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Peer reviewed

Andrea Manzo: Ancient Egypt in its African context: Economic networks, social and cultural interactions

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In this volume, Andrea Manzo confronts the common perception of ancient Egypt as a Near Eastern (or Western Asian) civilization, in but not of Africa. This entry in Cambridge's Ancient Egypt in Context series provides a concise overview of evidence of ancient Egypt's Africanity. The first section provides a brief overview of how Egypt came to be removed from its African context through colonial and racist theoretical frameworks like the long discredited Hamitic Hypothesis and Dynastic Race theory. The author instead argues for newer models like entanglement that allow for cultural exchange between Egypt and its neighbors in a way that embeds Egypt in its proper African context, counterbalancing the traditional (and misguided) view of Egypt as more closely linked to the Near East than to the rest of Africa.

Manzo underlines ancient Egypt's African ecological context in the second part. He turns first to the Holocene environmental shifts in northeast Africa, when rainfall extended through what today is absolute desert in the Sahara, allowing for wide ranging and continuing interactions to the east, west, and south from the eighth through second millennia BCE. The desire to acquire and trade in valuable resources like gold, silver, and obsidian, and plants and animals, notably ebony (for fine furnishings), elephants (initially for ivory and later for warfare), and monkeys (particularly baboons for religious purposes) enhanced regional integration and interconnectivity. He also makes the important point that the widespread pastoral complex that prevailed across the region provided an early foundation and similarities in material culture, cultural practices, and iconography, both on objects and in widespread motifs found on rock art, particularly surrounding cattle.

The author continues with a historical overview of interactions across time, showing that these earlier entanglements never ended but continued throughout the Pharaonic period (c. 3100 BCE to 400 CE) and beyond. Here he highlights the importance of Nubia and Nubians in Egyptian society and as a regional counterbalance sometimes under Egyptian imperial control and sometimes dominating Egypt, but always entangled and facilitating wider engagements. These included trade and diplomatic expeditions that ranged as far as Punt at the horn of Africa via the Red Sea and overland caravan routes running southwest from Dakhla Oasis to Chad's Ennedi mountains and/or Darfur and the Wadi Howar (or Yellow Nile) in far western Sudan. This activity connected Egypt with a wide area across northeast Africa, sometimes as a dominant player, but often as a peer to other regional polities like the Nubian kingdom of Kush, Chadian/Sudanese Yam, and Punt.

Nubians settled in Egypt and likely married into the royal line during the New Kingdom empire (c. 1502-1070 BCE). Citing my work ([Smith, 2003](#)), Manzo argues that the cultural exchange was

more than assimilation, but entanglement, a process of reciprocal influence that resulted in a new and original culture emerging in Nubia with women playing a central role in mediating cultural exchanges. Kush came to dominate Egypt for a time as Pharaohs of the 25th Dynasty (c. 747 to 654 BCE), further deepening the engagement and entanglement of Egypt within Africa, a relationship that continued after the Assyrian conquest pushed them out of Egypt [\(Smith 2022\)](#). This included not only relationships along the Nile, but into the deserts to east and west, and south into the Sahel through Meroe, an important Kushite economic and political center, site of the later Kushite royal necropolis (c. 300 BCE to 350 CE).

The third part continues the theme of migration and intermarriage through a discussion of the movement of people into and out of Egypt, resulting in not just cultural but broad biological entanglements. Manzo makes the important point that the ideological juxtaposition of Egyptians and foreign others does not reflect the reality of Egypt's mixed population—in effect there are no “pure” Egyptians, which makes sense in terms of population dynamics. Egyptians and locals co-existed in Dakhla Oasis, while Nubians and Egyptians overlapped at Aswan in southern Egypt. Various outside groups settled throughout Egypt, including Nubians like the mixed community at Gebelein and the pastoral Medjay at the desert margins, and other Africans like Libyans in the Nile Delta, who played an important role in later Egyptian history. Manzo notes that settler colonialism brought Egyptians into Nubia, resulting in mixed populations and deepening cultural entanglements. During the 25th Dynasty, Kushite elites settled in Egypt, particularly at Thebes, the southern capital. I would argue that an enduring relationship with Thebes helps to explain the ease of the Kushite assumption of the Egyptian throne, their continuing loyalty to Kushites rebelling against the initial Assyrian conquest, and the later engagement of Meroitic rulers with elite uprisings against Hellenistic rule.

Against traditional Egyptological models of “Egyptianization,” Manzo argues that relationships with other African groups resulted in mutual influence going back to the beginnings of Pharaonic civilization. In the Saharan wet phase, [similarities in widespread](#) material culture (especially pottery and lithics), and symbolism surrounding cattle [with the ritual placement of bucrania](#), was [widespread. Cattle were](#) connected to kingship, [at Kerma with the ritual placement of bucrania around royal tombs and in Egypt](#) as illustrated on Narmer's famous palette with its cow goddesses and royal bull imagery. Cultural contributions came from the south, east, and west, and these relationships continued into later periods. Nubia in particular contributed elements of martial culture, such as the award of golden flies for valor. Religious influence includes Kushite ram imagery and other theological elements that were interwoven into the cult of Amun during the New Kingdom empire. Here I would add Solange Ashby's (2018) work on religious influence in the cult of Hathor through Nubian women's ritual performances. And Manzo's excellent discussion of the importance of the Temple of Isis at Philae as a political crossroads, would have benefitted from Ashby's (2020) work on the vital role that Nubians played in the later worship of Isis at Philae. Manzo correctly points out that while Kushite royal symbolism seems imitative, it was in fact adaptive, in particular with the prominence of royal women contrasting with their subordination in traditional Egyptian kingship ideology. I would also add that, in many ways, Kushite rulers transformed Pharaonic kingship to suit their own ideas of royal power in both Egypt and Nubia instead of imitating contemporary or harkening back to older forms to legitimate their control over Egypt as Manzo stresses (cf. pp. 70-74; Smith, 2022).

A few minor issues appear to reflect a reliance on older literature, for example the use of Pye (often rendered Piye) instead of Piankhi, which is now the accepted reading of the Kushite king's name. However, my largest critique is a tendency to use phrasing that reproduces an Egypt vs. Africa dichotomy (e.g., pp. 42-3, 55, 61). This may not have been the intent of the author, who otherwise emphasizes interconnections, but is particularly problematic in the heading for the third section "Africans in Egypt, Egyptians in Africa." In this framing, Egyptians are not themselves African, reifying what I (and others) have argued is a completely artificial division founded on older colonial and racist ideas like the Hamitic Hypothesis (Smith, 2018). This lapse is strange considering that this problematic history is acknowledged at the beginning of the book. It shows how deeply embedded this notion is within Egyptology. Better to simply see Egypt as fundamentally African, embedded within a northeast African milieu, interacting with and influencing, but not equally poised between, an African and Western Asian/Mediterranean milieu.

Nevertheless, Manzo's emphasis on the need to place Egypt back into its African setting is refreshing given Egyptology's continuing reluctance to engage with Afrocentric or even Africa-Centered approaches to one of the world's earliest state-level societies. The book goes a long way towards countering the divorce of Egypt from Africa that is the result of longstanding racist and colonial attitudes. Manzo makes an important contribution not only to Egyptology but also African history and archaeology more generally. His depth of scholarship makes it a highly useful overview for academics while its length and accessible writing style would make the volume ideal for course adoption.

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