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Multiculturalism and the Multicultural in Ancient Egypt: a preliminary assessment

Multiculturalismo e o Multicultural no Egito Antigo: uma avaliação preliminar

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Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the characterization of ancient Egyptian society as multicultural and the related use of the concept and terminology of multiculturalism in research and public communications on ancient Egyptian society. An initial outline of the concept of multiculturalism sets the stage for a review of its application in specialist literature. It may seem sensible to ascribe multiculturalism or a multicultural reality to Egypt, given its history of migrations. It becomes apparent that a comprehensive theorization of multiculturalism is yet to occur with respect to ancient Egypt. This affects scholarly assessments and perceptions of historical transborder mobility and social integration.

Keywords: Egyptian foreign relations; Historiography and museum displays; Migration; Public policy in premodern societies; Transborder mobility and integration.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a caracterização de sociedade egípcia antiga como “multicultural” e o uso relacionado do conceito e terminologia do multiculturalismo na pesquisa e representações públicas sobre a sociedade egípcia antiga. Um esboço inicial do conceito de multiculturalismo prepara o terreno para uma revisão de sua aplicação na literatura especializada. Pode parecer sensato atribuir o multiculturalismo ou uma realidade multicultural para o Egito, dada a sua história das migrações. Torna-se evidente, no entanto, que uma teorização abrangente do multiculturalismo ainda está para ocorrer em relação ao antigo Egito, o que afeta os tratamentos e as percepções acadêmicas da história da integração social e da mobilidade transfronteiriça.

Palavras-chave: Relações exteriores egípcias; Historiografia e exposições museológicas; Migração; Políticas públicas nas sociedades pré-modernas; Integração e mobilidade transfronteiriça.

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Introduction

This paper discusses a matter in research on ancient Egyptian society that has clearly emerged over the past ten years but is yet to be addressed in any comprehensive fashion: multiculturalism. As seen below, multiculturalism or an assumed multicultural reality of Egyptian society are a factor in Egyptological scholarship. Usage of the term has implications for scholars' and other audiences' perceptions and imaginations as to how porous the borders and boundaries between societies and individuals (LANGER; FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ, 2020) were at the time. This paper also shows that multiculturalism is rarely, if ever, theorized in Egyptology. It therefore seems prudent to attempt making sense of what descriptions like multicultural, multi-ethnic, ethnic pluralism, or demographic and cultural diversity mean and what place they have in ancient Egypt-related scholarship.

This contribution is thus not an assessment of multiculturalism(s) as a policy or societal state in the present-day, this is left to the social sciences and actual politics. It is, rather, an attempt to highlight the need for theorization of what are seemingly buzzwords taken from contemporary daily affairs and a more systematic adoption of such terminology when it comes to premodern societies like ancient Egypt. After introducing the concept of multiculturalism, the paper moves on to review the usage of related terms and concepts in Egyptological literature, before discussing the implications of the two sections. This contribution does not claim to be an exhaustive review of the matter, inasmuch as it should be seen as a foray into an issue that could become a worthwhile subject of enquiry.

Approaching Multiculturalism: Theory and History

The term *multiculturalism* first emerged (as a political term) in the 1970s United States and has since come into use in Europe and the wider Anglosphere (CHIN, 2017, p. 8, 17–18). Originally, multiculturalism was a cosmopolitan foil to (US-American) national chauvinism, and cosmopolitanism indeed the prerequisite to attaining a multicultural society. Linguistic and cultural diversity were seen “as an opportunity for enrichment and engagement,” and multiculturalism was increasingly linked to *cultural pluralism* (CHIN, 2017, p. 9–11). The politics of multiculturalism aimed at the acknowledgement of the United States' multiplicity (CHIN, 2017, p. 13), initially by way of school curricula. Recently, Adamson (2021) has conceptualized nationalism and multiculturalism as two sides of the same coin as both revolved around the idea of difference, with multiculturalism surmounting to *masochistic nationalism*.

What multiculturalism looks like specifically as a policy varies from country to country, for example within the Anglosphere (ASHCROFT; BEVIR, 2019a) or between the Anglosphere and Continental Europe; the same holds for official stances toward multiculturalism (STRATTON, 2020, p. 1–2). Definitions may even be time specific. For instance, culture has been the marker of alienness in Europe only since the 1980s, in legislation prior to that it was nationality and legal status (CHIN, 2017, p. 3–4). In other places, like South Korea, multiculturalism is situated “at the intersection of the neoliberal restructuring of the global order and the national reshaping of the racial order” (AHN, 2018, p. 4), while Melamed (2011) contends that (neoliberal) multiculturalism was today “a global racial formation” (MELAMED, 2011, p. 151) and generally served to reinforce the hegemony of Western capital. In academia, multiculturalism specifically refers to the advocacy and drive toward “greater diversity and representation in the academic community” as it emerged in the United States after the 1970s (ZACK, 2005). In addition, Singaporean scholarship has pointed out that multiculturalism as advanced in liberal democracies centred on the individual rather than the community, but has been searching for ways to adapt multiculturalism to the communitarian approaches of multi-ethnic Southeast Asia (LIAN, 2016). In parts of China, minorities are encouraged to revel in their cultures, partly also because minority cultures have been identified as a source of economic growth in (remote) rural areas (McCARTHY, 2009, p. 167–168). In Europe, the post-war drive toward multiculturalism resulted from the need for labour powers brought about by the immense loss of life among the working-age population of Europe; thus western European societies transformed into receiving societies, much opposed to previous centuries when Europe was sending excess capacities out into the colonies. Beyond that, the term has been retroactively applied to describe the reality of the Austro-Hungarian (Habsburg) Empire (FEICHTINGER; COHEN, 2014), the Roman Empire (PEACHIN, 2011, p. 12), the Achaemenid Empire (MENEK, 2020), and the Assyrian Empire (KARLSSON, 2019).

Merriam-Webster (2022) defines multiculturalism as “cultural pluralism or diversity (as within a society, an organization, or an educational institution): a multicultural social state or a doctrine or policy that promotes or advocates such a state”, interweaving the conditions in a polity and policy. Some scholars like Stuart Hall conceive of a difference between the terms multicultural and multiculturalism, with the former denoting a diverse situation on the ground and the latter a set of policies governing that on-the-ground situation (CHIN, 2017, p. 18). Feichtinger and Cohen (2014, p. 3), in turn, raise the question whether pluralism indeed made

societies multicultural, for multiculturalism had nurtured rigid differences and frozen (cultural) boundaries (BHATTI, 2014, p. 17).

What has become clear by now is that both the multicultural and multiculturalism mean different things to different people (ASHCROFT; BEVIR, 2019b, p. 2–3). Today the term multiculturalism, especially in public discourse, is very fuzzy and undefined, connoting “anything from touchy-feely celebrations of cultural differences to the political demand for minority rights, from gay and lesbian studies in the academy to public funding for community projects” (CHIN, 2017, p. 8).

A common misconception about multiculturalism seems to be the idea that it would result in a harmonious mixing of distinct groups. This Melting-Pot Theory supposes that all (cultural) ingredients eventually blend in with each other to form essentially a new (mono)culture. This, however, is the opposite of what multiculturalism means, which is precisely the coexistence of distinct cultures tolerating each other’s existence (CHIN, 2017, p. 11). Multiculturalism can thus also be a strategy to keep distinct groups separate and keep minorities away from the majority (FEICHTINGER; COHEN, 2014, p. 2); multiculturalism therefore rather maintains boundaries between people instead of breaking them down. Furthermore, taking late-Habsburg Austria as an example, Judson (2014) questions the oft-made connection between multilingualism and a multicultural society since multilingualism ultimately says little about the quality of interaction between distinct groups. As we can see, multiculturalism is a complex and contested issue, and the question is if and in what way Egyptological scholarship is aware of this complexity.

Multiculturalism in Egyptological Historiography

Multiculturalism’s fuzziness as a term and concept as well as its application to empires of old raise the question: why not apply it to ancient Egypt as well? After all, the Egyptians also entertained an empire, especially during the Late Bronze Age when it took control over considerable swaths of Nubia and the southern Levant, including the local populations (GUNDLACH, 1994; LANGER, 2021). Add to this the prominent presence of various groups in Egypt over the course of the first millennium BCE, including ruling elites from abroad (Libyans, Nubians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans).

Indeed, one can find tentative attributions of multiculturalism or multicultural social relations to Egyptian society. Gatto (2014) discusses “the process of multicultural adjustment and transformation” in the First Nile Cataract region during the fourth millennium BCE. Her

employ of theories like hybridization or cultural entanglement aims at explaining cultural mixing along the south Egyptian border. Davydova (2013) interprets the god Serapis of Alexandria as a multicultural deity. Prada (2015; 2016) sees the multiculturalism of Graeco-Roman Egyptian society realized through the lens of arts and language contact. The merger of artistic styles and the coexistences of two or more languages in Egypt at the same time here appear as enough to categorize Egyptian society as multicultural. Bietak (2018) applies the label to Avaris when discussing the presence and apparent segregation of several ethnic groups in the Hyksos capital during the Second Intermediate Period; Müller (2015) and Smith (2018, p. 140) understand the site of Avaris in similar ilk. Liszka and de Souza (2020) wonder about the integration of the Medjay into the multicultural Egyptian society. On a side note, Hafsaas (2006; 2020) conceptualizes C-Group Lower Nubia between 2500 and 1500 BCE as multicultural.

Depauw and Dzierzbicka (2019, p. 16) subscribe to the idea of Graeco-Roman Egypt as multicultural, for there had essentially been “no walls separating” Egyptians from Greek and Roman settlers. Broux (2019) looks at “the daily life of the people of the multicultural generations in Greco-Roman Egypt”, Vandorpe and Clarysse (2019) shed light on religious organization in the “multicultural context” of Graeco-Roman Egypt, while Naether (2019, p. 445) considers magical Greek and Demotic papyri to be “multilingual and multicultural in nature” – here once more the connection between multilingualism and the multicultural (similarly Torallas Tovar and Vierros, 2019, p. 494); in the same volume, Jennes’s (2019) and Pfeiffer’s (2019, p. 438) employ of the terms multi-ethnic and multicultural in a single sentence suggest a conceptual difference between the two. There are other works in the same *Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt* that describe Egypt at the time as multicultural. Suffice to say, none of these works go to lengths to theorize any of those terms.

In what can be called Public Egyptology, public relations and the communication of the field to the wider public, the idea that ancient Egypt was multicultural has become a *hidden theory*, something that is deemed beyond explanation and generally accepted. The concept of the hidden theory was developed by Sommer and Gramsch (2011, p. 25) and recently adopted by Matic (2020, p. 30) to explain the pervasiveness of scientific racism in Egyptology. To cite a recent example, the 2021 Manchester Museum exhibition *Meet Egypt: The Exhibition of the Golden Mummies* touring major Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai dealt with objects from Graeco-Roman Egypt and framed Egyptian society as multicultural from the onset. The following excerpts are from the foreword to the exhibition and flavour text accompanying the section of daily life:

Foreword

... Egypt was ruled first by a Greek royal family, ending with Queen Cleopatra VIII, then by Roman emperors (between 300 BC and AD 300).

Wealthy members of this multicultural society made elaborate preparations for the afterlife, combining Egyptian, Greek, and Roman ideals of eternal beauty ...

And

Life in a Multicultural Society

Egypt was always in contact with neighbouring cultures and was never as isolated as it is often portrayed. Plentiful evidence survives for trade with Nubia to the south of Nubia and around the Mediterranean for centuries under the Pharaohs, and many non-Egyptians came to live in Egypt. But relations between these peoples were not always peaceful and there were sometimes violent struggles for power. During the Graeco-Roman Period, some of these events are recorded in papyrus documents.

A dynasty of Macedonian origin called Ptolemies ruled Egypt from 305 – 30 BC. They built their capital on the coast at Alexandria facing their homeland, but they appeared as traditional Pharaohs on temple walls throughout Egypt. They developed farmland in the fertile Faiyum area to house new settlers from Greece. Here and elsewhere the Ptolemies promoted the worship of a new, multi-cultural god called Serapis. A wide range of Greek, Roman and Egyptian gods were worshipped in people's homes. By looking at items found buried with the dead, we can learn more about the everyday lives of the Egyptian people.

From these excerpts we can isolate the following features of the multicultural Egyptian society the curators implicitly communicate: 1) domination by an external elite minority; 2) (continuous) contact with neighbouring societies, albeit not always peaceful; 3) an influx of 'many non-Egyptians' to Egypt; and 4) elite promotion of shared aesthetic ideals and religious beliefs.

What becomes clear is that multiculturalism becomes a mere buzzword in such Egyptological public relations, for a theorization does not take place; however, this is naturally also due to the character of a (commercial) exhibition aimed at the wider public and designed to bring in revenue. That notwithstanding, I argue that such public communications are a good benchmark for assessing the pervasiveness of a given hidden theory perhaps not often communicated this directly in works aimed at specialists, here the underlying assumption that Egypt was indeed a multicultural society.

Langer (2021) entertains the idea that Egyptian deportations may indeed have facilitated a multicultural Egyptian society during the Late Bronze Age, given that individuals from the entire eastern Mediterranean and Northeast Africa were forcibly moved to Egypt and other places in the wider region. Yet he also maintains that whether Egypt could be seen as an actual multicultural society ultimately depended on the degree of interaction between Egyptians and non-Egyptians. The deportation dataset suggests that there was little to no interaction between these groups, for most deportees were apparently concentrated in segregated settlements attached to the temple economy. However, this does not account for non-Egyptians coming to Egypt by more voluntary means, such as economic migration, which also have to be taken into account. (On a side note, although this paper is on multiculturalism in Egypt itself, the deportation policies raise the matter to what extent Egypt may have facilitated multicultural societies in occupied Nubia and among its Levantine vassals.)

There are also studies that do not explicitly mention that the authors deem Egypt a multicultural society, yet hallmarks of multiculturalism are at least implicit. For instance, Panagiotopoulos (2006) uses no terminology related to multiculturalism, yet remarks that during the Late Bronze Age “people from abroad began to live and work among and impinge on Egyptians” with “a hitherto unknown intensity” (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 2006, p. 371). He conjectured that foreigners adapted to Egyptian customs at different speeds depending on their (economic) importance to the Egyptian state as indicated by their social status (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 2006, p. 403). Those precious few individuals that managed to attain positions at the royal court, he maintains, were expected to “totally adopt Egyptian cultural values” (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 2006, p. 403). He further concluded that people from abroad living in Egypt undermined the official Egyptian stance towards foreigners as harbingers of chaos and that they were accepted into Egyptian society, “given the opportunity to adapt to the Egyptian way of life” (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 2006, p. 406). The first assessment entertains the possibility of multiculturalism or the Melting-Pot Theory, since people from abroad are said to have left their mark on Egypt. The remaining assessment seems to reject both notions, though, as foreigners, at least those among the elites, had to adopt Egyptian customs; if anything, then Panagiotopoulos sees elements of the multicultural among the lowest strata not expected to adopt Egyptian values as soon as elites. That contribution does not deal with such theoretical issues, though.

It is noteworthy that publications using the terminology of multiculturalism primarily aim at non-specialist audiences. Whether this is a (sub)conscious move to make ancient Egypt

more relatable to contemporary audiences or a sign that authors enjoy greater liberty to employ a terminology of their choosing has to remain open for now. Note that in his outline of ethnicity in ancient Egypt, Matic (2020) avoids discussing multiculturalism or characterizing Egypt as multicultural altogether.

There is also an alternative perspective. For instance, Schneider (2010, p. 144) sees Egyptian culture and norms essentially as a *Leitkultur* to which people of foreign origin had to adapt once they lived in Egypt; any notion of ‘foreignness’ thus lost its relevance here. Matic (2020, p. 60) supports this assessment, adding that any “person of foreign descent could become Egyptian no matter his or her background”. If correct, then this would have made Egypt de facto monocultural, for everyone adopted Egyptian culture as their own. This also goes against the Melting-Pot Theory, where people of foreign origins would have influenced Egyptian society in such a way as to infuse parts of their own culture to transform it into something new. In any case, these authors implicitly seem to reject the notion of Egypt as a multicultural society. However, Schneider (2010, p. 145–146) also noted that groups may have retained their distinctiveness on the small scale and that Egyptian elites appropriated foreign cultural elements. This leaves the door wide open for both multiculturalism and the Melting-Pot Theory, respectively.

Discussion: Multiculturalism, cultural diversity – or all and nothing at the same time?

The terms multicultural and multiculturalism, for all their positive connotations in the present, may evoke an image that non-Egyptians could easily migrate to Egypt, settle in and integrate with the locals. Schneider (2010, p. 148) remarked: “Large numbers of individuals and groups of foreign descent entered Egyptian society at all times of its history and on all its levels, where they underwent varying degrees of acculturation.” Yet beyond such truisms it is excruciatingly difficult to assess the quality and degree of such an acculturation, let alone any interaction of the locals with new arrivals. Although foreigners/non-Egyptians were seemingly everywhere in Egyptian society, especially in the Late Bronze Age (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 2006; SCHNEIDER, 2010, p. 151–155), their share among the population can ultimately not be ascertained. The same goes for the degree of their integration into Egyptian society.

Official Egyptian ideology with its Ma’at-Izfet dichotomy, the opposition of divine order embodied by Egypt and chaos represented by foreigners, was built around and legitimized hard boundaries between Egyptians and non-Egyptians and did not exactly encourage immigration into Egypt (LANGER, 2018; LANGER; FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ, 2020). Egyptians

were aware of differences between themselves and other groups (MATIĆ, 2020, p. 11–12), yet Egyptian ideology left little space for policies like our modern multiculturalism. Outsiders would nominally and theoretically never enjoy the same privileges as Egyptian people due to their adherence to chaos, doomed to be a threat to the Egyptian state. That also means that the Ma’at-Izfet dichotomy as the *raison d’être* of the Egyptian state, at least until the Alexandrian Conquest in 332 BCE, never ceased reigning supreme, ultimately functioning as a *Leitkultur*. (Akin to the contemporary German approach and its more recent rejection of multiculturalism.) In ancient Egypt, the Egyptian language and customs would have framed that lead culture (MATIĆ, 2020, p. 10–11).

Langer (2021, p. 333) proposes that foreigners’ ability to integrate and expectation to adapt to Egyptian norms ultimately depended on their mode of immigration into Egypt, consequently not everyone was treated nor perceived in the same way. Most deportees were apparently kept separated from the wider Egyptian population, housed in segregated settlements related to the temple economy; the rest distributed by the king to other Egyptian stakeholders (LANGER, 2021, p. 271–293). Such walled settlements would quite literally represent boundaries that prevent a multicultural society from emerging, at least in the sense Egyptological literature seems to employ the term, namely connoting a relatively free coexistence between and mixing of several diverse groups of people. Yet, as seen at the onset of this paper, multiculturalism rather aims at maintaining the initial cultural distance within a polity; in this sense, segregation in Egypt may have effected just that. Deportees and foreigners coming to Egypt more voluntarily, say, as economic migrants (LANGER, 2020, p. 15), had to be and were de facto integrated into Egyptian society and its economy. But, in any case, it remains entirely unclear how Egyptians interacted with deportees, mainly assigned to toil in the temple economy, thus directly serving the Egyptian gods and helping them ensure Ma’at triumphs over Izfet (LANGER, 2021, p. 319–325, 332).

Crucially, Schneider (2010, p. 148) also remarked: “Officials of foreign descent were assimilated into Egyptian elite culture, to the effect that their ethnic origin may have lost all significance to their social career”. We have to reckon with a complex situation on the ground, one in which the quality and degree of both integration and interaction was tied to status. Arguably, elites had an easier time adapting to Egyptian customs, and one can make the case that a similar mechanism still applies to our contemporary world, where elites are highly mobile internationally (even during times of a pandemic) and tend to mingle with each other. Whether

that makes Egyptian elites multicultural or monocultural (foreigners defer to Egyptian lead culture) needs to be theorized in the future.

This leads to the general lack of theorization in related literature. One gets the impression that a denomination like ‘the multicultural Egyptian society’ is but a stand-in for ‘the culturally diverse Egyptian society’. It seems part of the literature sees (cultural) entanglement, ultimately the confluence of elements of more than one culture (e.g., in a hypothetical Egyptian pot with Nubian motifs), as evidence of the multicultural or multi-ethnicity (GATTO, 2014, p. 97–98). Yet such a confluence would adhere to the Melting-Pot Theory and thus run counter to precisely what multicultural and multiculturalism mean. For want of a sufficient theorization of key terminology in ancient Egyptian contexts, one may rather opt to use cultural diversity as a less sharp and more encompassing term for now.

Even how we understand the essence of the multicultural is subject to definition; whether we mean a society where diverse groups coexist and interact, or a society where such groups coexist yet do not interact and ultimately form largely segregated parallel societies. Granted, for the Graeco-Roman Period it is easier to assume multiculturalism. But the mere fact that, for example, more than one language was spoken in Egypt at the time does not necessarily make it a multicultural society. As seen above, the equation *multilingualism*=*multicultural society* is not an automatism.

The categorization of Egyptian society as multicultural brings ancient Egypt closer to modern liberal democracies, where especially those of the Anglosphere are widely considered multicultural or aspiring to multiculturalism. And, indeed, not few authors applying the label to ancient Egypt come from these countries or write from these ideational locations due to their educational backgrounds. The US-American genesis of the term suggests the application and reading of Western liberal democratic ideals into ancient Egyptian society. Considering the positive connotations of the labels multiculturalism and multicultural discussed above, one may wonder whether this is a variation to the *Myth of Eternal Egypt*. The Myth of Eternal Egypt, conceived in the nineteenth century, conceptualized Egypt as a lost, paternalist and unchanging paradise, primarily catering to the ideals of the European bourgeoisie at the time (MORENO GARCÍA, 2009; 2015). While dubbing Egypt as multicultural may not feed into similar ideational defenses against rising socialism of the later nineteenth century, we may be looking at a contemporary variant that conceptualizes Egypt as a paradise of a different sort, in the sense of individual (group) freedoms and the toleration (perhaps even the celebration) of cultural

differences. In other words, we are free to recognize ourselves and our own societies in the ancient Egyptian state.

Conclusions

This brief investigation on the prevalence of the term and concept of multiculturalism in Egyptology has revealed two things. Firstly, express references to it have become more frequent over the past decade, probably reflecting the multiculturalisms and debates over cultural diversity in liberal democracies of the global North; and, secondly, theorizations of related terminology and concepts have been virtually absent from the literature as well as communications to the wider public. The tendency to view ancient Egypt as a multicultural society with easily transgressable boundaries between Egyptians and non-Egyptians may well stem from a desire to recognize modern Western (liberal) ideals in the distant Egyptian past.

The label of multiculturalism endears and brings societies from the distant past closer to us and our own ideals. Such a projection may turn Egypt into a premodern version of Europe or the (settler colonialist) Anglosphere. Yet considering a sufficient theorization is yet to occur, the available data do not allow the wholesale labelling of ancient Egyptian society, at any point, as multicultural, nor do they allow the attribution of multiculturalist policies in the modern sense to Egyptian elites. Egyptian ideology aimed at maintaining a monoculture, while the reality on the ground saw the influx of people of different origins, each bringing their own culture. To what extent these cultures were retained or (formally) given up to adopt the Egyptian *Leitkultur*, or how far Egyptian and foreign cultures merged is hardly possible to assess conclusively.

In the future, one may investigate more closely if Egyptian thought did allow for multiculturalism in theory, and if any potential was time-specific and/or developed over time. Similarly, individual writers should be encouraged to disclose what exactly they mean when they apply key terminology to ancient Egyptian contexts and how the available data fit their understanding. In this sense, the preliminary assessment in this paper should be seen as just: a starting point; for once multiculturalism has been sufficiently theorized for ancient Egypt, especially before the Graeco-Roman Period, fruitful debates can emerge, in turn enhancing our understanding of Egyptian society and its evolution as well as ourselves.

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