

Running Head: THE ROOTS OF CULTURE

The Roots of Culture: Developing an Ethno Depth Psychological Inquiry into
the Role of the Nile in Ancient and Contemporary Egypt

Bonnie Bright

January 4, 2010

bonniebright@depthinsights.com

The Roots of Culture: Developing an Ethno Depth Psychological Inquiry into
the Role of the Nile in Ancient and Contemporary Egypt

“Perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung” (Griffin, 1992, p. 8).

Like many of us in western culture, I am aware of an underlying and ongoing search for meaning in life, looking for roots and a sense of groundedness in which I can locate myself and come into greater understanding and relationship with both my own sense of self and the collective world around me. I feel a longing to deeply relate to something historical, a holding container, to find myself at that invisible, universal place in the rhizome which is lasting and eternal, the place where Jung (1961) maintained that psyche and world are one.

As I consider the rich culture and history of ancient Egypt, a place and time that captivates the imagination with its soaring pyramids, complex hieroglyphics, ancient temples, and sacred deities, I am keenly aware of the youth and shallow history I perceive in my own culture and the lack of connection I feel with the land on which I live. How easy it would be, I think to myself, to live in a more rooted and connected way if lived in a country like Egypt with such a grand and sweeping history, with the mighty Nile river rushing through its midst. This culture is so foreign to my own, yet somehow so familiar. What, I want to know, is the connection between modern Egypt and its magnificent past? Even more specifically, what has been the impact of the lifeblood of the culture, the vital and powerful Nile, on both ancient and contemporary cultures? This is a question ripe for an ethno psychological inquiry that looks at history, mythology, worldview, ethnic groups, and ecology among other aspects.

When Freud, Adler, Jung, and others took the first tentative steps toward a new science in the world, a depth psychological field that focused not only on the conscious and the visible, but equally on the unconscious, the unknown, and the unspoken, they created a radical force that pushed research in a new direction. They birthed an opening into a rational world: a willingness to answer a question with a question; to accept that research is ongoing inquiry that leads one deeper into the soul of a subject rather than wrapping it up tight in a neat package with all the strings in place like so many of the other sciences insisted upon (Coppin & Nelson, 2005).

However, as with any field, any idea, the tendency of the human brain is to harness it, and to do so we must analyze, label, define, and control. The moment depth psychology was born into being as a science, it was already in full-fledged battle not to follow the suit of its predecessors. Though the very field itself is one of inquiry, openness, and allowing, the definitions of key concepts such as conscious and unconscious, psyche and soma, the archetypes, Jung's four functions, and others already began to take on the fixed shape of the very individuals who created them and that of the culture those men called their own.

Research from the Inside Out: An Emic Approach

The choice to conduct an inquiry requires a commitment to soul, a concept Romanyshyn (2007) discusses extensively in *The Wounded Researcher, saying:*

In the bodies of knowledge we create, our failure to take into account the presence of the unconscious takes the shape of our epistemologies, becoming one-sided, fixed truths and ideological exercises of power. One has only to look at the multiple splitting that has plagued the history and development of depth psychology to see how differences with the other, without proper consideration of the other in oneself, lead to animosity toward and the demonizing of the other. (p. 336)

Romanyshyn insists the bodies of knowledge that we create cast shadows as much as the physical body does, and cautions against assuming that what we take to be knowledge is truth.

To perform depth psychological research, then, we must allow a work to take shape from an organic level, a level of soul that cannot hope to repress or ignore the fact that we enter a project with preconceived ideas, notions, and values, but to take responsibility for them and allow them to exist and have their own voice all the while encouraging other voices and perceptions to show up from an *emic* standpoint, one that shapes up from the inside out (Hwang, 2006). Only by being highly aware of my own expectations, and of the values and beliefs that I carry with me into the experience can I begin to integrate them into the findings as they emerge and to take responsibility for the results, such as they are. Only then can I begin to be authentic, to understand when and why I am affected by something and to re-tell the story in a way that is valid and real. Even my curiosity alone about a given subject points to *a priori* values and ideas that I hold, those which shape my very quest.

Indeed, on a recent trip to Egypt, I observed contemporary Egyptians who live within the shadow of the pyramids of Giza, descendants of the pharaohs (either literally or symbolically) who seem to be simply going about their daily lives in much the same manner as I do, working, spending time with family and friends, or simply trying to survive in a culture that is increasingly global. As I consider a global culture progressively more victimized by media reports that seem to be growingly sloppy, incomplete, or one-sided as media becomes easier to disseminate and therefore more monochromatic, I began to wonder at the validity of my initial assumption, that Egyptians have access to some sort of magical embeddedness provided by the legacy of their ancient mytho-historical roots.

Wade Davis (2007) recounts the fear of anthropologist Margaret Mead that we are becoming a homogenous world that will eventually be so bland, generic, and amorphous, we may ultimately confine ourselves to a single intellectual and spiritual structure in which our imagination becomes completely lost. “Her nightmare,” Davis relates, “was the possibility that we might wake

up one day and not even remember what had been lost” (p. 199), a fear that also resonates deeply in me. Not only do I see the danger of earth’s cultures losing their identities, their sense of origin and place in the world, echoing the loss (and lostness) I feel in my own individual self, but I am also ever more aware of the danger that assessing cultures through a increasingly globalized *psychology* can create.

The Landscape and Lifeblood of Research

The mytho-historical culture of Egypt, however, still appears to be unique: perhaps one of the reasons it is so captivating. During my short visit there, the intensity with which I became immersed in the legendary stories of the gods and pharaohs, the celebrated cycles of nature that manifested in the rising and receding of the awesome Nile, and the quest for eternal life borne out by elaborate funerary rites, carefully-constructed tombs, and painstaking process of mummification to preserve the body from decay so it could reunite with the soul and live forever provided much food for thought. I began to wonder about the relationship of contemporary Egyptians to their romantic past as products of one of the earliest and most advanced civilizations in history, and to consider the legacy they carry. For the purposes of this inquiry which is limited in space and scope, I have chosen to look at the power and symbolism of one particular aspect of Egyptian history and culture, one without which Egypt herself would arguably not exist--the very lifeblood of Egypt itself, the Nile river.

For the ancient Egyptians, time was delineated by the rising and setting of the sun along with the annual flooding of the Nile which captivated the people with its power and unpredictability. Egyptians divided time into three seasons: drought, the season between, and inundation. The god Osiris ordained the annual flooding. Osiris, often depicted with green skin because of his association with the fertility of the Nile, was known as the one who weighed the

heart upon death to see if the individual had lived a worth existence enough to proceed to eternal life (Cox & Davies, 2007; Davis, 2007; Silverman, 1997).

Egyptian archaeologist Fadel Gad refers to the Nile as the spine of Egypt. Because it makes life possible, 90% of the Egyptian population lives along its banks. The Nile was believed to have its source in the Underworld, and its bounty through annual inundation was ritually celebrated. Khnum, the ram-headed creator god, was associated with the source of the Nile and was said to have created the human race on a potter's wheel with mud from the Nile (Silverman, 1997). Ancient Egyptian temples paying homage to the gods dot the Nile as it traverses its meandering course from South to North (Mishlove, 1995). Creatures of the Nile including the hippopotamus and the ibis were venerated among the Egyptians and were frequently associated with divinity, and the crocodile, frog, and fish also represented fertility (Silverman, 1997).

The Egyptians lived in awe of the Nile, assigning autonomous energy to it, making offerings to it as an unpredictable god which could make or break the survival of the people. When the Nile failed to rise, drought and famine ensued. When it rose too much, the inundation also wiped out villages and crops. The season just before the flooding began, when the water levels were low enough a person might cross the Nile on foot, was a time of intense apprehension as the people and the land waited for the flooding to be initiated. Though the Egyptians were unable to tame the mighty Nile, they did what they could to take advantage of the natural landscape to remain safe and make the most of the waters for agricultural use (Silverman, 1997). When the waters receded, mounds of fertile black earth gently emerged to be bathed in the sun as new life from the primordial waters of creation. Because of the this cyclical rise and fall of the water, it is easy to see why the Egyptians built their civilization on the concept of life after death.

How Things Change: The High Dam

Everything changed with the construction of the High Dam which began in 1960 and lasted a decade. The reservoir began filling in 1964, leading to the creation of Lake Nassar, a lake about the size of Texas and New Mexico combined, named after the Egyptian president who put the plan into action. The commencement of the dam and formation of the lake put an end to the eternal recurring seasons controlled by the Nile for untold millennia. The end of the flooding season forever ruptured the reign of the Nile god, symbolically ending the powerful cycles of life, death, and rebirth. As the great icon of eternal life was effectively washed away forever, so was much of the very culture which is part of Egypt's integral history. Dozens of historic archeological remains were buried under the water of the new lake and tens of thousands of Nubians, the indigenous inhabitants of the area, were displaced from their lands and homes (EconomicExpert.com, 2010).

The formation of Lake Nassar threatened to wipe out a number of major archeological monuments, millennias-old sites that formed part of the foundation of the identity of Egypt itself. Under the guidance of UNESCO, and with help from a number of countries around the world, 24 major monuments were moved to locations where they would not be inundated, including the two massive rock temples of Abu Simbel built by Ramses II (EconomicExpert.com, 2010).

On my own visit to Abu Simbel, located just a few kilometers from the Sudanese border, I was deeply moved and impacted by the enormous 67-foot-high statues that adorn the outside of the temple. During relocation, they were partitioned into giant blocks and moved one at time to higher ground just a few hundred meters from their original location which now sits at the bottom of Lake Nassar. Inside the temple, now housed inside an artificial mountain in lieu of the original living rock, columns of immense standing figures tower overhead on both sides of a the hallway and intricate murals and hieroglyphs are etched and painted on every square inch of the walls. Here, it is impossible not to feel located in something bigger than myself. Though Egypt is not my own

genetic or ancestral culture, the phenomenological understanding I experienced simply by being in the presence of such incredible work that is millennia old (from around 1200 B.C.) from a civilization of such ancient richness, made me feel like I belonged there, made me feel rooted and located in the earth itself, my feet placed firmly on the ground like the giant statues themselves.

Romanyshyn reminds us that feeling into a topic from a soul perspective radically changes our relationship to it in a far different way than does thinking about it rationally. Paying attention to the landscape of the research, the phenomenology, brings a level of authenticity that underlies language, taps into a kind of *tacit knowing* that is universal, an energy that transcends the individual and extends into the shadowy archetypal forms of the collective unconscious. Hillman acknowledges this way of knowing, stating, “The developed feeling function is the reason of the heart which the reason of the mind does not quite understand” (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 287).

Though I was prepared on what to expect from a factual standpoint by my Egyptian guide before I entered the vicinity of Abu Simbel as it sits on the edge of Lake Nassar, and while it is clear that she took pride in the monument that represents her own collective history, my own reaction to the site was so powerful that it made me wonder how the site affects the Egyptian people who have the opportunity to go there. From my own standpoint, and clearly that of many developed and educated countries, it is clear that site had to be saved from the rising waters no matter the cost. Relocating the site allowed Egypt to maintain a critical piece of the national identity and has also helped the economy because of tourism, but what part does this powerful image really hold in the hearts and minds—in the *imagination*—of contemporary Egyptians? I cannot even assume most of them have ever seen it in real life even though I, who live on the other side of the world, have.

Entering an inquiry with a preconceived framework on which to hang one’s findings creates a construct of a specific type, something essentially prefabricated that relies on one’s a priori lens

and values in order to take shape at all, a knowing without embeddedness. Giving over to *wirklichkeit*, or the “given world,” on the other hand, relies on a “primordial embeddedness without knowing” (Wallner & Jandl, 2006, p. 55). Scientists can only understand their knowledge if they rely on their scientific constructs and see through to what they carry with them into the inquiry. Being in reality is not an option; paying attention to the reality we assign--either consciously or unconsciously—is a critical aspect of the research, allowing it to wash over us and create a life of its own.

Strangers in a Strange Land: Seeking Roots of Authenticity

The transformation of the natural Nile and the creation of Lake Nassar heralded the displacement of over 90,000 Nubians in Egypt, making them exiles in their own country (EconomicExpert.com, 2010). In a compensatory move for permanently covering the entire area of Egyptian Nubia with the waters of the Nile, the Egyptian government promised to build a new Nubia, constructing reproductions of 30 inundated villages replete with the same names as the originals. However, the location of the townships did not allow the transplanted Nubians to produce the fruit, dates and fish they had lived off of tens or hundreds of kilometers to the south in the fertile valley now covered by the harnessed Nile. Additionally, some families never received the promised government constructed homes at all, and, for those who did, many of the houses cracked or collapsed from faulty masonry (Williams, 2008).

As Minsky (1998) points out, the loss of connection with ancient roots may be contributing to an increased fragmentation in the culture and this is certainly illustrated by the visible stressors placed on the Nubians in southern Egypt with the forced loss of their land to the Nile. Though the Nubians ruled Egypt during pharaonic times, and many still hold an ensouled view of the Nile as an archetypal mother energy, contemporary Nubians fear their youth are losing their memory and connection to the culture (Williams, 2008). This loss of connection can lead to increased social

violence, crime, and psychological disorders among other things. I am reminded in this inquiry that I must gently hold any and all resulting consequences from a life-and-culture changing event that has been perpetrated on the Nubians. Obviously, the worldview or schema of one particular group is a guiding (and sometimes unconscious) factor in any values and opinions held by the group. When stressors are introduced that affect these core defining structures, conflict emerges on every level, beginning with community and trickling down to family and individuals (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Fromer, 1995). In my inquiry into the impact of the Nile on contemporary culture, my own core sense of displacement, and that of entire countries and cultures in contemporary society, echoes the loss of the Nubian homelands and affects me even now, miles and years apart as invisible ripples from the event reach out and I, as a researcher, try to hold them.

There is no reality but only varying perspectives imbued with value and meaning. Since knowledge is what enables us to cope in the world, there is no way to enter into research without *a priori* knowledge. The knowledge each human being has access to is subjective and unique, shaped by a complex set of filters and lenses made up of cultural conditioning, family values, education, ancestral patterns, and more. Approaching a research work requires soul, an allowing, without making judgments and drawing conclusions, of all the voices that want to be heard, the ones that have been marginalized, silenced, or otherwise pushed aside. Indeed, even we must use caution because the preconditioning we carry into a work can even determine which voices we hear and which we are deaf to, a concept that ties to what Romanyshyn (2007) calls “emotional deafness”, the failure to recognize the other that is within us. But, if we are willing to listen deeply, especially into the silences, a pattern emerges.

What are the voices here that are calling out? Not only are they the voices of the poor and the marginalized, the local Egyptians who live along the banks of the Nile in mud houses that do not have the core services we take for granted as Americans—like massive supermarkets where our

food seems to magically appear from all corners of the world, or like garbage collection and recycling services where trucks come to our curb to clear away our waste--but what of the voices of the land and landscape itself that holds a memory of veneration by the ancients, or of the ancestors, the ones who tended the Nile and paid homage to it through ritual and sacrifice? They may be long gone from the physical, visible realm we see, but surely their energy remains somehow, and their voices demand to be heard, calling us all back home to our roots in the sacred.

The Ecology of Ethnocentric Research

It's easy to imagine that many Egyptians appreciate the harnessing of the Nile. The High Dam contains twelve generators within Lake Nassar which began generating power for the country in 1967. As the dam achieved peak output, it produced approximately half of Egypt's electricity production, radically changing the lives of contemporary Egyptians as it provided electricity to most Egyptian villages for the very first time. The dam also eliminated the dangerous and unpredictable floods of the past. Additionally, with the newfound option of cruise ships to run the Nile year-round, tourism is increasingly contributing to the economy and creating a new social class of tour guides who are specially educated and who earn significant remuneration in western currencies as they are exposed to conversation and ideas from the often liberal tourists who boldly turn up from foreign countries (EconomicExpert.com, 2010).

The human-constructed dam is taking its toll on the environment. Every year, at the end of October, as the natural floodwaters of the Nile began to recede, they left behind a rich deposit of fertile silt that allowed new life to grow. The creation of the High Dam at Aswan, though mitigating the capricious floods, halted the distribution of valuable silt forever. Instead, the precious silt now builds up uselessly behind the dam and the fertility of the once-rich land of along the river and in the Nile Delta has declined dramatically, leaving Egyptians no choice but to use harsh chemical fertilizers to support their crops. Meanwhile, severe erosion is eating away at banks

of the Nile because they are no longer being replaced by fresh silt, and rice marshes and fish populations have declined as freshwater pools are no longer produced (EconomicExpert.com, 2010).

For contemporary Egyptians, the harnessing of the Nile has ended its ensoulment. No longer is it a deity to be honored and make offerings to. Its power as a god is gone, and thus the respect and awe the inhabitants of Egypt once held for it has evaporated as well. Sadly, the Nile I witnessed in Cairo was deeply distressing, its banks piled high with trash so that hardly any of the earth itself was visible. The water carried floating garbage, plastic bags, bottles, and various junk people dumped when they no longer wanted it. The Nile, rather than being a bringer of life has become more associated with a graveyard, and rebirth seems a far-off illusion.

From my own privileged viewpoint, it is easy for me to behold the damage done to the once-sacred Nile and make judgments. On tour, I was influenced by the stories of my tour guides, envisioned in my mind's eye the mighty Nile of the ancients, the lifeblood of the civilization, the deity that it was considered to be. To see the Nile as it is today, polluted and dirty, I am devastated, experiencing a rupture in my expectation and my fantasy, the one I hold in my imagination. However, listening to the silence, the voices that have not been heard, I hear them wondering if contemporary Egyptians have not simply colonized the Nile in much the same way that Europeans, my own ancestors, colonized Egypt and much of Africa for centuries, and I have to pause and hold the feelings of grief that rise up in me.

Obeyesekere (1990) suggests we need to understand our conflicts in cultural symbols and express them in a mythical way while Mishra (2006) advocates that using an imaginal approach to research allows us to transcend past experience as researchers and give the topic due as a subjective force of its own. Indeed, a depth approach to research eschews positivism and acknowledges an autonomy about a research project that cries out to be done, one that appeals to a researcher and

entices her to take the first step to re-membering the thing that wants to come forth, the thing that *wants to be revealed*—something she likely does not know already and may not have any past experience with. Recognizing the potentiality that arises from this deepening subjectivity on behalf of the work that calls out to be done, how can a responsible researcher who is truly called to a particular inquiry *not* take steps to contain and frame her own preconceived notions and expectations that based on her own upbringing and cultural conditioning? Good depth research reveals deeper and deeper layers into the collective substrata rather than pinpointing specific answers that lie closer to the surface.

In truth, the relationship of contemporary Egyptian people to the Nile is complex and varied and the subject clearly requires additional scope and depth of research. If the “old” Nile is gone, what is the new Nile? How does the archetypal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth continue now that the Nile is contained? The cradle of religion is culture and vice versa. If the Nile has been bound, stopped in its course, who is the new god being worshiped? In a sense, a new Nile is emerging for Egypt, one that welcomes tourists and visitors from all corners of the world, preserving the uniqueness and identity that provides the Egyptian people with roots while allowing an opportunity for people like me to experience the awesome temples, monuments, and stories of ancient Egypt.

What, then, is the lifeblood of an ethno depth psychological approach to inquiry—the new Nile of research? If cultural depth psychology includes openness, non-judgment, and organic/emic inquiry, it is vital to be able to imagine from another’s eyes. Meaning is replaced by new things appearing that provide meaning, by light being shined into shadow. Perhaps, if I as a researcher become the banks of an open space, an empty waiting channel in which the living water can rush, the myth and meaning will wash over me, cleansing and bringing new verdant life with roots that grow in something vast and strong.

References

- Coppin, J., & Nelson, E. (2005). *The art of inquiry: A depth psychological perspective*. Putnam, CT: Spring Publications.
- Cox, S., & Davies, S. (2007). *An A to Z of ancient Egypt* (2nd ed.). London, England: Mainstream.
- Davis, W. (2007). *Light at the edge of the world: A journey through the realm of vanishing cultures*. Vancouver, B.C.: Douglas & McIntyre.
- EconomicExpert.com (2010). Aswan Dam Retrieved January 2, 2010, from <http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Aswan:Dam.htm>
- Griffin, S. (1992). *A chorus of stones: The private life of war*. New York: DoubleDay.
- Hwang, K.-K. (2006). Constructive Realism and Confucian Relationalism. In U. Kim, K.-S. Yang & K.-K. Hwang (Eds.), *Indigenous and cultural psychology* (pp. 73-107). New York: Springer.
- Jung, C. G. (1961). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. New York: Random House.
- McCubbin, H., Thompson, E., Thompson, A., & Fromer, J. E. (1995). *Resiliency in ethnic minority families: Native and immigrant American families*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Center Family Studies.
- Minsky, R. (1998). *Psychoanalysis and culture: Contemporary states of mind*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mishlove, J. (1995). An Egyptian Journey of the Soul Retrieved December 17, 2009, from <http://www.intuition.org/journey.htm>,
- Mishra, R. C. (2006). Indian Perspectives on Cognition. In U. Kim, K.-S. Yang & K.-K. Hwang (Eds.), *Indigenous and cultural psychology* (pp. 263-281). New York: Springer.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1990). The works of culture: Symbolic transformation in psychoanalysis and anthropology. In *The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures*. (pp. 1-51). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Romanyshyn, R. D. (2007). *The wounded researcher: Research with soul in mind*. New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal Books.
- Silverman, D. P. (Ed.). (1997). *Ancient Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wallner, F. G., & Jandl, M. J. (2006). The Importance of Constructive Realism for the Indigenous Psychologies Approach. In U. Kim, K.-S. Yang & K.-K. Hwang (Eds.), *Indigenous and cultural psychology* (pp. 49-107). New York: Springer.
- Williams, D. (2008, November 23). Nubians push for a return to their drowned homeland. *The New York Times*. from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/world/africa/23iht-letter.2.18890692.html>.