

AFRICAN VOICES

Summer/Fall 2022

A Revival of the Spirit: Chester Higgins' Sacred Nile

By Debbie A Officer

While most people might never get to travel through some of the world's most sacred and holy lands, traversing these spaces through the lens of an expert is the ultimate journey. Award-winning photographer Chester Higgins has created not only a work of art but many portable moments of quiet in the images he has captured in his decades-long sojourns to the Nile Valley region of the African continent. There is something aesthetically beautiful and awe-inspiring when faced with a page covered entirely by an Oda, the "sacred sycamore" tree where Oromo people came to sit in a circle around it, facing the river; paying homage to their supreme divinity who had blessed them with three months of rain.

The photographs serve many purposes here. They are like art on canvas; you look, turn away, and the painting's meaning shifts each time. The shade from the window makes the painter's message less clear, the brush stroke ambiguous. Not so with the hundreds of images carefully selected for this gathering of deities, icons and the devout. The viewer can feel the urgency of the artist who is making sure to document these real-world practitioners of faiths as old as humanity. A tableau for a moment in time when

diaspora communities, hit hard by the recent pandemic, could use a lift, is a reminder of the greatness, the beauty from whence they have come. There is a shared page with photos of a pyramid in Royal Necropolis, Meroe, Sudan and Tamaber in the Northern Highlands of Ethiopia. Taken at different times of the morning and afternoon, they each bring light through the shadows of their structures. There is a sense of something bigger, an immersive journey for the viewer as they too bear witness to a larger spiritual connection within their world.

An Ancient Connection to the Land

At first glance, some of the images seem like private moments within a community, but the deeper meaning of collective worshipping comes shining through. These aren't characters in yet another oversize coffee table book, beckoning tourists to venture down their streets and dine in the best cafes in far-flung places. These are the faces of a people reminding the rest of us that there are places where people's lives are centered around something bigger, something deeper than a horse-drawn carriage ride through Central Park or a queue in front of the Louvre, anxious to greet the Mona Lisa. The essence of their faith and an ancient connection to the land and the Blue Nile is at the heart of this book. In his introduction titled "Journey," Higgins declares the importance of his work when he states "Sacred Nile is my portrait of the spiritual imagination and the genesis of faith in Africa. Ancient records left in stone

detail Africans' philosophical quest to wrestle with the seminal issues of who we are, where we are, and what is our purpose." The breathtaking image of a sunset in Lake Ashenge, Tigray Region of Ethiopia is one of the most striking images in this collection. The story continues with contrasting images of a sunrise over the Pyramid of King Khufu in Cairo, Egypt and an early morning sunrise in Semien Mountains, Ethiopia. The viewer quickly realizes the photographer is just as inspired by the landscape as he is by the people whose lives intertwine with this most sacred Nile.

A Closeup View of Traditional Practices

Higgins has centered his focus on Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Sudan for good reason. He writes that "the earliest known written Holy Scripture — located on the tomb walls of the 2500 BCE pyramid of King Unas in Saqqara, Egypt — introduces the concepts of spirit, soul, resurrection, ascension and celestial afterlife nearly 5,000 years ago. A code of morality carried forward in the Ten Commandments existed on papyrus millennia before the introduction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam." The photographs are a road map of sorts through the ancient roots of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, even giving viewers and readers a closeup view of the traditional practices involved in daily worship and rituals. *Sacred Nile* is a private tour of a place where the three major religions of the world have deep roots and historical beginnings. According to Higgins,

“Many of the motifs and icons that arise out of the sublime among the ancient River Nile people have over millennia been retooled, adapted and woven into the fabric of modern faith.”

Sacred Nile is a guide for those seeking to understand the roots of their faith or those who are interested in the historical connection between Africa and the emergence of Westernized religion. There is a photograph of Hebraic students at HaTikvah Synagogue in Gondar, Ethiopia and a Muslim man praying at the Grand Mosque in Yabello, Ethiopia. This is symbolic of the syncretic cultural fusion between the river, the people, and their faiths. It has long been a sore spot for Africanist and Afro-Centric scholars that the European perspective on Africa, especially the cultures of the North and the Eastern Horn of Africa, has been whitewashed and has nullified Black contribution. Schools, academia and even maps were drawn up to “prove” that Egypt wasn’t part of the African continent or that Black people didn’t contribute to the culture of the ancient north and northeast.

To Set the Record Straight

This erasure of Black contribution to the ancient civilizations, cultures and religions of Africa by some scholars impacted the way history has been taught around the world. To some degree, it also shaped the narrative of the images people saw through the lens of photographers

with an agenda. Higgins' agenda, unlike his predecessors, is to set the record straight, to lift morale, offer historical documentation of Black contribution to the heart of the three major religions and to civilization on the continent and to some degree, the Western World. Touching on the intellectual sabotage that has been done, he writes that "Twenty-one centuries after Diodorus, Senegalese historian (and physicist) Cheikh Anta Diop, who studied the origins of the human race and pre-colonial African culture, declared that 'the basic elements of Egyptian civilization are neither in Lower Egypt, nor in Asia, nor in Europe, but in Nubia and the heart of Africa; moreover, that is where we find the animals and plants represented in hieroglyphic writing.' Today, Egyptologists are starting to overcome their dissonance and accept ancient Egyptian culture as African."

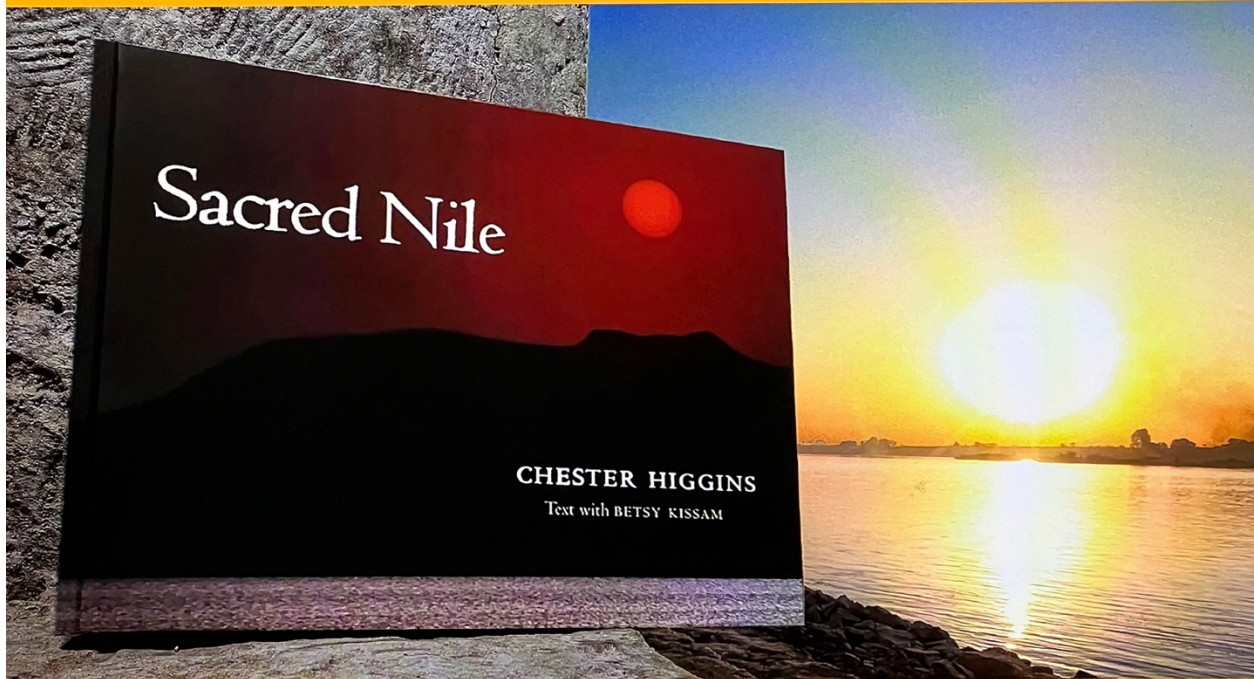
The photographs in *Sacred Nile* illustrate the respect the photographer has for his subjects. There is a delicate balance between a sensationalist gawking through the lens, almost in awe or shock and the reverence of the work Higgins has asked us to witness on these pages. Opening to any page in this collection, the viewer "feels" his respect and his sense of boundaries as the man behind the camera. *Sacred Nile* is a testament to not only Higgins' talent as a photographer but also as a bonafide storyteller who is capturing history through his lens.

SACRED NILE by Chester Higgins (Photographer) and Betsy Kissam (text). March Forth Imprint, 2021. Pages 232

ISBN 978-578-85118-1

Travel & History Matter

Take an unforgettable journey through ancient times along the River Nile in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia.



ISBN 978-0-578-85118-1 / HB \$50

BCH/ March Forth Imprint 232 pages / 232 color photographs