*) is spoken (*idd*) by the baboons. These wordings bring to mind a well-known formula. Ritual phrases of importance are normally prefaced with the formula 'Speaking of Words' (*dd mdw*)²⁵. It is found in magico-medical papyri at the beginning of rubrics with prescriptive meaning and also at the beginning of all speeches of gods and goddesses on temple and tomb-walls. The formula indicates that a precise recitation of ritual and sacred texts begins. It is not at all a free speaking of words at random. The formula marks a transition from the profane to the sacred world of learning and religion. In the cited text it is said that the king knows that secret language that is spoken by the baboons. He can do it and becomes one of them. How the transition was made, ritually, is not stated.

A scribe, before starting to write, had to make a libation offering to Thoth, consisting of some drops of water from his ink-pot²⁶. So one can expect that the beginning of a recitation, marked by the formula 'Speaking of Words' implicated some ritual action. Scribe and reciter entered both the learned and mythical world of the baboons. A specialist may also boast of his knowledge in this respect:

I know the mysteries of the divine words (*sšt3 n mdw ntr*) and the conducting of ritual²⁷.

The divine words may sometimes mean hieroglyphs, because they are written down in hieroglyphic script. But they were primarily not signs, but words spoken by gods or baboons and especially Thoth, the divine baboon, the lord of the divine words. Then also all such words and formulae that were believed to contain a divine or creative efficiency might be termed divine words. Of such kind were the formulae of sacred ritual²⁸.

According to Diodorus Siculus (1st century B.C.) language, writing and religion were revealed by Thoth:

It was by Hermes, for instance, according to them that the common language of mankind was further articulated and that many objects which were still nameless received an appellation, that the alphabet (grammata-script) was invented and that ordinances regarding the honours of offerings due to the gods were established²⁹.

In Egyptian texts from the New Kingdom and later Thoth is hailed as the one who differentiated the languages³⁰. This baboon-god knew the original, sacred language of gods and men and could even function as

interpreter in the Netherworld. The threefold gift of Thoth consisting of language, writing and religion is confirmed by Egyptian tradition:

I am Thoth and I speak to you the language of Re as a herald. They spoke to you before my words were understood. I am Thoth, the lord of divine speech, who puts things in their right place. I give god's offerings to the gods and invocation-offerings to the blessed dead. I am Thoth who ascribes truth to the Ennead and all that comes from my mouth comes into being like (all that comes from the mouth) of Re...³¹.

notes

- 1 E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead. The Chapters of Coming Forth by Day. The Egyptian Text in Hieroglyphic. Edited from Numerous Papyri*, London 1898, p. 210.12-14.
- 2 H. te Velde, "A few Remarks upon the Religious Significance of Animals in Ancient Egypt", *Numen* 27 (1980), pp. 76-82.
- 3 Herodot, *Histories* II, Ch. 37.
- 4 Budge, *op.cit.*, p. 269.4-12.
- 5 J. Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester*, Glückstadt 1970, p. 22; *idem*, *Sonnenhymnen in thebanischen Gräbern*, Mainz 1983, p. 48f.; *idem*, *Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, Stuttgart 1984, p. 11; J. Baines, *JEA* 73 (1987), p. 80f.
- 6 The best discussion of this topic with reference to older literature, and the textual and iconographic material is in: J. Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott*, Berlin 1969, pp. 208-214.
- 7 R.A. Parker, J. Leclant, J.C. Goyon, *The Edifice of Taharqa by the Sacred Lake of Karnak*, Providence-London 1979, p. 46f. and pl. 21; J. Assmann, *Re und Amun*, Freiburg-Göttingen 1983, p. 30.
- 8 *mdt* - Sprache: *Wb* II p. 181.9. The older form of this word is *mdw*.
- 9 Cf. J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Some Claims of Xenoglossy in the Ancient Languages", *Numen* 33 (1986), pp. 141-169.
- 10 Cf. W.C. McDermott, *The Ape in Antiquity*, Baltimore 1938, p. 82.
- 11 Cf. J. Yoyotte, *RdE* 9 (1952), p. 135.
- 12 L. Stork, "Pavian", in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV, col. 915-920.
- 13 J.F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, Leiden 1978, nr. 132.
- 14 Aelianus, *On Animals*, IV 46 (translation: A.F. Scholfield in The Loeb Classical Library nr. 446, p. 269).
- 15 Horapollon, *On Hieroglyphs*, I 14 (translation: G. Boas, *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollon*, New York 1950, p. 67).
- 16 Aelianus, *op.cit.*, VI 10 (translation Scholfield in The Loeb Classical Library nr. 448, p. 21).
- 17 P. Boylan, *The God Thoth*, London 1922, p. 92ff.
- 18 Berlin 2293 and *Urk* IV, 1875, pp. 6-11; cf. A. Barucq et F. Daumas, *Hymnes et Prières de l'Égypte Ancienne*, Paris 1980, p. 355.

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- 19 G. Bénédite, "Scribe et Babouin", *Monuments et Mémoires de l' Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (= Mon. Piot) 19 (1911), pp. 5-42.
- 20 *Pyr.* 608; 1347.
- 21 *Pyr.* 505.
- 22 *CT* III 53. In *CT* VII 227h 'the inhabitants of Kenset' is written with baboon-determinative. See also B. Altenmüller, *Synkretismus in den Sargtexten*, Wiesbaden 1975, p. 15f.
- 23 J. Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester*, p. 21; Parker, Leclant, Goyon, *The Edifice of Taharqa*, p. 39.
- 24 J. Baines, "Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society", *Man* 18 (1983), pp. 572-599; J. Baines and C.J. Eyre, "Four Notes on Literacy", *GM* 61 (1983), pp. 65-96; H. te Velde, "Scribes and Literacy in Ancient Egypt", in: *Scripta Signa Vocis. Studies presented to J.H. Hospers*, H.L.J. Vanstiphout et.al. ed., Groningen 1986, pp. 253-264.
- 25 A.H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, London 1957³, p. 306.
- 26 J.M.A. Janssen, *Hieroglyphen*, Leiden 1952, p. 7.
- 27 Louvre C 14,6; cf. W. Barta, *Das Selbstzeugnis eines Altägyptischen Künstlers*, Berlin 1970, p. 78ff.
- 28 Boylan, *Thoth*, p. 94.
- 29 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* I, 16 (Translation: C.H. Oldfather in The Loeb Classical Library nr. 279, p. 53).
- 30 J. Černý, "Thoth as Creator of Languages", *JEA* 34 (1948), p. 121f.; S. Sauneron, "La Différenciation des langages d'après la tradition égyptienne", *BIFAO* 60 (1960), pp. 31-41; D. Müller, "Ägypten und die Griechischen Isis-Aretalogien" (*Abh. Sächs Ak. d. W. zu Leipzig*, Philol.-hist. Kl. 53,1), Berlin 1961, pp. 21-25.
- 31 J.C. Goyon, "Textes Mythologiques II, Les Révélation du Mystère des Quatre Boules Pap New York 35.9.21", *BIFAO* 75 (1975), p. 376.