SOME REMARKS ON THE STRUCTURE OF EGYPTIAN DIVINE TRIADS[1]

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ALTHOUGH the Egyptian word for triad rarely appears in Egyptian texts, the triad is undoubtedly a structural element of Egyptian religion.[2] We too often find traces in Egypt of the triadic ordering of gods to suppose it to be due to an illusion of modern scholars preoccupied with Christian trinitarian doctrine.[3] A critical approach is needed, however; the triadic structure was not realized always and everywhere in Egypt. Neither is there much point in disqualifying the triad as a secondary religious phenomenon. Theological treatment of the religious tradition, such as grouping gods into triads, is no less an element of religion than certain aspects and developments of cult and devotion.

The triadic structure (or structural element) was used in Egypt to answer the problem of divine plurality and unity. The triad restricts plurality and differentiates unity, as every plural number does. In Egypt the triad was an extremely suitable structure for connecting plurality and unity, because the number three was not only a numeral, but also signified the indefinite plural. This is apparent, for instance, in hieroglyphic writing: to express the plural, an ideogram may be repeated three times or three strokes placed after the signs indicating a noun.

Thus the triad was a structure capable of transforming polytheism into tritheism or differentiated monotheism. Because of the nature of binary oppositions within the triad, its monistic tendency could not always be realized, and pluralism remained dominant in most cases. Monistic and pluralistic triads may be distinguished, with differently assembled inmates. One might reserve the term triad for the pluralistic triads and call the monistic triads trinities. The danger is, however, that in doing so one would lose sight of their connections, and would also no longer distinguish a main objection in Egyptian religion to monotheism. The breaking-point between the monistic and pluralistic triads, or a stumbling-block for monistic tendencies lies in sexual differentiation. In triads containing the binary opposition of male and female, the way from plurality to unity is obstructed.

[2] H. Kees, *Götterglaube*, 148–61; H. Bonnet, *RÄRG*, 251.

[3] Cf. S. Sauneron in G. Posener et al., *Dictionnaire de la civilisation égyptienne* (Paris, 1959), 291: 'On peut même se demander si la notion de triade n'est pas une illusion des modernes . . .'.

We can distinguish (a) triads consisting of three gods or three goddesses, and (b) triads consisting of two gods and a goddess or one god and two goddesses. The triads containing both sexes usually have the family structure: father, mother, and child. When a family was placed in the triadic structure, the concept of a differentiated monad could not subsist, and it remained a pluralistic totality.

In the lesser temple of Abu Simbel there is a place where three Nubian gods are portrayed: Horus of Miam, Horus of Bak, and Horus of Buhen.[1] The three of them together represent the many Nubian deities. Actually the triad restricts this profusion by only comprising three gods. Since their names and iconography agree although their origins are different, these three Horus gods make the impression of being three local forms of one god. The tritheistic reduction of polytheism is mono- or henotheistic here. In the great temple of Abu Simbel, not three but four figures are carved in a central place: Amen-Rēʿ, Rēʿ-Ḥarakhte, Ptaḥ, and Pharaoh Ramesses II. The three gods form an essential representation of the many gods of the empire, and the pharaoh seems to represent the unity of this triad. And indeed, the great temple of Abu Simbel is named: House of Ramessesmeramūn.[2] By way of the triad, plurality moves to unity here, and vice versa, for in this temple to the unique pharaoh many gods are present in written or sculptured form. Elsewhere too we find that a god may be the unity of this triad. Thoth is called: 'The heart of Rēʿ, the tongue of Tatenen (= Ptaḥ) and the throat of the Hidden of name (= Amūn).'[3]

Sometimes the starting-point is not plurality but unity, which is differentiated into three, that is into plurality. In the sun-god the rising sun Khepri, the midday sun Rēʿ, and the setting sun Atum are distinguished, and these modalities are joined in the name Khepri-Rēʿ-Atum.

The gods Ptaḥ, Sokaris, and Osiris could be conjoined and depicted as a single being: Ptaḥ-Sokaris-Osiris. The great majority of texts regard this composite god as singular. In a few cases, where the third person plural is used of him, he seems to be looked upon as a plural being.[4]

An excellent example of the triad not only as a triple, and so implicitly plural differentiation of unity, but particularly as a restriction of plurality is found in Pap. Leiden I, 350 IV, 21.[5] The Egyptian scribe even uses the Egyptian word for triad:

The pantheon (*nṯrw nbw*) is a triad who do not have their equal. Hidden is his name as Amūn. He is Rēʿ in countenance. Ptaḥ is his body.

We note the changing inflexion for the number of the pronouns. The many gods— all the gods, says the text[6]—are summarized in a triad, an Egyptian plural. At the same time they are restricted to three gods. Referring to this passage, Gardiner[7]

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[1] C. Desroches-Noblecourt and C. Kuentz, *Le Petit Temple d'Abou Simbel* (Cairo, 1968), I, 90; II, pl. civ.

[2] L. Habachi, 'Features of the deification of Ramesses II', *ADAIK* 5 (Glückstadt, 1969), 10, pl. v*b*.

[3] *Opet*, 119 i, 167 c; *Urk.* VIII, 47 (58 b); C. de Wit, *Les Inscriptions du temple d'Opet à Karnak*, III (Brussels, 1968), 64, 95, 133, n. 262.   [4] S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, 150.

[5] J. Zandee, *De Hymnen aan Amon van Papyrus Leiden I 350*, 87 ff.

[6] If this translation is right. In his paper 'Triune Conceptions of Deity in Ancient Egypt', which he read at the above-mentioned congress, J. Gwyn Griffiths translated *nbw* as 'lords'.

[7] *ZÄS* 42 (1905), 36.

speaks of 'trinity as a unity' and Zandee[1] remarks: 'Amūn, Rēʿ and Ptaḥ are regarded as one god.' By the aid of the triad, divine plurality is explained as a unity.

The examples of triads given so far were trinities. They all consist of male deities. Morenz[2] gives an example of a trinity consisting of three female deities: Qadesh-Astarte-ʿAnat. He also mentions a triad containing one goddess: Atum, Shu, and Tefnut. He calls this 'eine Trinität des Werdens', and remarks: 'Wir sehen zwar die Einheit sich entfalten, aber der Grundakkord der Einheit wird nicht durchgehalten, der die Trinitäten erst zu dem macht, was sie sind.'[3]

Where the threefold differentiation comprises a differentiation of male and female divinities, no return to unity is possible any more. One god as indweller of another is a common conception in Egypt, for instance Atum and Rēʿ, so that they are looked upon as the single god Atum-Rēʿ. For the indweller of a goddess to be a god, however, or the other way round, is not possible. The union of man and woman is not restrictive but productive, and leads to the birth of the child. The triad Atum, Shu, and Tefnut, indeed, develops into an ennead. Mixed male-female triads are no trinities, and not monistic but pluralistic triads.[4]

Worship in the temples was not usually confined to a triad. The tritheism inherent in the triad, also in the pluralistic triads of mixed sex, was clearly felt as too much of a limitation. An ennead was worshipped, in which the triadic structure was sometimes plain to see. Such an ennead did not always consist of nine gods; there might be more or less. It was not a matter of a definite number of gods, but of undefined plurality. In the temple of Abydos there were seven chapels, for Osiris, Isis, Horus, Amūn, Rēʿ, Ptaḥ, and the pharaoh. The Osirian triad, the triad of the empire, and the pharaoh together constitute a triad.[5] The ennead of Karnak, consisting of fifteen gods, was

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[1] *Hymnen aan Amon*, 87.   [2] S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, loc. cit.

[3] S. Morenz, op. cit. 153 f. In the discussion after the paper was read J. Bergman remarked: 'Pap. Ebers 95, 8 stellt bekanntlich Isis als Mutter von Schu und Tefnut dar. Dahinter scheint eine Struktur von Urgöttin-erster Zweiheit (etwa als Parallele zu Atum-*iš·ti*, *CT* Spell 261/ siehe Bergman, *Ich bin Isis*, 286 mit Anm. 3) zu stecken. Man denke an den Sagenkreis um *sꜣ·ti biti* „das Kinderpaar des Königs von Unterägypten" (vgl. *Pyr.* 804c, 1017a und Sethe, *Komm.* Bd. IV, 30 f.). Hier sind wohl auch andere unterägyptische Muttergottheiten (vor allem Neïth; vielleicht auch Bastet — vgl. die gewöhnliche späte Darstellung dieser Göttin als Katze zusammen mit zwei Kätzchen) in der Rolle einer einzigen Urgöttin-Muttergottheit aufgetreten.' In future studies on divine triads in Ancient Egypt it may be of interest to make further investigations into these 'Trinitäten des Werdens', consisting of one 'Urwesen' with a male son and a female daughter. Cf. also S. Sauneron, *Les Fêtes religieuses d'Esna* (Cairo, 1962), 111, § 6.

[4] J. Bergman remarked: 'Wenn auch der Geschlechtsunterschied gewöhnlich für die Götteridentifikationen/ Zusammenschmelzungen eine nicht zu übertretende Grenze zu bilden scheint, zeugen die späten Spekulationen über Neïth und Isis, nach denen diese Gottheiten zu zwei Dritteln männlich, zu einem Drittel weiblich sein sollen (siehe hierzu Sauneron, *Mélanges Mariette* (1961), 242 ff. ("Le créateur androgyne"), von einer auffälligen Einheit vom Männlich-Weiblichen. Diese aus drei Elementen bestehende Einheir kommt m. E. einer aus drei Gottheiten entstandenen Trinität sehr nahe.' These examples seem to be connected with the problems, as yet unsolved, about the above-mentioned 'Trinitäten des Werdens'. One might call the two-thirds male and one-third female goddess a preliminary stage in the 'Trinitäten des Werdens'. She is not yet a triad, nor even a trinity with three different names. As soon as the three parts in the goddess are given three different divine names the point of no return is reached, because of the male–female opposition.

Answering a question of J. Gwyn Griffiths on the difference between triads and trinities, we stress the point that trinities are monistic triads or 'tri-unities' and triads groups of three gods.

[5] E. Otto, *Saeculum*, 14 (1963), 268 n. 48.

structured in three phases: 1 became 2, 2 became 4, 4 became 8, 15 altogether (1+2+4+8).[1] The ennead of Heliopolis was also structured in three phases: Atum became Shu and Tefnut; Shu and Tefnut became Geb and Nut; Geb and Nut became Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. Thus the triadic structure of the ennead of Heliopolis is not 3×3 but 1+2+2+4. To the one god, gods were added three times, that is many times. The ennead is unity and plurality together, like the quaternity in the temple of Abu Simbel.

Most pluralistic triads consist of father, mother, and child. As a rule, the child is a son. The most familiar example is Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Other examples are: Amūn, Mut, and Khonsu in Thebes; Ptaḥ, Sakhmet, and Nefertem in Memphis; Montu, Rattawy, and Harprēᶜ in Hermonthis and Karnak; Horus, Hathor, and Harsomtus or Iḥi in Edfu and Denderah; Atum, Bastet, and Horhekenu in Bubastis.

The deities of these triads are often named together in the texts and depicted together on the monuments, but they are never referred to in the singular, always in the plural form. Because of the male–female opposition they cannot be regarded as a trinity. The contrast of man and woman is not unified in the child because of its sexual differentiation. The binary opposition of father and mother is repeated in the opposition of mother and son.

The deities are summarized in a pluralistic triad: the family. This theological solution of the problem of divine unity and plurality corresponds to the Egyptian conception of man not as a lone individual, but as a member of society. This society was not the larger family, as we see from the comparative poverty of the Egyptian language in kinship terms. Neither did a local or social community take first place, though ties with town and nome were certainly felt; what counted was the small family unit. In Egyptian texts and visual material it is noticeable how important to the Egyptians were the relationships within the family unit, of man and wife, mother and child, father and son. As the family unit was so important in Egyptian society, we can understand that Egyptian theologians made use of the family to solve the problems of divine unity and plurality. It is remarkable that the divine family does not impair the triadic structure. Triads contain one child, and no more. The child, usually Horus the child, represents the pharaoh who is the ideal man. Where a triad is incomplete and a divine pair is worshipped, e.g. Khnum and Heket in Antinoë, we may suppose that the pharaoh or man forms the third member: Khnum is the creator of man. Examples of triads consisting of father or mother with two children are hardly to be found, apart from Atum, Shu, and Tefnut, which is a special case. The example given by Kees[2] of Hathor with Harsomtus and Iḥi at Denderah is highly doubtful.

However important the family was in Egyptian culture, in itself the triad is a totality and a plural. Thus we find triads in Egypt that are not trinities, nor does the family structure seem to have been impressed upon them in order to preserve the aspect of unity.

[1] P. Barguet, *Le Temple d'Amon-Rê à Karnak* (Cairo, 1962), 23.
[2] H. Kees, *Götterglaube*, 151.

There are several stelae from Deir el-Medineh bearing the figures of the Syrian goddess Qadesh with the Syrian god Resheph, and the Egyptian god Min.[1] The structure of this triad is problematic. In this triad consisting of a goddess with two companions, worshipped in a non-Egyptian milieu of Syrian immigrants, we must take into consideration a deliberate disturbance of the family structure. Though Min can be the son in a family triad,[2] this triad of Qadesh-Resheph-Min would rather seem to be a 'triad of sexuality', appearing in those Ramesside times when extra-conjugal erotic relations were not so suppressed as before.[3]

The family structure is also problematic in triads consisting of a god with a pair of goddesses: Khnum with Satis and Anukis, Montu with Iunyt and Tenenet. Sometimes such triads are formed by Osiris with Isis and Nephthys, or Horus with Isis and Nephthys, or Atum with Iusaas and Hathor-Nebet-Ḥetepet.

In the family triad of father, mother, and son the masculine element is doubled in father and son. This duplication does not always appear. It is resolved in the figure of Kamutef ('bull of his mother'). Min-Kamutef of Koptos is husband and son of Isis.[4] It was suggested above that the son may sometimes be absent in a triad because the pharaoh or man took the place of third member. The conception of a divine pair without a son, or a goddess and her son without a father (Isis and Horus) was obviously regarded as incomplete. The triadic structure could be filled out by doubling the female component.

Duplication of a goddess or pairs of goddesses are often found in Egyptian religion: the two Maʿat goddesses, the two Meret goddesses, the two mistresses Nekhbet and Uto, the two sisters Isis and Nephthys, ʿAnat and Astarte. Hathor is called angry as Sakhmet and gay as Bastet,[5] while in the list of fifty-six goddesses at Karnak[6] Bastet and Uto form a pair, as do Satis and Anukis and Iunyt and Tenenet. One may also name Mut and Sakhmet at Karnak, and Nebtu and Menḥyt at Esna who according to Sauneron[7] 'ne sont pas deux déesses, mais deux fonctions différentes d'une déesse'. In all these cases we have little or no indication as to the nature of the division.

Too little is known of the triad comprising the god Montu with the pair of goddesses Iunyt and Tenenet, to draw any certain conclusions.[8] The two companions of Montu form part of the Ennead of Karnak, and appear in other connections also as a divine pair or as one goddess with a double name.[9] A text speaks of the mother of Montu and one of his companions, but it would be too uncertain to conclude from this alone that the relationship of Iunyt and Tenenet was that of mother and daughter.[10] The goddess Rattawy, female sun of the two lands, can replace Iunyt and Tenenet as

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[1] Cf. R. Stadelmann, *Syrisch-palästinensische Gottheiten in Ägypten*, 74, 118.

[2] L. Habachi, *MDAIK* 19 (1963), 44, fig. 21. Pharaoh Mentuhotep as the ithyphallic Min-Amun-Kamutef.

[3] W. Helck, 'Zum Auftreten fremder Götter in Ägypten', *Oriens Antiquus*, 5 (1966), 9.

[4] H. Bonnet, *RÄRG* 364.

[5] H. Junker, *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien*, *APAW*, Phil.-hist. Kl. (Berlin, 1911), 32.

[6] G. Legrain, *ASAE* 15 (1915), 280.   [7] *BIE* 45 (1968), 47.

[8] M. S. Drower in R. Mond and O. H. Myers, *Temples of Armant*, I, 159; J. Leclant, *Recherches sur les monuments thébains*, 260 f.   [9] E. Otto, *Topographie des thebanischen Gaues*, 89.

[10] H. Wild, *BIFAO* 54 (1954), 191.

consort of Montu. Her son is Harprēꜥ. Montu is also often called lord or king of the two lands. This is accentuated by the iconographical element which characterizes him: two uraeus-serpents on his forehead.[1] The name Iunyt means the 'Hermonthic' or 'Upper-Egyptian Heliopolitan' goddess. The name Tenenet can be connected with the god Tatenen and Lower-Egyptian Memphis. Perhaps this pair of goddesses represent the two lands of Egypt of which Montu is lord.

The duplication of the female complex in the triad of Elephantine, Khnum with Satis and Anukis, is according to Habachi[2] that of mother and daughter. A stela in Berlin names 'Satis mistress of Elephantine, Anukis the beloved of her mother, Khnum lord of the cataract region'. Elsewhere Anukis is 'favourite of her mother'. From these epithets of Anukis Habachi deduces that Satis is the mother of Anukis, and that the family structure was maintained in this triad, the only difference being that the child is not a son but a daughter. However, this difference is by no means slight. Although the position of women in Egypt was certainly not very subordinate, the ideal child was undoubtedly a son.[3]

In so far as could be checked, Anukis is nowhere else plainly described or portrayed as child and daughter of Khnum or Satis. Anukis is chiefly known as nurse of the king,[4] and her name might mean wet-nurse (snk—to suckle).[5] Apparently an Egyptian prince was usually not suckled by the queen, but cared for by an official nurse, while the actual suckling seems to have been done by other women.[6] Thus the child with its mother and nurse was a familiar conception in Egypt. In mythology: Horus with Isis and Nephthys. If Anukis is the daughter of Satis, then she is not like Horus in the Osirian triad the representative or redeemer of her father, i.e. Harendotes,[7] but her mother's helper. An Egyptian princess could take over certain functions from her mother, so that sometimes she was not only 'daughter of pharaoh' but also 'consort of pharaoh'. The 'divines adoratrices' of Amūn were daughters, but also consorts of the god.[8] Habachi goes a little too far in pronouncing that the old theory that Anukis was one of the two consorts of Khnum 'has nothing to justify it'. That Anukis was Khnum's daughter need not always prevent her from functioning as consort. In the Theban tomb no. 73 Anukis is indeed the 'consort' of Khnum.[9] As the opposition between male and female in the father, mother, and son triads is repeated in the mother and son relationship, so it is repeated here in the father and daughter relationship of Khnum

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[1] J. Leclant, *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 4, 78.

[2] L. Habachi, 'Was Anukis considered as the wife of Khnum or as his daughter?', *ASAE* 50 (1950), 501–7.

[3] A. de Buck, *JEOL* 11 (1949–50), 9 (stela of Taimhotep).

[4] C. Desroches-Noblecourt and C. Kuentz, *Le Petit Temple d'Abou Simbel*, I, 59; 188.

[5] I concede to M. Heerma van Voss, who made an objection to this suggestion that the name Anukis might mean nurse, that indeed the Egyptian verb *snk* (causative of the verb *ink*, cf. E. Edel, *Altägyptische Gr.* I, 1955, § 443) and the corresponding Hebrew verb do not show the *ayin* which is written in the name of Anukis (ꜥnkt). There is, however, an Egyptian verb ꜥnk, alternatively written *ink* (*Wb.* I, 206, 2–3) and a verb ꜥrk (*Wb.* I, 211) alternatively written *irk* (*Wb.* I, 116). The Egyptian verb *ink*, 'embrace' etc. (*Wb.* I, 100, 19 ff.) is written in Semitic ꜥnk (M. Cohen, *Essai comparatif sur le vocabulaire et la phonétique du chamito-sémitique* (Paris, 1969), 91).

[6] F. Jonckheere, *Aesculape*, 37 (1955), 203–23.

[7] G. van der Leeuw, *Godsvoorstellingen in de Oud-Aegyptische pyramideteksten*, (Leiden, 1916), 85; J. Gwyn Griffiths, *JEA* 37 (1951), 32–7.   [8] J. Leclant, *MDAIK* 15 (1957), 169.

[9] T. Säve-Söderbergh, *Four 18th Dynasty Tombs*, 4.

and Anukis. It is noteworthy that in the father, mother, and son triads father and son do not form a pair as Satis and Anukis do. The son replaces the father, the daughter helps the mother and duplicates her. Although one of the Egyptian words for nurse (*rnnt*) can also mean virgin,[1] it does not become clear in how far the separation into mother and nurse also implies the separation into mother and virgin in the triad of Elephantine.

Comparative religion has shown that the duplicating of a goddess may comprise more than mother and daughter, mother and nurse, mother and virgin, older and younger woman. Careful study of Egyptian religious material will surely yield more findings. Female reduplication was at any rate popular in Egypt. Hence Egyptian theologians, unable to formulate divine unity through triads once male–female differentiation had been introduced, will have felt the need sometimes to express the female complex in a triad not only in the two functions of one goddess as mother and consort, but in two goddesses, because to them woman was not simple, but ambiguous.

[1] F. Daumas, *Les Moyens d'expression du grec et de l'égyptien comparés dans les décrets du Canope et de Memphis* (Cairo, 1952), 236.