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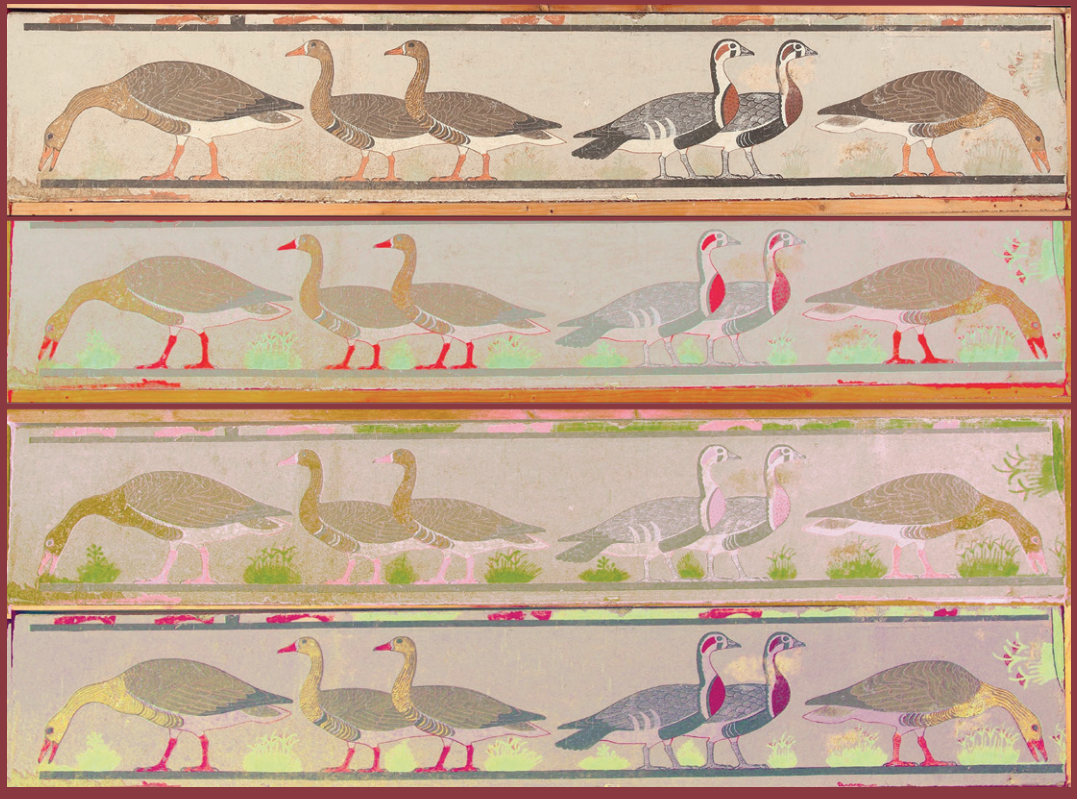

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ANTIQUITIES

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"A God Who Perceives What is in the Hearts"

On the New Kingdom Concept of Silent Prayer

In the *incipit* of an influential paper, Pieter van der Horst thus summarizes the problems underlying the notion of "silent", "inner" or "mental" prayer in the Mediterranean antiquity:

> The ancients said their prayers out loud. There can be little doubt that throughout the ancient world, the common practice was to say prayers in way audible to other persons. The reason simply was (…) the anthropomorphic conception of the deities (…). No sound implied no hearing. (…) When silent prayer is mentioned, it is undeniably regarded as an anomaly.[1]

Although the essay does not deal with Egyptian literature, the statement seems generally tenable for most Pharaonic sources. The vast majority of the recorded "appeals" or "prayers"[2] are framed as outspoken, and a long tradition of studies has been devoted to the "personal piety"[3] notion of a "god who hears prayers", with its strong focus on the vocal and aural components of the exchange.[4] Several factors may have concurred to this prevalence: from the anthropomorphic/theriomorphic conception of most of the pantheon, to culturally specific phenomena, such as the confidence in the performative power of utterances, the divine origin of speech and writing, and the role of listening as both a cornerstone of social coexistence and a means to access the transcendent. The present contribution offers a brief overview to integrate such perspective: *"la prière personnelle se fait habituellement dans le silence"*,[5] and several ancient Egyptian texts, in fact, explicitly mention inner prayers, not as deviations from the norm, or caused by impeding external factors, but being a conscious choice of the worshipper, met with the favour of the god.

The most renowned examples are found in the *corpus* of the Teachings. The virtue of "keeping silence" had prominently featured in the genre since the Teaching for Kagemni, mainly as a value of relational ethics, a culturally codified practice that ensured personal advantages and smooth functioning to

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1. Van der Horst 1994, pp. 1–2.
2. For an assessment of the terminology of "prayers", see Meeks 2000.
3. Luiselli 2008.
4. For recent treatises and bibliography on the subject, see Emerit 2011; Meyer-Dietrich 2017.
5. Meeks 2000, p. 18.

the state; but a definite expansion of this notion in the religious sphere can be observed from the 18th dynasty onwards.[6] The first and most perspicuous appearance of inaudible prayer is the early 19th dynasty[7] Teaching of Ani (17, 1–4; 20, 10–14):

m dȝyt ʿšȝ mdwt
gr.tw ḫpr.k m nfr
m ỉr ỉrt-ḫrw (m) ḫnw n nṯr
bwt.f pw sbḥ
snmḥ.n.k m ỉb mry
ỉw mdt.f nb ỉmn
ỉry.f ḫrt.k
sḏm.f […]
sšp.f wdnt.k[8]

Refrain from uttering many words:
be silent, and all will end well.
Do not raise your voice in the chapel of the god:
he abhors shouting.
If you pray with a loving heart,
whose every word is concealed,
he will satisfy your needs,
as he hears [your words]
and he will accept your offering.

A comparable counsel for a demure interaction with deities, as consequence of their *"bwt"* of noise and verbal disturbance, is clearly articulated in the Ramesside pChester Beatty IV, both in its Teaching (*v*, 5, 2) and in an hymn to Amun-Re (*r*, 5, 3–8):

n.k ỉmỉ.k nḏnḏ nṯr nn mr nṯr ḫnḫn sw (…)
sȝw.tw ḥr ḳȝỉ ḫrw m pr.f mr nṯr sgr[9]

Do not interrogate God: God loves not a man who approaches him (…).
Beware of loudness of voice in his house: God loves silence.

Ỉmn (…) mr gr r ḳȝỉ ḫrw[10]

Amun (…), he who loves the silent more than the high of voice.

6. Assmann 1984.
7. For the dating of the *Teaching*, see Quack 1994, pp. 61–62.
8. Quack 1994, pp. 94, 108.
9. Gardiner 1935, vol. I, p. 42; vol. II, pl. 20.
10. Gardiner 1935, vol. I, p. 30; vol. II, pl. 14.

At the end of the New Kingdom, the Teaching of Amenemope coalesces the wisdom tradition with the conceptualizations of the Ramesside *Zeitgeist*, thoroughly delineating the figure of the "truly silent man who sets himself aside"[11] as the correct model of approach to the divine. Besides the many scenarios where silence stands as a fruitful solution for its social and cultic benefits, and the iconic contrast, in Chapter 4, between the opposite destinies of the "*grw*" and the "hot one" (*pꜣ šmm*) in the temple,[12] Chapter 5 (7, 7–10) also delineates the *makarismòs* of the pious man with the oxymoron of the "silent who speaks":

ỉr gr nb n ḫwt-nṯr
st ḏd wr ḥs Rᶜ
ỉ.mḥ.tw n gr gm.k pꜣ ᶜnḫ[13]

As for all the silent ones in the temple,
they say 'Re is great of blessings.'
Fill yourself with silence, and you will find life.

These literary motifs find correspondence in various private documents displaying a special attentiveness of the gods towards "the silent man", a figure with whom the devotees thus yearn to identify. Such re-semantization of the sapiential and biographical archetype of the "*grw*" with nuances of humility, and dependence from the deity, is a complex phenomenon that exceeds the scope of the present paper. The selection of sources below highlights the Ramesside *topos* of the association between Amun and the "silent one".

Statuette of the royal scribe Amenemope (Berlin 6910, Sethi I-Ramses II; Deir el-Medina):

How good it is, to sit in the hand of Amun,
the guardian of the silent, the saviour of the poor (*pꜣ sbb m gr šd nmḫ*)![14]

Stela of the draughtsman Nebre (Berlin 20377, early 19th dynasty; Deir el-Medina):

You are Amun, the lord of the silent, who comes at the voice of the poor (*pꜣ nb n grw ỉy ḥr ḫrw nmḫ*):

I call (*ỉᶜš*) to you in my suffering, and you come to save me.[15]

11. Ch. 4 (6, 7); Laisney 2007, p. 72.
12. Laisney 2007, p. 72.
13. Laisney 2007, pp. 79–80.
14. Assmann 1999, p. 397.
15. Assmann 1999, p. 372; Erman 1911, p. 1091, pl. 16.

Block-statue of the royal scribe Ray (CG917, 19th dynasty; Temple of Mut, Karnak):

Amun (…) lives on truth, his abomination is falsehood;
he loves the silent, the calm one (ʿnḫ.f m mɜʿt bwt.f grg mr.f gr ḳbb).[16]

Anonymous inscribed seat (Turin n. 50259, Ramesside period; Deir el-Medina):

[…] arms of Amun, the [lord of] the silent (*pɜ [nb n] gr*), eyes in the place […].[17]

oPetrie 6 (UC39609, Ramesside period):

Amun, the protector of he who has no mouth (Ỉmn pɜ ʿḏr n pɜ s ỉwty rɜ.f).[18]

Graffito n. 1396, Valley of the Kings (Ramesside period):

Amun (…) the saviour of the righteous who has no mouth (*šd pɜ mɜʿty ỉwty rɜ.f*).[19]

Together with the imagery of these examples, it is possible to also quote other distinct references to nonverbal worship. In the chapel of Amenhotep-Huy (TT 40), viceroy of Kush under Tutankhamun, the caption of a scene of adoration of Osiris includes the following passage:

wnn ḥss tw ḥr gr ỉnk dr srf[20]

He who praises you keeps silent; I am he who fends off the ardour.

Since the epithet of "*dr/dɜr srf*" is a frequent feature of New Kingdom biographies, revolving around the conceptual metaphor "antagonism is heat",[21] and often paired with the qualities of "cool calm" ("*ḳbb*") and "silent", the whole phrase seems focused on a tacit mode of veneration—possibly related to the nature of the god involved, the "*nb sgr*" and "Lord of Igeret".[22]

A stela dedicated by the royal scribe Thutmose-Tjuroy, from the reign of Ramses IX (DeM 280), explicitly states that the god not only cares for the "*grw*", but actually responds to him, in a striking juxtaposition between the vocal and factual act of answering, and silence of the worshipper:

16. Assmann 1980, pp. 2–3; Borchardt 1930, pp. 153, 5. The text quotes the hymn to Akhenaten in the tomb of Panehesy (EA 6: Assmann 1999, p. 528), but with the addition of the line on the "*grw*", as if in a "modernization" of the discourse.
17. Tosi, Roccati 1972, pp. 209, 360.
18. Černý, Gardiner 1957, p. 3, pl. VII, 3, 3–4.
19. Černý 1956, p. 27, 1936, 4, pl. 77.
20. Davies 1926, p. 30, pl. XXI.
21. Di Biase-Dyson 2018, p. 35.
22. LGG III, pp. 590, 742–744.

Amun-Re (…), he who responds to the silent, who gives breath to his throat (*wšbw n grw pꜣ dd ṯꜣw n ḫḥ.f*).[23]

This rarer model of piety does not detract from the spoken and aural interaction with the divine. "He has eyes and ears, a face on each side for his beloved ones; he hears the prayers of those who call to him, and he comes from afar for those who summon him" (Great Hymn to Amun of Leiden):[24] this is, indeed, the preferred pattern to express the connection between the celestial spheres and humankind, with its powerful imagery of virtuous devotees imploring in the hour of need, and gods who hear and rush to their aid—so pervasive that the "cry to Amun" motif was even employed by Ramses II in his propaganda.[25] The gods of "personal piety" are gods who speak, respond, instruct. Nonetheless, the New Kingdom theological speculation produced the parallel concept of a god who can hear a tacit call from the heart.

As illustrated by van der Horst, a significant conceptual gap seems to have hindered the validation of inaudible prayers for centuries. But in the 18th and 19th dynasties, the Egyptian religious experience had already laid stable grounds for this theoretical leap: one above all, the long-assessed notion that "god sees in the heart". As early as in the Teaching for Merikare,[26] the theme of the divine interest for his creatures, complete with active listening, was established lucidly:

(Well) provided is humankind, the cattle of the god. (…)
He traverses (the sky) to see them,
he has built a shrine behind their backs,
and when they weep, he hears (*rmm.sn ỉw.f ḥr sḏm*).[27]

The academic literature on the subjects of *Gottesnähe*, divine omniscience and providence in the New Kingdom is, naturally, vast.[28] As our topic is concerned, the aforementioned considerations are effectively condensed in a passage from the chapel of Rekhmire, vizier of Thutmosis III (TT 100). Well in advance of the Ramesside developments of the idea, he raises a hymn to the all-encompassing, all-knowing divine principle, with a particular reference to the "silent man":

sḏmw [ỉrf tn] ntyw m ḫpr nṯr rḫ ntt m ḫt ʿwt [nbt ỉmnt] spg ḥr ʿwy.f (…) sštꜣ […] pḥꜣ m ḥr.f grw […] wf rḫ sw[29]

Listen, [o you who] are in existence: God knows what is in the body, the limbs [that are in it, all of them], are open in front of him. (…) The secrets of […], they open up to his view, the silent one […], he knows him.

23. Assmann 2013, p. 79; Bruyère 1952, pp. 118–120, pl. XLIV.
24. Assmann 1995, p. 200.
25. Gardiner 1960, pp. 9–10. For the spatial dimension of the interaction of "calling and coming", see Potter 2018.
26. For the problems of dating Merikare, see Quack 2013a; Stauder 2013, pp. 175–198.
27. P134-138; see Helck 1977, p. 98; Lorton 1993; Quack 1992.
28. E.g., Assmann 2001 and related bibliography.
29. Urk. IV, 1083.

Such considerations are echoed in the tomb of the High priest of Amun Nebwenenef, in the proclamation of his appointment by Ramses II:

> As for my father Amun, he is a great god (…) who investigates bodies, who reveals hearts (*ḏʿr ḫwt wbꜣ ḥꜣtyw*); he is Perception, who knows inside the body (*sỉꜣ rḫ ḫnw ḫt*).[30]

Omniscience, "hearing of the heart" and the presence of God in men are cited in another hymn to Amun of pChester Beatty IV (r, 10,13):

> *ỉn ỉw ʿnḫwy.ky pḫr.w ỉbw.sn sšmt m ḫt nbt*
>
> Are not your ears inclined (to) their hearts? (Your) guidance is in every body.[31]

In the opinion of J. Assmann, the roots of the model of "god in the heart" can be traced back to the Amarnian proscription of traditional deities, resulting in a new quality of hiddenness of the divine:[32] transfigured in an object of inner spiritual reflection, the Ramesside god is manifested only to those who search for him, who hunger and thirst after him, who have "placed him in the heart" (*rdỉ nṯr m ỉb*).[33] Whether this theory is accepted or not, it is still possible to consider how the concealed nature of divine will—a problem of theodicy in the Middle Kingdom pessimistic literature—becomes, in the New Kingdom, a fundamental characteristic of the gods, making them accessible only for those who seek them with commitment. The process is archetypically represented in the Ramesside prayer to Thot from pSallier I (8, 2–7), where the "silent man" is the sole receiver of the divine message of wisdom and truth, a pool of fresh water in the heat of violent discourses.

> *mỉ šd.k wỉ pꜣ grw Ḏḥwty tꜣ ḫmt nḏmt mỉ s ỉb (m) dšrt*
> *sw ḫtmw.tỉ n pꜣ gm rꜣ.f sw wn.tỉ n pꜣ grw*
> *ỉỉ pꜣ grw gm.f tꜣ ḫmt*
> *(n) pꜣ šmw tw.k [mḥt]*[34]
>
> Come and save me, the silent one! O Thot, you, sweet well for he who suffers thirst in the desert!
> It is closed for him who finds his mouth, open for the silent one.
> May the silent one come, and he will find the well;
> O hot one, you are under control.

30. *KRI* III, 284, 1–2.
31. Gardiner 1935, I p. 34, II pl. 16.
32. Assmann 1994.
33. Assmann 2001, pp. 197–198.
34. Caminos 1954, pp. 413–414; Gardiner 1937, p. 86. Translation follows Assmann 1999, p. 413–414; Quack 2013b.

"The heart of man is the nose of the god (*ỉr ḥɔty n rmṯ fnd n nṯr*), beware of neglecting it", recites a maxim of Amenemope (24, 4–5):[35] the innermost being is placed in direct contact with the divine, so that thoughts are not just heard, or seen, but *inhaled* by the god. Praying "with a loving heart, of which all words are hidden" thus develops as a logic consequence of this axis between heart and god; while temples and contra-temples become auditory places of supplication, the "*ib*" poses as an alternative dimension, an imagined space of immediate closeness. The coexistence between such an innovative elaboration in the frame of reference of the man-god relationship, and the time-honoured aural model, is indubitably supported by the versatile quality of the ancient Egyptian mindset, in its "multiplicity of approaches".

The principles of divine omniscience and inner prayer will be explicitly reiterated in the Demotic Teaching of P. Insinger (31, 1–5):

> When people raise their hands, the god knows.
> He knows the impious man who ponders iniquities,
> he knows the man of god, and that he has the greatness of the god in his heart.
> Before the tongue has been questioned, the god knows its answers (*pɔ ls ỉw bw-rʿ.tw.w šn.t.f n.f ḏdw pɔ nṯr ỉr-rḫ st*).[36]

The same is said of Hathor in her festal song in the Temple of Dendera (A.3, 5), testifying the persistence of this pattern in the official religious discourse of the Greco-Roman age:

> You see what is in his body
> even when he does not speak with his mouth (*mɔɔ.t nfɔ m ḫt.f nn ḏd m rɔ.f*).[37]

This limited compendium can be concluded with two "foreign" quotes of Neoplatonic philosophy. Porphyry reports that "the Pythagoreans, and the wise men among the Egyptians, forbade speaking while passing through doors or gates; as they venerated in silence that God who is the principle of all that exists (σεβομένους ὑπὸ σιγῆς θεὸν ἀρχὴν τῶν ὅλων ἔχοντα)."[38] Along the same lines, Iamblichus asserts he is quoting sources of Egyptian wisdom when describing "the Primal intellegising element and the Primal object of intellection, which is worshipped even by means of silence alone (ὅ δή καὶ διὰ σιγῆς μόνης θεραπεύεσται)."[39]

It is, of course, unlikely that 2nd century philosophers had access to the aforesaid sources. But it is worthy to note that, from the *mare magnum* of the Egyptian religion, the *interpretatio graeca*

35. See Laisney 2007, p. 208. "fnd" is a *lectio difficilior*, while the Torino n. 58005 tablet has "the heart of man is the gift (*fḳɔ*) of god": however, the vision of the organ as an element of divine nature inside the person, a place familiar to the god, is fundamentally analogous.
36. Lexa 1926, pp. 98–99.
37. Mariette 1870, pl. 31.
38. Porphyry, *Antr.* 27, 13–19.
39. Iamblichus, *Myst.* VIII, 3.

had been able to isolate and preserve an echo of the principle of tacit prayer, and the distinctively Egyptian concept of silence as a privileged framework of communication—an intimate, perfect communion between the heart of men and the mind of God.

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