The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster*

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I

In Radin, Jung and Kerényi's well-known book about the Trickster, reference is made to a study on the divine deceiver by the Dutch scholar Kristensen. In this study Kristensen treats especially the Babylonian god Ea and the Greek god Hermes. In passing, he also calls the Egyptian god Seth a divine deceiver. Therefore, it might be thought that I am now elaborating certain suggestions Kristensen published in Dutch in 1928 and earlier. This is not so, however, since strictly speaking trickster and divine deceiver are not altogether identical. The divine deceiver as described by Kristensen is an inscrutable deity, whose words and actions are so ambiguous that man cannot help misunderstanding him. The trickster, indeed, is not a devil either. Yet he is not an innocent joker. He does not simply raise a laugh — the absurd things he does are killingly funny. The trickster takes no account of order or meaning. As Kerényi says, he is "the enemy of boundaries" and "the spirit of disorder". Now I cannot enter into a phenomenology of the trickster here. Obviously, the disorder of a "spirit of disorder" can only show up against an established background of order. As we know, the manifold religious and cultural systems of mankind do not always give the same reply as to what constitutes the order of existence. For Egypt, we might consider the key word to be *maat*, ethical and cosmic order. It is notable that the Egyptian word *khenenu*, signifying the opposite of *maat* that is "confusion", is determined in hieroglyphic writing with the animal of the god Seth. In *Seth, God of Confusion*, I have listed 24 words that are determined with the Seth-animal. They all refer to negative aspects of reality in cosmic, social or personal life such as "storm", "tumult", "illness", things that do not accord with *maat*. In quite a recent publication, G. Posener, *Revue d'Égyptologie* 18 (1966) 54 I found that also a word meaning "to deceive" may be determined with the Seth-animal.

II

The Dutch scholar Sierksma considers a principal trait of the trickster to be immaturity: he is devoid of culture, as yet unformed. He is not only ignorant of the difference between good and evil, but also of that between man and woman, right and left, sacred and profane. This criterion of being uneducated, taken from primitive cultures, can be very well applied to the Egyptian outlook.

The ideal Egyptian gentleman is the *ger ma-a*, the truly modest, literally the silent man, characterised by self-control. The *ger ma-a* knows the rules of etiquette at table and in conversation, he assists widows and orphans, and his behaviour is all it should be. He lives in accordance with *maat*.

A familiar theme in Egyptian wisdom literature is the contrast between this gentlemanly ideal of the truly silent man, and the heated

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man, one who disturbs the harmony of ordered existence by his foolish speech and unruly conduct. Less familiar is the fact that one who is unformed and immature may also be called a *shed-kheru*. *Shed-kheru* means literally: "to raise the voice" and more generally: "to behave incorrectly", "to make mischief", "to stir up strife", "to kick up a row", "to cause commotion". No wonder properly brought up Egyptian officials and priests declare in their ideal autobiographies that they have never committed the actions of a *shed-kheru*, that they have always reproved these, and indeed that they abhor *shed-kheru*. Once (in the P. Jumilhac) a priest of the god Sobek is called a *shed-kheru*, but then this Sobek is represented as a Seth who had changed himself into a crocodile. I cannot give the name of any human being branded a *shed-kheru*, only of a god, and that is Seth. In the great Osiris Hymn Louvre C 286 it is related that Isis has checked the misdeeds of the *shed-kheru*.

In chapter 39 of the Book of the Dead, Seth rather braggingly reveals himself in the words: "I am Seth the originator of confusion who thunders in the horizon of heaven". From many other texts also we know that Seth manifests himself in thunder-storms and rain: a troublesome and superfluous phenomenon in the peaceful land of Egypt, irrigated by the Nile. Seth was considered to have great physical strength and to be a very rackety personage, as appears in his epithets. In the course of history he proves to be especially a lord of foreign countries. As divine stranger he is therefore susceptible to foreign cultural influences. Thus he is sometimes represented in exotic costume. It is, I think, not out of order here to point out that showy dress and a lot of noise still mark the immature person of our own times.

III

After these two passages on Seth as the spirit of disorder contrasted with *maat* and Seth as the uncivilised *shed-kheru* contrasted with the *ger ma-a*, I should like to remark on the three mythological roles of Seth in the myths of Osiris, of Horus and of Re.

The most famous, or rather notorious, is the mythological role of Seth as the murderer of Osiris. In the theological system of the priests of Heliopolis both Osiris and Seth belong to the Ennead, from which the Horus king, the typical Egyptian gentleman, drew his pedigree. The primaeval god Atum had brought forth Shu and Tefnut. This pair produced the following pair: Geb and Nut. From the latter, however, there proceeded not only Osiris and Isis as next pair, but also Seth and Nephthys. That Seth originated beside Osiris already disturbs the order whereby each pair of gods engenders one other pair. It is related that Seth was not born in the natural fashion, but that he was spat out by his mother Nut. One might suppose, then, that Seth's origin and existence is an accident, not in agreement with *maat*.

From the story Plutarch tells of the murder of Osiris by Seth, one can distil the tale of a trickster: Seth plays a mischievous game with Osiris and the gods. It is a game with a chest, which afterwards proves to be a coffin. Seth promises the chest to whom it will fit, and the gods lie down in it by turns. The chest fits Osiris, for of course the god of the dead fits into a coffin. Then Seth unexpectedly runs up, closes the chest, and throws it into the water without any funeral ceremonies. Eternal life was at stake, for that is what the possessor of a sarcophagus may hope for. The prize Seth gave, however, was a miserable death by drowning. Osiris had to die to become what he is: lord of the realm of the dead. But Seth gave him a sordid, untimely, hard and disorderly death, as might be expected of a spirit of disorder. The North American Indian trickster also brings death into the world by carelessness. In the West Indian Voodoo religion the god Ghede is at the same time the god of death and graveyards, and the divine joker. The murder of Osiris is the cruellest joke Seth ever carried out. As such, it is never depicted, and the Egyptian texts only refer to Seth's deed in veiled terms.

IV

After the death of Osiris, Isis bears the child Horus. Seth, however, is far from appearing as protector of the widow and orphan. He attempts to seduce Isis, and he covets the office of Osiris, whom the earth god Geb had appointed to rule the world. Isis rejects him, and does all she can to get Horus proclaimed king of the world. Hence arise the disorders between Horus and Seth.

Since Seth is anything but a royal husband or a sedate family man, his marriage with Nephthys, whose name means "mistress of the palace", remains a rather formal affair. It is at least doubtful whether Seth was ever held to be the father of Anubis, the son of Nephthys. Incidentally, Seth is connected with other goddesses: Neith, Hathor and Anat. He is a god of exuberant sexual strength: the god with the testicles. Sometimes Seth is called *hemty*, "the womanly man".

From various texts we know that Seth induced his nephew Horus to take part in homosexual acts. I do not only mean that Seth let Horus rob him of the seed of his testicles, but also other homosexual acts, occasionally described in some detail. These homosexual actions should not be regarded as a humiliating act of violence, an incident in the fight between the two gods. The point is rather that Seth disregards the order of sex because he is the spirit of disorder. The North American Indian trickster also transgresses the bounds of sex and is active both heterosexually and homosexually. The fruit of the homosexual relation between Horus and Seth is Thoth, the "son of the two lords". Their homosexual relations end in a quarrel. Seth is the notorious thief of the eye of Horus. Besides being a murderer and a homosexual, Seth is also a robber.

Finally the gods, Thoth in particular, mediate in the conflict. Horus and Seth are separated, and then reconciled to one another, so that they proceed to co-operate for the welfare of the world. Every pharaoh, that is man in his quintessence, is a Horus reconciled with Seth, or a gentleman in whom the unformed spirit of disorder has been integrated.

V

It has been noticed in the descriptions of tricksters in primitive cultures, that they are often "slayer-of-the-monster". Seth, too, is a slayer-of-the-monster. This is perhaps his most positive role, in which he is often worshipped and depicted.

The cosmos ruled over by the sun god Re is surrounded and threatened by chaos. This chaos takes shape as a great, unwieldy, malevolent snake, which attacks the solar barque of Re that transports him across the sky and through the underworld. In solar hymns the sun god himself is usually praised as the one who with his fire-breathing uraeus-snake keeps the monster Apopis at a distance. There is also an inclination, however, to personify and specify the aggression of the sun god towards the monster as a separate deity, who stands upon the prow of the ship and repels the monster by word and deed. Various gods with aggressive characteristics could play this part of solar hero. Especially, however, the Egyptians liked to imagine Seth in this role. For who was so aggressive, who could thunder and kill so well as Seth? Seth is then called "the chosen of Re". The sun god chooses him to make a clamour and to chase away the dangerous snake. In the so-called "Contendings of Horus and Seth", the sun god decreed: "give me Seth, the son of Nut, that he may stay with me, being with me like a child and he shall thunder in heaven and be feared". And indeed, Seth is sometimes called not only "chosen of Re", but also "son of Re". Thus this suspicious foreigner, this thief, homosexual and murderer is given a fitting place in the divine ordinance. Thus he who causes noisy disturbance is accepted as a child of god, of Re.

Conclusion

The god Seth is not exclusively a trickster. In several places he was worshipped as god of the city or the nome, while later in the course of the first millennium B.C. he was increasingly cursed as a devil. The question in how far Seth is a

trickster cannot be definitely answered until a phenomenology of the trickster has been written.

In any case, Seth appears to have five elements in common with tricksters of other cultures: *Seth is disorderly and uncivilised; he is a murderer, a homosexual and a slayer-of-the-monster.*

These five elements Seth has in common with the very complex phenomenon of the trickster, suggest that in future studies of the trickster the Egyptian material regarding Seth deserves attention.

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