

SURVIVALS OF PHARAONIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY COPTIC CHRISTIANITY

بقاء الممارسات الدينية الفرعونية في الديانة القبطية المعاصرة

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Version 2

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بقاء الممارسات الدينية الفرعونية في الديانة القبطية المعاصرة

Saphinaz-Amal Naguib

Relikte der pharaonischen Religion in der modernen koptischen Kirche
Survivances des pratiques religieuses de l'époque pharaonique dans
la chrétienté copte contemporaine

The concept of "survivals" has provoked heated discussions among scholars of various disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences. In the case of Egypt the polemics have been most vehement between those who trace contemporary popular beliefs and practices back to Pharaonic times and others who reject the idea altogether. The perspectives of "analogy," "continuity and change," and "living traditions" have opened the way to alternative approaches to the subject. Urbanization and globalization have profoundly changed Egyptian culture and prompted the abandonment of most religious practices belonging to the Egyptian lore. However, some aspects of Pharaonic religious practices can still be observed in Coptic Christianity. These practices are tied to the Coptic calendar, funerary rituals, visits to the dead, and mulids.

موضوع الإستمرارية أدى إلى مناقشات حامية بين العلماء من المجالات المختلفة من العلوم الإنسانية و العلوم الإجتماعية. في حالة مصر، أعنف المجادلات آانت بين من حاول تتبع الإعتقادات و العادات الشعبية المعاصرة إلى العصور الفرعونية و بين من رفض هذا المبدأ تماماً. مفاهيم «التناظر»، «الإستمرارية و التغير»، و «التقاليد الحية» فتحت الطريق إلى نظرات بديلة للموضوع. التمدين و العولمة غيرا الثقافة المصرية أثيراً، و دفعا إلى ترك أغلب الممارسات الدينية المرتبطة بالعلم المصري. و لكن يمكن ان تلاحظ بعض سمات ممارسة الديانة الفرعونية في الديانة القبطية. هذه الممارسات مرتبطة بالتقويم القبطي، الطقوس الدينية، زيارة المتوفيين، و الموالد.

The concept of survivals was first introduced by evolutionists in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was then used to designate elements of an older civilization that were considered to have persisted unchanged in the popular traditions—religious practices included—of a given society. These elements of culture would manifest themselves either materially through artifacts or spiritually through beliefs and rituals (Lang 1884, 1887;

Tylor 1871). Evolutionistic ideas were later discarded by the functionalists (Malinowski 1944, 1945) and by the structuralists (Lévi-Strauss 1952). According to these two schools, all features of a society and culture should be interpreted in the light of their contemporary function and meaning. Nevertheless, both functionalists and structuralists recognized the existence of what they labeled as "dead weights," "cultural fossils," and "surviving historical residues." From the late 1970s the

concept of survivals gave way to “analogy” and the dichotomy “continuity and change” (Hodder 1982; Hodder and Hutson 2003). The latter approaches open for alternative avenues of investigating and interpreting syncretism and hybridity. They emphasize that traditions do not stand still but are in continuous processes of transformation and adaptation to new ideas and life-styles. The “analogy” and “continuity and change” movements denote that cultural and religious translations and blending involve modes of acculturation, transculturation, and assimilation. They imply re-interpretation, choice, taking and leaving, and putting together in novel ways. Further, they show the interaction between two or more cultures and that these cultures are not stable, fixed entities, but rather systems that are already hybrid (Turgeon 2003). The perspective of these movements entails making room for disruption and providing space for innovation and new meaning. Meaning is always contextual and is never established once and for all. The form may be similar but the contents and connotations are different. When incapable of adaptation and renewal, traditions lose their significance and value and wither away. During the last decade of the twentieth century the concept of “living traditions” has taken over (Layton 1990). As such, so-called survivals pertain to a society’s intangible heritage and depend on local knowledge and collective memory to persist (Naguib 1993, 2002, 2006).

Egypt has been open to a number of foreign influences. One cannot, therefore, assert that customs and rituals derive directly and unaltered from Pharaonic times, and that they are exclusively Egyptian and Coptic. As mentioned earlier, traditions are hybrid and continuously adapted to changing contexts. What is important is not to assess the degree of indebtedness one culture has to another but instead to explore the significance, quality, and results of acculturation processes. Coptic religious iconography offers many examples of themes and motifs that have been perceived as legacies from Pharaonic times. Such examples do not necessarily imply a direct, unbroken cultural lineage to ancient Egypt. Rather, they show cultural resilience and the power to accommodate various cultural influences with-

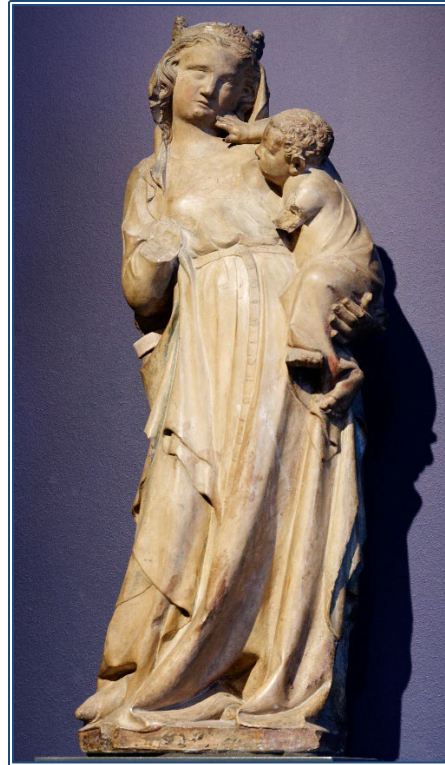


Figure 1. Maria Lactans, ca. 1325 CE, limestone and painted statue of Maria breastfeeding the infant Christ.



Figure 2. Isis Lactans, Roman Period (probably first century CE). Marble statue of Isis breastfeeding Harpocrates.



Figure 3. Isis Lactans, Late Period (ca. 6th c. BCE) bronze statuette of Isis breastfeeding Horus the Child.

in an Egyptian mold (Bull 2021; Frankfurter 1998: 33). Among the most known motifs are the representations of Maria Lactans (Fig. 1), which bring to mind those of Isis with the child Horus (Figs. 2 and 3); similarly, the figure of the holy horseman or warrior-saint slaying a dragon, devil, symbolic human enemy or snake with his spear (Fig. 4, Snyder 2019) echoes that of Horus fighting an enemy in the form of a hippopotamus, snake, or crocodile, battling Seth, or killing Apophis (Fig. 5).

A characteristic of the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first is that more than half of the world population is urbanized. Moreover, globalization, with its developments in communication and information, has modified most cultural systems. Ideologies, economies, technologies, world views, and all sorts of commodities are no longer restricted by national borders. Instead, they have become transnational and transcultural. Education programs are becoming more and more similar, families have grown less significant as transmitters of traditions, and there is greater mobility among people worldwide. One of the consequences of these developments is that the distinction be-



Figure 4. Icon of St. George spearing Diocletian, ca. 11th century CE.



Figure 5. Horus on horseback spearing a crocodile, ca. 4th c. CE.

tween what traditionally has been known as high culture and popular culture is being blurred; the interplay between the two is constant. Egypt clearly exhibits these phenomena (Haikal 2002, 2003; Naguib 2002). In addition, the Coptic renewal and, from the

1970s, the radicalization of religion among both Copts and Muslims have led to the consolidation of normative religion and the abandonment of most religious practices belonging to the Egyptian lore. Yet, some practices pertaining to the Coptic calendar, death, and mulids can still be observed.

Cultural changes usually occur as part of long processes of transformation. However, some events may trigger rapid changes in a culture's structures, generate innovations, and bring about new ways of life. The construction of the Aswan High Dam was such an event. Inaugurated in January 1971, the Aswan High Dam has radically altered Egypt's ecology and led to the disappearance of most rituals and religious practices related to the Nile and its inundation. It has modified a cumulative body of local knowledge and made the agricultural calendar meaningless. Nevertheless, some religious practices tied to the seasonality of the Nile are still recognizable in Coptic Christianity. Their memory lingers on in the Coptic calendar, a solar calendar that is based on the ancient Egyptian one, which used to be the agricultural calendar of Egypt (Naguib 2006; Wissa-Wassef 1971). For instance, like the ancient Egyptians, Copts celebrate their New Year (*ayd el-nayruuz*) on the first of *Tnut*, which corresponds to the month of September. Before the building of the Aswan High Dam, the river's level attained its peak around the middle of the month. Land-taxes would not be collected before the Nile had reached the ideal height of sixteen cubits. The final level of the river was measured on the seventeenth of *Tnut* and was called "the level of the Cross." The Coptic synaxarium reminds us that the day is dedicated to the Feast of the Cross (*ayd el-saliib*). The third month of the year, *Haatur*, begins with the three "nights of darkness," during which Coptic liturgy is imbued with funerary tones. From an Egyptological point of view it harks of Plutarch's statement that Osiris was killed during this month (Griffiths 1970: 178, §39). Nothing in the Coptic liturgy reminds us of the mysteries of Osiris that were celebrated during *Khoiak*, the fourth month of the year. Yet during this month it is a custom among Egyptians, both Copts and Muslims, to sow seven types of grain on cotton-wool wrapped

around a bottle or on the model of a doll cut in cardboard. The sprouting figure is considered as an omen of a "green year"—that is, a prosperous and happy one. The fifth month, *Tnubab*, was known for the quality and purity of the Nile's water. People used to store *mayyat Tnubab*—Nile water drawn during this month—for special occasions. Big jars filled with it were placed near cemeteries, tombs of saints, and other pilgrimage sites. It was believed that the waters would cure diseases and prevent all kinds of ailments. Copts celebrate the Feast of Immersion (*ayd el-ghitaas*) commemorating the Baptism of Christ on the eleventh of *Tnubab* and visit their dead on the following day. In ancient Egypt solemnities commemorating the erection of the *Djed*-pillar were held during this month. The spring feast of *shamm el-nasiim*, which usually occurs during the month of *Barmuudab*, has been considered to derive from the ancient Egyptian Sokar Festival. The twelfth of *Ba'uuna* is dedicated to the archangel Michael, and the liturgy of that day includes prayers to the Nile. Before the building of the Aswan High Dam, this period coincided with the Night of the Drop (*laylat el-nuqta*), when the Nile was at its lowest level and the inundation period started. On that night a divine drop falling from the sky was said to initiate the rise of the Nile. To ancient Egyptians it corresponded with the appearance of the Dog Star, *Sopdet* (vocalized as *Sothis* by the Greeks), at dawn announcing the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. According to Pausanias, it was believed that during that night Isis mourning the loss of Osiris shed a tear, thus triggering the overflow (Rocha-Pereira 1989, Book X, 32, 10; see also Derchain 1970; Clerc 1978; Desroches Noblecourt 1980). Furthermore, it is worth noting here that the archangel Michael seems to have taken over the characteristic of the god *Thoth* as regulator of the Nile.

Coptic funerary rituals in today's Egypt show many analogies to well-documented ancient Egyptian religious practices. Animal sacrifice, for example, is performed at the doorstep of the main entrance of the house when the coffin is taken out, on the same day at the cemetery, at the end of the mourning period, and periodically before the visits to the dead. The meat is distributed to the poor. However, due

to various factors, these rituals have almost disappeared from large towns and cities. Visits to the dead, offerings of food and flowers, and libations at the cemetery are other reminders of Pharaonic Egypt. Copts go to the cemetery on fixed dates—specifically, the third day after death, after the rituals of “taking away the mattings” and “delivering the soul of the dead” have been carried out, then on the seventh, fifteenth, and fortieth day after death. Other periodic visits to the dead take place on the Coptic New Year (*cayd el-nayruuz*), on Nativity (*'ayd el-miilaad*), on the Day of Immersion (*yawm el-ghitaas*), on Palm Sunday (*'ahad el-sa'af*), during Pentecost (*el-khamsiin* or *'ayd el-'ansara*), and during pilgrimages and mulids. It is especially women who carry out these visits, or *tuluu'* (more commonly known as *tal'a*). Their attitudes resonate with those attributed to the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. Like them, they cry for the dead, lament over the corpse, bring offerings of food and flowers, and make libations of water (Naguib 1993: 19 - 32).

Coptic pilgrimages and mulids have gone through various developments giving way to innovations and hybridization. The term “mulid” (Arabic: *mawlid*, pl. *mawaalid*) stems from the root *wld*, meaning birth. It designates the birthday of a saint. More exactly, it marks the anniversary of the saint’s martyrdom or death and thereby her or his “rebirth.” By extension, mulid denotes the festivities held around the shrine of the saint, who is a center of pilgrimage. The shrine locality attracts fairs with all their various stalls and games (Mayeur-Jaouen 2005). Mulids, whether Coptic or

Muslim, pertain to popular religion and have been frowned upon by both religious and governmental authorities, which blame them for re-enacting pagan rituals, encouraging sexual licentiousness, and providing the grounds for the consumption of drugs. So much so that the term “mulid” signifies rowdiness and anarchy. Nevertheless, mulids are popular among people from different social backgrounds and until recently Copts and Muslims used to take part in each other’s mulids (Haikal 2007; Mayeur-Jaouen 2005: 345 - 379; Meinardus 1970: 216 - 219). Some mulids are recent creations, but the majority have a long history exemplifying the significance of a given site as a consecrated sacred space and bringing forth the descriptions of festivals dating back to the Pharaonic Period. Some saints and martyrs may have incorporated the characteristics of older local deities, but this is an opinion open to controversy (Haikal 2007; Mayeur-Jaouen 2005: 33 - 63; Yoyotte 1960).

In discussing possible legacies of Pharaonic religious practices in Coptic Christianity, one has to keep in mind the ruptures, the gaps, the renewals, and also the eradications. There are, however, new outlets, and religious practices may survive in other ways—through literature, through visual and performing arts, through films and various social media, and through the tourist and heritage industries. Moreover, no study has yet investigated if some of the religious practices among Coptic communities living outside Egypt still maintain the memory of Pharaonic times.

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- Figure 3 Isis Lactans, Late Period (ca. 6th c. BCE) bronze statuette of Isis breastfeeding Horus the Child. Walters Art Museum accession number 54.416. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

- Figure 4 Icon of St. George spearing Diocletian, ca. 11th century CE. From Labechina, Racha region, Georgia. From *The Art Museum of Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1970. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).
- Figure 5 Horus on horseback spearing a crocodile, ca. 4th c. CE. Louvre, accession number E4850. Photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen. CC-BY 4.0, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).