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IDEAS

Looking for the footprints of God

A writer and her photographer husband have spent decades tracing the path of the River Nile in search of the wellspring of our collective origin story.

By Betsy Kissam and Chester Higgins



A night procession for the annual November Festival of Saint Mary at the Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Tsion in Aksum, Ethiopia. Photographed in 2011. Chester Higgins

Five thousand years ago, African people committed their thoughts to stone.

Some messages are chiseled into the rock, some are raised relief, and many are painted. The earliest known written holy scripture, chiseled into the wall of the tomb under the pyramid

of King Unas in Saqqara, Egypt, which dates to 2500 BCE, introduces concepts of creation, spirit, soul, resurrection, ascension, and celestial afterlife. Scenes on ancient monuments foreshadow many of the rituals, elements, and iconography of modern worship: the clerical hierarchy, the purifying power of water, the purpose and substance of offerings, prayer, and incense. There is also a profusion of symbols of the sun, the cross, and the crescent.



Hieroglyphs carved 4,600 years ago line the four walls of the antechamber of the tomb of King Unas, Dynasty 5, in Saqqara, Egypt. Still more hieroglyphs fill the walls of the king's burial chamber and are the first known written holy scripture. Photographed in 1999. Chester Higgins

The messages in stone provide evidence of a sophisticated belief system rooted in the natural world and of faith in the civilizations the ancient Africans created. Nowhere is this more apparent than in northeast Africa along the River Nile.

From its source near the Ethiopian highlands at the Blue Nile Falls, the river drops nearly 5,000 feet to join the White Nile in Sudan before continuing north through the deserts of

Sudan and Egypt and emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. This 2,600-mile waterway was an early migratory route for people and their shared ideas.



The Tis Esat (“water that smokes”) waterfall, also known as the Blue Nile Falls, is 6,035 feet above sea level in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. The Blue Nile River snakes north through Sudan and Egypt. Photographed in 2002. Chester Higgins

We refer to much of early African thought and religious belief as the “footprints of God.” Finding and documenting these footprints has taken us more than half a lifetime — a five-decade journey beside this sacred water.

At times we camped in the desert in Sudan or in the Ethiopian highlands under the most incredible starry skies. We traveled to Sudan at the end of the last century before much infrastructure was yet in place. In 1999, our guides took us on desert routes to the ancient Meroë Necropolis on the east bank of the Nile between the river’s fifth and sixth cataracts, or rapids.



The pyramids at the Northern Royal Necropolis in Meroë, Sudan, were erected during the Meroitic Period, between 240 BCE and 340 CE. Photographed in 2007. Chester Higgins

Having secured permits, our guides set up our tents in full view of the ancient pyramids, which rose majestically before us. The site was deserted and the quiet beauty breathtaking. In front of each pyramid is a chapel, intricately decorated with a mix of elaborate Nubian and Egyptian iconography. There, we documented ancient scenes of offerings of incense and food alongside images of kings and queens protected by deities hovering with outstretched wings.



One of 12 sandstone ram sphinx sculptures along the processional avenue to the Temple of Amen, built during the reign of the Merotic King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore in the second half of the 1st century CE, in Naga, Sudan. Photographed in 2007. Chester Higgins

In 2006, we visited Naga, south of Meroë, where remnants of an avenue of stone ram sphinxes flank the entrance to the Temple of Amen, the ancient supreme deity. The ram is Amen's animal form. Rams or sheep are still sacrificed for religious festivals by African Jews and Muslims, in a commemoration of the biblical story of Abraham. Jews also use a ram horn for the ritual blowing of the shofar.

In Ethiopia in 2009, we camped one night close to the ruins of the Temple of the Moon at Yeha. We spent months going through the process of obtaining permission to remain on site so that Chester could photograph a rising quarter moon from within the remaining walls of the 7th century BCE temple. On that clear, crisp night, light from the moon, floating in a sea of stars, suffused the ruins with a surreal calm. The view was unobstructed; archaeologists have since erected braces to support the ancient edifice's crumbling walls.



Moonrise at the Temple of the Moon, c. 700 BCE, in Yeha, Ethiopia. Photographed in 2009. Chester Higgins

The next morning, we were awoken by young villagers carrying baskets of speckled hard-boiled eggs. I remember them as among the best I have ever eaten.

The ancient land of Ethiopia is today shared by worshippers of the three Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity, and, as it is called there, Hebrew, and also an even more ancient religious belief system, called Waaqeffanna. A deep spiritual ardor still defines the daily life of faith in Ethiopia. Pilgrimages to holy sites are an integral expression of this spirituality. Worshipers travel miles to attend celebrations, some that last for days. Camping and communal cooking and feasting are part of the revelry.



Ethiopian Jews mark the Sigd ceremony, which honors God's deliverance of the Ten Commandments to Moses at the top of Mount Sinai. This ritual is celebrated on the highest nearby mountain peak. Here, it takes place on the 10,500-foot high Mount Entoto on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Photographed in 2011. Chester Higgins

Over the years, we have witnessed Christian festivals, Christmas and Timkat, or Advent; the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice; and the Hebrew ritual [Sigd](#), which commemorates Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. One September in Bishoftu, beside a hallowed crater lake and holy sycamore tree in the heart of Ethiopia, we were part of the pilgrimage honoring the annual regeneration of people, plants, and time at the end of the country's rainy season. There, we documented pilgrims, most dressed in white, carrying stalks of green grass and yellow flowers in honor of divine nature.



Pilgrims make offerings beside the sacred Hora Ārsedī lake during the Erecha celebration of renewal in Bishoftu, Ethiopia. Photographed in 2001. Chester Higgins

There are still messages on stone to be revealed underground in tombs, aboveground in temples and monuments, on statues, pyramids, columns, obelisks, steles, and altars. This sublime well of belief conceived and honed millennia ago beside Africa's sacred River Nile is the source of so many of our cultural beliefs and traditions today. Our symbols, our myths, and our rituals resonate with the wisdom of the first people there who sought to understand and honor life on this earth and beyond.

Betsy Kissam is a freelance writer and is editor at Chester Higgins Projects. She has been accompanying Higgins for the past several decades on his many field trips to the Blue Nile countries. "[Sacred Nile](#)" is their fourth and most recent book together.

*Chester Higgins's photographs have been exhibited by museums around the world and published widely in *The New York Times*, where he was a staff photographer for 38 years. He first visited Egypt and Ethiopia in 1973 and has been documenting antiquity sites in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia and contemporary religious ceremonies in Ethiopia ever since.*