

Royal Divinity in Pharaonic Egypt: A Reconsideration of Egyptian Divine Kingship Through the Lens of Cognitive Science

The typical terminological framing of divine kingship, both in Egyptology and in other cultural contexts, has revolved around the question of whether or not the king can be considered to 'be a god'. There are two components to this: the question of the ontological status of the king (his 'being' divine), and the question of what 'a god' actually is. I will start with the latter.

The term 'god' is increasingly considered contentious in its employment within the study of ancient cultures, being redolent of monotheistic (especially Christian) conceptions of the divine that are rooted in cultural theological assumptions which are not necessarily appropriate to impose on earlier or more distant cultures. This is certainly the case with regard to ancient Egypt, where the content of the concept expressed by the term *ntrw* is very different to that found in the Abrahamic faiths.¹ If we are to examine Egyptian conceptions of the divine in etic terms, then we will need to find a serviceable alternative to 'god'.

A recent terminological innovation from anthropology presents a useful solution. Marshall Sahlins, in his comparative work on pre-modern cultures, has coined the term 'metapersons' as a culturally non-specific term to refer to beings that might be called in more culturally specific terms "animistic spirits, demons, ghosts and ancestors, species and place masters, and high gods."² This term is also useful in being easy to convert from an ontological status ('being a metaperson') to referring to a quality that an entity may possess in variable degrees ('having metapersonality'), which would accord better with more recent notions of divinity as a relative status, or as something which can be bestowed, lost, magnified or diminished – as is the case in Egyptian kingship, with the coronation intended to actualise the divine status of the king, which then needed "recharging" periodically through the *Heb-sed* festival.³

Whilst 'metaperson' may be a serviceably neutral term, the content of the concept in Sahlins work is insufficiently specific, simply serving to unify under one umbrella a set of phenomena that are actually rather different to each other (Sahlins constructs a typology of metaperson forms, which would seem to undermine the benefit of introducing the term in the first place).⁴ If we are to use the term productively, we will need to provide a clearer set of cross-culturally valid definitive criteria that can allow us to determine the metapersonality of an entity. Such criteria can in fact be derived from the efforts of researchers in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which has identified several features shared by metapersons in various cultures as a result of cognitive mechanisms universally

¹ Lloyd 2014, p. 228-229.

² Sahlins 2022, pp.70-73.

³ Lloyd 2014, pp.68-69. On divinity as a relative status, see Gradel 2002, pp. 25-26, and Woolf 2008 (both with regard to Roman emperorship).

⁴ Sahlins 2022, pp. 73-123.

present in the human mind, which thus ought to be identifiable (in culturally specific forms) in any culture, including pharaonic Egypt.

According to CSR, metapersons are minimally counterintuitive, psychologically anthropomorphic, powerful, knowledgeable, interested, intentional agents, with social or emotional salience for the (human) person who interacts with them.⁵ Some of these criteria are fairly straightforward: psychological anthropomorphism refers to our tendency to believe that metapersons think like humans do; intentional agency, in this context, means that metapersons have desires and objectives, and act upon them independently; and social or emotional salience is more a necessary product of possessing the other criteria to a sufficiently high degree, rather than a trait in and of itself.

The minimally counterintuitive property is essential for differentiating a metaperson from an 'ordinary' human person. Cognitive science has identified numerous intuitive 'folk' beliefs about physics, biology and psychology that are naturally acquired by all humans, in addition to a set of basic ontological categories that are acquired in early childhood. A minimally counterintuitive concept (MCI) possesses "at least one property that violates the intuitive assumptions we hold about its category" (e.g. 'a man that can walk through walls'; an Egyptian example might be that the gods have bones of silver, skin of gold, and hair of lapis lazuli).⁶ Crucially, an MCI must not possess too many counterintuitive properties, or it will be too complex to retain in the mind. This property of minimal counterintuitiveness conditions other criteria for metapersonality: that metapersons are powerful and knowledgeable. This power and knowledge must be either of a degree or nature greater than that which can be ordinarily exercised by a human being, otherwise it is not counterintuitive.

Returning to the matter of divine kingship, it can be argued that the question of whether or not a king was believed to 'be' a god (i.e. metaperson) depends partly upon how far they possessed (or were believed to possess) the metapersonal criteria outlined above (and on how far those criteria were recognised as being shared with more typical metapersons within that culture). Within an ancient Egyptian context, it seems clear that the conception of pharaonic kingship did attribute the king with a high degree of metapersonality. The king's power in terms of exercising the social control necessary to engage in monumental building projects across the country was supplemented by more 'supernatural' (and thus counterintuitive) powers such as *hu*, *bau*, and *heka*; the enhanced knowledge of the king was expressed through his possession of *sia*; and his social salience is attested by the widespread presence of the royal cult, principally in the form of the so-called mortuary temples.⁷ These attested metapersonal properties of the king were shared with the *ntrw*, who were also

⁵ Purzycki, 2022, pp. 71-79; Larson 2016 pp. 19-21; Mackey 2022, pp. 12-23.

⁶ Larson, 2016, p. 19.

⁷ Lloyd 2014, p. 67; Quirke 1992, pp. 81-90. The king's psychological anthropomorphism and intentional agency are inherent in his human nature, but that does not impede their reinforcement of his metapersonality when considered alongside his more 'supernatural' traits.

believed to possess *hu*, *bau*, *heka*, and *sia*, and who were also worshipped through cult in temples throughout Egypt.⁸

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gradel, I. (2002) *Emperor-worship and Roman religion*. Oxford Classical Monographs. Clarendon Press.

Larson, J. (2016) *Understanding ancient Greek religion: a cognitive approach*. Understanding the Ancient World. Routledge.

Lloyd, A. B. (2014) *Ancient Egypt: state and society*. Oxford University Press.

Mackey, J. L. (2022) *Belief and cult: rethinking Roman religion*. Princeton University Press.

Purzycki, B. G. (2022) 'Gods: cognition, culture and ecology', in J. L. Barrett (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the cognitive science of religion*. Oxford University Press, pp. 67-89.

Quirke, S. (1992) *Ancient Egyptian religion*. British Museum Press.

Sahlins, M. (2022) *The new science of the enchanted universe: an anthropology of most of humanity*. Princeton University Press.

Wolf, G. (2008) 'Divinity and power in ancient Rome' in N. Brisch (ed.), *Religion and power: divine kingship in the ancient world and beyond*. Oriental Institute Seminars 4. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, pp. 243-259.

⁸ Lloyd 2014, p. 232.