





RITUALS *OF* THE RIVER NILE

*echoes of pharaonic tradition
persist to the present day*

images by CHESTER HIGGINS, text by BETSY KISSAM



CHESTER HIGGINS, A STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE *NEW YORK TIMES* FOR MORE THAN FOUR DECADES, HAS LONG FOCUSED HIS LENS ON THE LIFE AND CULTURES OF PEOPLES OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT AND THE DIASPORA. BETSY KISSAM IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT SACREDNILE.COM.

When the Greek historian Herodotus identified Egypt as “the gift of the Nile” in the fifth century BCE, he had no knowledge of the source of the river, which issues from Lake Tana in the Ethiopian highlands. Yet anyone who has witnessed the turmoil created by the summer rains there, some 1,800 meters above sea level, can appreciate the otherworldly beauty of the frothing foam, laden with red sediment, and its menace as it hurtles down mountainsides, tracking through ancient gullies and joining to form swift flowing streams, tributaries, and then the impressive Blue Nile. The might of this river has sliced gorges through volcanic rock, creating canyon walls, some more than 1,200 meters deep. Twisting and turning, the water asserts its power to sculpt and sheer through a juxtaposition of broad sweeps and tight curves, as it cascades down to the deserts of Sudan and Egypt. By the time the river reaches Khartoum, where it joins the White Nile—flowing down from the Great Lakes region of Central Africa—to form the River Nile, its elevation has dropped to 365 meters. When, at last, the Nile reaches the base of the Great Pyramids at Giza, in Cairo, its elevation is barely 20 meters. Before modern dams interrupted its flow, the Blue Nile carried about 80 percent of the water and fertile silt that transformed Egypt’s parched desert plains: surely “the gift” that Herodotus recognized.

OPENING SPREAD: THE SACRED SYCAMORE TREE OF THE NATURE-WORSHIPPING OROMO PEOPLE OF BISHOFTU, ETHIOPIA. FACING PAGE: A FISHERMAN ON LAKE TANA PLIES ITS WATERS IN A *TANKWA*, A PAPYRUS REED BOAT OF A TYPE IN USE SINCE THE PREDYNASTIC PERIOD, MORE THAN 5,000 YEARS AGO.

Since 1973, Chester Higgins has been exploring the rich spiritual landscape along the Nile, from its source at Lake Tana until it empties into the Mediterranean. Through his photographs, he has recorded patterns that evince a deep-time spiritual heritage along this great waterway, one that can be traced back millennia to the Pharaonic Era.

The 1799 discovery of the Rosetta Stone—with its three scripts: hieroglyphic, demotic, and ancient Greek—jump-started the discipline of Egyptology. Inscribed in 196 BCE with a decree from Ptolemy V, this stone became the key to discovering the lost voices of the hieroglyphs once Jean-François Champollion cracked its code in 1822. We now know that the ancient land of Egypt was called Kemet, translated as the Black Land, while the territory of Sudan to the south was known as Nubia, its name derived from *nub*, the ancient word for gold, with which the region is so richly endowed.

The earliest known written holy scripture—found on the walls of the 2500 BCE tomb of King Unas at Saqqara, Egypt—introduces concepts of resurrection, ascension, and celestial afterlife. Ancient temple scenes foreshadow many of the symbolic transactions and elements and much of the iconography of modern worship: the hierarchy of clergy; the purifying power of water, prayer, fire, and incense; the potent symbolism of the cross and the crescent; and use of ritual paraphernalia such as a sistrum to summon the divine. What has become clear is that many of the motifs and icons that arose out of the imagination of the sublime among the ancient people of the Nile have, over the millennia, been retooled, adapted, and rewoven into the fabric of modern faith. ▲ ▽



ABOVE: RAMSES II OFFERS INCENSE TO HATHOR, THE GODDESS OF LOVE, MUSIC, DANCING, FERTILITY, AND PLEASURE, WHO HOLDS A SISTRUM (MUSICAL INSTRUMENT) AND THE STAFF OF AUTHORITY, IN THIS SCENE CARVED IN RELIEF WITHIN THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY BCE TEMPLE OF OSIRIS AT ABYDOS, EGYPT. FACING PAGE: *DEBTERAS*, DEACONS OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH, HOLD SISTRUMS DURING THE FESTIVAL OF ST. MARY AT AKSUM, ETHIOPIA.







ABOVE: RAMSES II PERFORMS A CEREMONY IN FRONT OF THE SACRED SYCAMORE TREE IN A PAINTED RELIEF WITHIN THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY BCE TEMPLE OF DERR AT LAKE NASSER, EGYPT. FACING PAGE: WORSHIPERS MAKE OFFERINGS AT A SACRED SYCAMORE TREE DURING IRREECHA, THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF RENEWAL HELD AT THE END OF ETHIOPIA'S THREE-MONTH RAINY SEASON IN SEPTEMBER. BISHOFTU, ETHIOPIA.



ABOVE: A BAS-RELIEF—WITHIN THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY BCE RED CHAPEL IN THE TEMPLE OF AMUN-RE AT KARNAK, LUXOR, EGYPT—DEPICTS PRIESTS CARRYING A BARK, WITH STATUES OF DEITIES HIDDEN INSIDE, FOR THE OPET FESTIVAL. FACING PAGE: COPTIC PRIESTS CARRY THEIR CHURCHES' *TABOTS*—OR HOLY ARKS—ENSHROUDED IN RICH BROCADE DURING TIMKAT (EPIPHANY) CELEBRATIONS AT ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA.







ABOVE: TEHUTI (THOTH) HOLDS THE *WAS*-SCCEPTER, OR STAFF OF AUTHORITY, IN A PAINTED RELIEF IN THE TOMB OF RAMSES VI IN THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS, LUXOR, EGYPT. FACING PAGE: AN OROMO ELDER DISPLAYS THE STAFF OF AUTHORITY, SIGNIFYING HIS POWER TO JUDGE DISPUTES. YABELO, ETHIOPIA. THE STAFF OF AUTHORITY, WHICH REPRESENTED HUMAN SOCIETY IN ANCIENT EGYPT, AND THE ONE STILL CARRIED BY OROMO ELDERS IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA, BOTH END IN A DISTINCTIVE CURVED FORK.