Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut

*The sky goddess Nut of ancient Egypt, an anomaly among sky deities, fills her cosmic role as mother of the stars and the sun, giving birth to the sun daily, and acts as mortuary goddess through the deceased king’s identification with the sun, assuring his rebirth in the next world. Her mythological significance as Mother goddess and mortuary goddess may be reflected in the important role taken by women in the life of ancient Egypt.*

Diodorus Siculus, writing about Egypt in the 1st century B.C., suggested that the dominant position of women he observed in that ancient culture resulted from “the success attained by (the goddess) Isis . . . (who) avenged the murder of her husband and reigned all her days over the land with complete respect for the laws, and . . . became the cause of more and greater blessings to all men than any other” (Book I, 27, 1). Earlier, Herodotus, writing in the 5th century B.C., though making no reference to a deity, noted that the Egyptians “made all their customs and laws of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men abide at home and weave; . . . Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders” (Book II, 35).

In addressing the issue of the relationship of the goddesses of a culture to the status of women, ideally one should look at all the female deities who fill cosmogonic roles and/or act as mother goddesses and consider each of them within the context of the culture’s history (in the case of Egypt, this history extends over three millennia). One should also examine the actual status of all women, not simply the privileged, and trace their status through the course of history. Clearly the task extends beyond the possible in a short article.

*The Functions of Nut*

As a first step, I will look at Nut, the cosmogonic sky goddess of Egypt, present in the earliest texts. She is an anomaly in the world of mythology, for, as is well known, sky deities are almost universally male. Eliade explained the Egyptian situation as “a chance of grammar” (Eliade 1958:242, 1975:365). Such is not the case, however, despite the fact that in the language of the an-
cient Egyptians, the word for earth is masculine and that for sky is feminine (cf. Hornung 1982:68). The usual Egyptian word for sky is pt, and although at times the two words, pt and the goddess’s name nut, may appear to be interchangeable (Erman and Grapow 1982, Vol. I:491, 498; Vol. II:214, 215), in fact, they generally are not. Nut appears in an organic activity, namely bearing the gods, not as the static, lifeless, heavenly roof of the world structure, which is the usual portrayal of the sky (Kurth 1981: cols. 535 and 538, notes 6 and 7). Indeed, she is named “the one who bears the gods” (deBuck VII: 120 e). Thus one needs to look at Nut as more than simply a personification of the sky.

Why the reversal of earth and sky? What leads to the Egyptian departure from the virtually universal sky god–earth goddess configuration? Why is Nut the sky deity rather than Geb? As bearer of the gods, Nut appears mythically in the so-called Heliopolitan theology. In this scheme, Nut and Geb, as the children of Shu and Tefnut and grandchildren of Atum, all cosmogonic deities, are the parents of four active, noncosmogonic gods: Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. Nut and Geb are also the grandparents of Horus, who appears as the ruling king, his father Osiris, their son, being the deceased king who rules as king of the underworld. In a slightly different genealogy, also Heliopolitan in origin, Nut is the mother of the so-called epagomenal gods, born on the five extra-calendrical days of the year: Osiris, Horus, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys. Here again Osiris and Horus are the deceased king/king of the underworld and the living king respectively. In both genealogies, Nut is intricately bound up with the royal house of Egypt, most especially with the deceased ruler. It is she who receives him in the sky as his mother, a sharp contrast to the more usual reception of the deceased by mother earth, as found in other cultures (Eliade 1959:140–141). For instance, in the earliest Pyramid Texts, texts written on the walls of the pyramids in the latter part of the Old Kingdom, dating from ca. 2350 B.C., the deceased king is assured that “the embrace of your mother Nut will enfold you . . .” (Sethe 1908–10: Vol. I, Sec. 208b), and in a text from another pyramid that “she has embraced [the king] in her name of ‘Coffin’ and [he] has been brought to her in her name of ‘Tomb’” (Sethe 1908–10: Vol. I, Sec. 616 d–f). The tomb and the coffin are actually those places, the localities in which the remains of the deceased are placed. It must be understood, however, that even as “coffin” and “tomb,” Nut is not envisioned as a chthonic deity as are virtually all mother goddesses. Another pyramid text attests to this fact: “So this has caused [the king] to fly up to the sky (pt) in the company of [his] brethren the gods, Nut the great has uncovered her arms for [him] . . .” (Sethe 1908–10: Vol. I, Sec. 459 b–c). Another statement shows her as the heavenly goal to which the deceased king aspires: “You have set this king as an imperishable star who is in you” (Sethe 1908–10: Vol. I, Sec. 782e). These texts leave no question about Nut as an active sky deity: she plays a significant role in assisting the king to achieve life among the gods, embracing him as a star in the sky in the role of his mother.

Cosmogonically, Nut is mother of the stars, and many iconographic renderings from the New Kingdom period on (i.e., from the second half of the
second millennium B.C.,) depict her with stars on her body, which is to say in her body. Indeed, one tale from the later part of this period tells of her husband-brother Geb’s wrath that she swallowed the stars regularly. According to this narrative, the couple had to be separated from each other by their father Shu (Parker and Neugebauer 1960: I, 67–68) in the Egyptian version of the separation of the earth and sky by force (cf. Eliade 1958:241 for other examples).

Nut was mother of the sun, Re, bearing him daily. Thus, it is not surprising to find the king also seeking to be identified with the sun in his search for eternal rebirth and life. In a text from one of the pyramids, the king is commanded to “sit on the throne of Re that [he] may give orders to the gods, because [he] is Re who came forth from Nut who bears Re daily, and [the king] is born daily like Re . . .” (Sethe 1908–10: Vol. II, Sec. 1688 a–c). The same image appears iconographically in the New Kingdom period, where the sun is shown being swallowed by Nut in the evening, traversing through her body at night, to be born again at dawn. This image appears not only in the royal tombs but also, although less elaborately, on coffin lids and even on an ostrakon (a broken piece of pottery sometimes used for practice drawings and doodles). This last was probably sketched by a workman in the Valley of the Kings sometime during the 19th Dynasty. Nut’s appearance on the coffin lids only serves to emphasize her age-old role, attested from the time of the pyramid texts, as the coffin: she literally embraces the deceased, the king alone in the oldest times, but eventually all the deceased, at least those who could pay for coffins. In fact, a whole series of Nut texts may be found on royal sarcophagi from the Old Kingdom.

Did the king’s need to be born in the sky precede the idea of the female sky deity, or did the presence of the female sky deity make possible the rebirth of the king in the sky? The imagery of both is very old, and it would be presumptuous to assert an answer one way or the other on the basis of the evidence available. It should be noted, however, that in a land where the daily rebirth of the sun was a given, where there was virtually no rain, and where water came from the ground (i.e., the caverns from which the Nile originated), a sky goddess and earth god could be understood to fulfill the same functions as those in the usual configuration. That is to say, the sky goddess Nut, mother of the sun, provided one of the essentials of life, namely the daily rebirth of the sun, and the earth god Geb provided the other, namely water, semen if you will. Numerous mythic papyri depict their relationship, including the impregnation of Nut by Geb and the separation of the pair by Shu. One might suppose that the need for the daily rebirth of the constellations, clearly a female function in nature, contributed to, or even demanded, the existence of a cosmogonic sky goddess. As much as this reversed configuration makes sense, it is necessary to note one other implication of Nut’s activity: she is de facto the regulator of the passage of days and nights, the movement of the sun and stars, therefore of time, a function normally established in the ancient world by male
deities such as Marduk of Babylon and God in ancient Israel. To date, serious consideration of this aspect of her being has been neglected.

The cult of Nut appears to have been relatively modest, with evidence of few sanctuaries and priests, although she is known to have received food offerings as a mortuary goddess and been presented the sacred menat (a necklace) in a ritual scene (Kurth 1981:538). The minimality of her cult, however, should not be construed as signifying her lack of importance. Her roles of mother goddess, mortuary goddess, sky goddess, and orderer of the day and night each constitute significant functions. It is noteworthy, however, that these functions define her largely in relation to the male via her reproductive functions and resulting role.

The Status of Women

As I noted previously, the history of Egypt covers nearly three millennia, and it experienced much change over the course of its long history. Note, for instance, that Nut embraced the king alone in early times, but that this privilege accrued to all deceased who could afford a coffin in later periods. In addition, despite my persistent reference to “texts” in the previous section as if there are many available to us, material remains from this culture, especially from everyday life, are sparse and accidental in find. Not only have the years taken their toll in disintegration, damage, loss, and destruction, but whole areas of the land are lacking in finds. For example, Lower Egypt, that is the Delta area around the mouth of the Nile including its branches, yields nearly no material due to a high water table and the fluctuating river beds of the branches. The problems resulting in trying to analyze material, considering these handicaps, are immense and complex, especially when trying to examine the daily lives of the people, even of kings and nobles. The textual evidence, such as we have it, derives mostly from tomb reliefs and paintings, from texts on stelae in temple precincts, and from the limited number of papyri, often damaged, which have survived. The artifacts of everyday life were made of perishable materials for the most part, even the houses, and thus have generally not survived. Scholars must glean their understanding from the little that does remain, recognizing the limits of the sources.

Broadly speaking, one should think of at least three classifications of women in ancient Egypt, though there certainly are more. There are royal women, noble women (the wives of wealthy men, often officials), and the common, ordinary women (the wives of the artisans and laborers). Diodorus dealt with women as queens or wives, and Herodotus considered the matter in terms of working women (i.e., economics). Theodorides, a modern scholar of Egyptian law, has noted that the woman “was a ‘person’ in every sense of the term” (1975:280), while Baines and Málek, two other modern scholars, have observed that aside “from the royal family and queens regnant [the woman] had little political power” (1984:204–205). In light of these divergent
approaches, it is necessary to ask how to define the position of women legally, politically, economically, sexually, and socially. This question cannot be properly considered in an article of this length. I will, however, consider why the general notion exists that Egyptian women were more greatly respected and had a higher status than women in other ancient civilizations. I do so with caution, recognizing that there has been almost no study of women in this culture.

Among the most famous of the royal women is Hatshepsut, the female “king” of the 18th Dynasty (the first half of the 15th century B.C.) She truly ruled, carrying out such activities as trading expeditions and extensive building, as would any powerful king. Another famous royal woman was Nefertiti, the wife of the so-called “heretic” King Akhenaton who ruled during the third quarter of the 14th century B.C., known in large measure due to the beautiful bust of her in the Ägyptische Museum in Berlin. There were other queens of great significance over the years: some acted as regents for minor males; some besides Hatshepsut were actually ruling figures in their own right; some were very strong figures during their husband’s and/or son’s reigns. One of the most venerated titles a woman could carry was Mwt nswt, “king’s mother,” a title that dates back to the early dynastic period at the turn of the fourth millennium. Fifteen women having this title are known from this time and the subsequent Old Kingdom (Seipel 1978: col. 538). Also during this early time, the queen sometimes bore the title “She who sees Horus and Seth,” that is, the king, reflecting her intimacy with the ruler. This title, like the previous and various other titles, defines her in relation to the king, but at the same time, the queen/king’s mother is revered to nearly the same degree as the king. Furthermore, the various stories of the birth of the king accord her a prominent place in the divine conception of the king: the god, appearing in the form of her husband, approaches the queen to procreate the new king. In sum, while the queen was venerated almost equally with the king, she was defined in terms of him and she was not usually viewed as a deity as was the king.

Women in the noble classes enjoyed a similar high respect, though not independent equality. In the painting and reliefs on the walls of the tombs, especially from the time of the Middle and New Kingdoms, the husband and wife were often depicted as equal in size, usually with the woman seated or standing behind her husband. The importance of the woman’s equality of size derives from the convention practiced in this culture of presenting lesser beings smaller in size than the main characters in a given scene (Schaffer 1974, 231–232). Since the tombs are often his, that she appears the same size illustrates her high status, and that she appears behind him might be considered appropriate. (One might then ask what of the situation when the tomb belonged to a woman. That question remains to be researched). One scholar has recently shown that at least some of these women were literate; they are portrayed with scribal paraphernalia under their chairs, even as male scribes, highly respected, are portrayed. Such depictions suggest literacy of at least some
women in the second millennium B.C. (Bryan 1984:17–32), but it was most probably limited to women of the upper classes, women whose husbands could afford tombs and their accompanying tomb paintings.

Texts found on papyri suggest a basic respect for, if not equality of, women in relation to men, at least legally. For instance, a woman’s dowry was hers should her marriage result in divorce, and there existed marriage contracts to govern this and other possible eventualities (Theodorides 1975:284). There is also evidence that some women acted as administrators, both of personal estates and in larger offices as well (Theodorides 1975:289). In addition, the Egyptian woman seems to have had the same rights of inheritance as a man (James 1984:93–96). One New Kingdom document reports a woman who successfully sued for her heritage following her husband’s death—assisted by her son. She had rights, but could she assert them without the aid of a male supporter? It is a question needing investigation.

The mortuary stela of the butler Merer of Edfu, dating from the period between the Old and Middle Kingdoms, refers to Merer’s “beloved wife, who shares (his) estate” (Lichtheim 1973:87). There is here a sense of harmony and domesticity. Indeed, the ideal of harmonious domesticity was counseled in texts. In a text dating to the late 6th Dynasty, ca. 2200 B.C., the vizier Ptahhotep instructs his son:

When you prosper and found your house,
And love your wife with ardor,
Fill her belly, clothe her back,
Ointment soothes her body.
Gladden her heart as long as you live,
She is a fertile field for her lord.

He suggests the need to please her; in return, she will provide him with richness. Then Ptahhotep continues:

Do not contend with her in court,
Keep her from power, restrain her—
Her eye is her storm when she gazes—
Thus will you make her stay in your house. [Lichtheim 1973:69]

These last lines might seem derogatory to women: do not let her have power, for she may hurt you. With knowledge of the fact that in ancient Egypt a woman could go to court in her own right, one sees that in this text the father is advising the son to keep his wife happy and peaceful so he will be able to keep her as his wife and she will not leave him.

In another instructional text, this time from the New Kingdom, Any advises his son to care for and support his mother, the person who cared for and nourished him when he was an infant and incontinent (Lichtheim 1976:141). He is also instructed:
Do not control your wife in her house,
When you know she is efficient;
Let your eye observe in silence,
Then you recognize her skill;
It is joy when your hand is with her. [Lichtheim 1976:143]

In another section of the same teaching, Any counsels his son to marry at an early age so the number of progeny will be great (Lichtheim 1976:136). Each of these counsels, as in the case of the title, “king’s mother,” is presented in terms of the man’s needs and pleasures, not those of the woman, even though in them she is respected. Considering that the texts from this culture, as from nearly all cultures until recently, were written by men, one expects concern for the man’s situation to be paramount. One might imagine that texts written by women, of which I know none, would express women’s pleasure and independent status. Contrary to this hope, however, is Any’s observation that “a woman is asked about her husband, (while) a man is asked about his rank” (Lichtheim 1976:140). With this clear definition of the women through her husband, any notion of an independent equality of women in ancient Egypt appears to be highly unjustified.

The materials I have considered are ambiguous about the status of women; they are neither dominant, as suggested by Herodotus and Diodorus, nor even exactly equal. Rather, in this preliminary, cursory, and very incomplete survey, one finds that women in ancient Egypt, from the highest rank to the commoner, are generally defined in terms of men. The world of ancient Egypt was a man’s world. Women may have had more rights and possibilities than their contemporaries elsewhere, but they did not have total equality with the men of their culture. As for their relationship to Nut or other Egyptian goddesses, Diodorus notwithstanding, it is difficult to see a decisively clear connection from this brief survey, despite the similarity in definition. Quite possibly, indeed probably, based on other cultures (Lerner 1986; Sanday 1981), a connection existed between the relatively respected position of women and the cosmogonic sky goddess and other dominant Egyptian goddesses. The nature and history of such a relationship cannot be conclusively affirmed, however, without a great deal of further research.

References Cited

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Hollis)