

Duality in the Religious Beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians

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Abstract

This article describes the duality thoughts in the ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. As a term duality refers to a way of thinking which indicates two opposed or complementary features; whether in religion, environment, culture or philosophy. Duality was presented in the ancient Egyptian religious beliefs; for instance, gods of Upper Egypt and gods of Lower Egypt and gods of the living and gods of the dead. The thoughts of the ancient Egyptians were always towards duality through both the daily life and the afterlife; this was a result of trying to attain balance between the opposing forces. The duality idea was emphasized through some aspects: life and death, day and night, and the world above the horizon and the Netherworld below. The duality thoughts were observed from the surrounding natural sources. Religion in ancient Egypt played an important and vital role in the Egyptians' understanding of the surrounding world.

Keywords

Duality, Religion, Beliefs, Pairs.

1. Introduction

Even that ancient Egyptian religion was related to death, there were ideas and thoughts about preservation for ensuring an everlasting life. The main purpose of religion in ancient Egypt was to get and secure favors of their

deities (Armour 1986, 88). The duality in ancient Egypt was at the heart of the Egyptian's concept of the universe itself. The Egyptians viewed the universe as heaven and earth, sun and moon, day and night, light and dark. Through the land geography, they viewed it as Upper and Lower Egypt, black land and red land, the north and south (Wilkinson 1999, 129, 131).

2. The concept of ancient Egyptian religion and cult

Herodotus stated that Egyptians were religious to a higher degree than any other people (Herodotus 1975, 319; Luft 2001, 139; Gaudet 2014, xv). Religious beliefs were essential and required for the conduct of life (Baines 1991, 123). Nothing affected the life of the Egyptians more than their religion (Brier and Hobbs 2008, 35). The ancient Egyptian religion could be divided into two sectors: the official state one and the daily practices of the Egyptian people (Baines and Malek 2009, 209). The ancient Egyptian religion and cult mainly depending on 'Maat', keeping order and preventing chaos (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 273; Tyldesley 2010, 193). Maat was the concept that gave meaning to life, by structuring both the human and divine worlds (Bell 1998, 128).

Religion throughout the ancient Egyptian historic eras was concerned about the relationship between the individual and his god (s) (Lurker 1974, 8). Ancient Egyptian religion centered on maintaining life (Frankfort 1978, 5). One of the hardest aspects in studying religion in ancient Egypt was the number of gods and goddesses, as they were many (Bard 1999, 734). Even the methods of worshipping these deities were divided into two (Assmann 1995, 190), as follows:

Table I: About the deities

Aspects Relevant	State Religion (Official)	Personal Piety (House, family)
(1)Ways of worship	<p>-Temples and state festivals were one aspect of the ancient Egyptian religion. Temples were the principal manifestation of practicing official religion (Mertz 1966, 280).</p>	<p>-People could approach their gods directly-though at a distance sometimes (Guglielmi 1993, 95; Vernus 1998, 166). Individuals could ask for divine aid directly (Johnson 1999, 129; Moreno Garcia 2020, 147; Thompson 2001, 329).</p> <p>-Popular religion took place outside temples, either in certain shrines by pilgrimages or the deities were also worshipped in private homes (Mertz 1966, 283; Johnson 1999,</p>

		133).
(2)Access to attend festivals	<p>-Access to the state gods in temples and during their festivals was so limited (Silverman 1991, 52).</p> <p>-During festivals, gods travelled on boats while travelling by water, or in barque shrines carried by priests on their shoulders while travelling on land (Thompson 2001, 329).</p>	<p>-Gods could be accessed by common people, to interact with their deities (Vernus 1998, 166): placing votive offerings at the outer walls of temple, hearing-ears shrines (Shaw 2014, 144-145) were located outside the walls of temples and in front of colossal statues, oracles, as gods could answer commoners' important questions, dreams: as Egyptians believed that sleeper could inhabit the world of the gods and through fragrance, sound, and breath of gods they could be sensed (Wilkinson 2007, 46-47).</p>

(3)Types of offerings	-Offerings presented inside temples were incense, libations and flowers for the gods (Bell 1985, 281; Spalinger 1998, 244).	-Ancient Egyptians produced votive statuettes of deities and stelae for the personal worship and devotion (Silverman 1991, 55). Votive stelae were offered and presented to gods, including texts for requesting favours and sometimes thanking for the granted requests (Wilkinson 2007, 47).
(4)Some of the worshipped deities	-God Amun of Thebes, Re of Heliopolis, Ptah of Memphis, Thoth of Hermopolis, Anubis of Cynopolis, Isis of Philae and Hathor of Dendera and Memphis (Wilkinson 1999, 132).	-Shrines were found honouring Amun, Hathor, Ptah, Thoth, Meretseger, Sobek, Renenutet, Isis, Osiris, and Anubis (Thompson 2001, 329; Wilkinson 2007, 48). -Goddess Tawaret and God Bes were favored by commoners; due to their protective role

		<p>(Mertz 1966, 238; Ockinga 2001, 45; Shaw 2014, 155). They had power to ward off evil (Wilkinson 2007, 48).</p> <p>-Cults of deified kings: some kings were deified at Deir el-Medina; Amenhotep I and his mother Ahmose-Nefertari and Ramses II were deified after their death (Silverman 2001, 374).</p> <p>-Individuals deification: Amenhotep Son of Hapu was deified as a god of wisdom during the Late Period. He was deified in the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri and the temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina (Shorter 1979, 66).</p>
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		<p>Imhotep was deified during the Greeks period, as a god of learning and medicine (Shorter 1979, 132).</p> <p>-There were also shrines for foreign deities: Astrate and Qadesh (Thompson 2001, 329; Wilkinson 2007, 48).</p>
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3. The effect of religion on the ancient Egyptian society

From the early Dynastic Period, the ancient Egyptian religion and its deities were widely prominent (Regulski 2021, 911). The structure of the ancient Egyptian religion was based on the worship of various gods and goddesses (White 1970, 21). Health and good life were requested from the gods (Vernus 1998, 176-177). Requests from gods were a long life, a happy existence, a good reputation after death and finally a well burial. These were some of the common desires in requests from their gods and deities (Callender 2009, 66-67). Ancient Egyptians believed that there was an interaction between gods and humans; making offerings for pleasing the gods to attain eternal life after death (Haikal 2020, 542). Gods throughout ancient Egypt were responsible for governing the order of creation. They were placed in heaven, but also they could come to earth (Vernus 1998, 73). Those deities who were responsible for the

cosmos creation roles were worshipped along the Nile Valley and in the Delta (Upper and Lower Egypt) (Bunson 2002, 147).

4. The dual thought of ancient Egyptian religion



The dual thought was a main characteristic feature in the ancient Egyptian mindset, as evident from the textual records (Sevrajean 2008, 1). The dual thought also appeared in the concept of divinity between the two opposing concepts of ‘unity’ and ‘multiple’ (Bonhême, 2001, 401-406; Hornung 1982, 226). In a symbolic act of duality, Shu separated Nut ‘heaven’ and Geb ‘earth’ from each other, symbolizing the up and down, light and darkness, good and evil (Lurker 1974, 8). Even the sun god used two boats during his daily journey ‘night boat’ and his day journey. These two boats resembled and symbolized duality ‘day / east and night / west’.

The sun god travels in the *manDt* boat during the morning journey ‘east-west’ and in the *msktt* boat during the night journey ‘west-east’. The duality of boats was an expression for the Egyptian duality thought in polar opposite pairs ‘dual units’. As this was the concept of unification of two concrete and complementary partial concepts (Armour 1986, 38; Assmann 1995, 50).

The ancient Egyptian thought was always focusing on the opposing forces (dual / two), especially in the religious beliefs; as religion was considered the main essence of people’s daily life (Franco 1999, 298). The dual thought was manifested in the two opposing forces of theological thought: of Re of Heliopolis and that of Osiris (Assmann 1995, 62; Mercer 1952, 5). Life was set supposedly on a constant struggle between the forces of order and chaos, so rituals evoked the conflict between Horus and Seth in order to preserve the balance of power and the cosmos order (Spencer 2008, 80). The best example for the universal struggle between good and

evil was reflected in the Horus’s myth (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 100). In the ancient Egyptian thought, order and disorder (Maat / Isfet), which could also be Horus and Seth, dual forces were inseparable (Tyldesley 2000, 18; Guilhou 2009, 80; Tyldesley 2010, 32).¹ God Osiris was a nature god; he was closely related to the Nile River and the rich fertile soil of the Nile Valley. His cycle of life and death was a symbol of the subsequent changing seasons and the annual rise and fall of the Nile flood (White 1970, 28).² Also the triumph of light over darkness and order over chaos was a feature of duality thought, all of these ideas formed the fundamental ancient Egyptian ideology and beliefs (Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 100).

Even the division of deities came into those deities of Upper and Lower Egypt (Hornung 1982, 226). There were two guardian deities for the ancient Egyptian king: Nekhbet ‘who belonged to Hierakonpolis’ and Wadjet ‘who belonged to Buto’ (Baines and Malek 2009, 32). Goddess Nekhbet, the patron goddess of the kingship of Upper Egypt, is depicted with stretched wings on temple and tomb walls and ceilings (Hodel-Hoernes 2000, 212). There was another classification for deities

throughout ancient Egyptian religion: great deities “*wrw*” 
 (Lesko 1982, 119) and small deities “*nDsw*”  (Lesko 1982,

¹ Order inside the ancient Egyptian society was the fundamental religious and social concept ‘Maat’, while disorder was the opposite of ‘Maat’ and it was associated with the world outside creation ‘Isfet’ (Baines 1991, 128; Shaw 2014, 26).

² Swamps developed in the floodplains ‘or in other words Upper Nile’, as the river deposits changed from sand to fertile silt, and spread downstream into Delta ‘Lower Nile’ (Gaudet 2014, xv).

44).

5. Types of duality through ancient Egyptian religion

Deities in the ancient Egyptian religion were grouped in pairs, as the dual thought was still predominantly recognized by the Egyptians in their daily life and also their religious thoughts. This method of thought was considered to be the essence of the Egyptian concept and view for the surrounding universe itself (Wilkinson 2007, 75).

5. 1. Unity in duality (Syncretism)

Syncretism means the gods were identified together (Baines 1997, 33-34; Vernus 1998, 71; Bickel 2020, 824-825); the most famous pair was that of Amun-Re (Baines 1997, 32), for example: Amun-Re, simply means Re is in Amun (Hornung 1982, 91). Some of these identifications occurred with the sun god: Horus-Re, Khnum-Re, Sobek-Re and Amun-Re (Vernus 1998, 73). Ancient Egyptians created composite gods, such as: Atum-Khepri, Re-Horakhty and Amun-Re. This syncretism may have been a combination of similar deities or different aspects of the same god; Atum-Khepri combined the morning and evening manifestations of the sun. While Re-Horakhty formed a composite of two other important aspects of the solar deity (Wilkinson 2007, 33-35).

Atum brought the whole deities to life by the first actual sunrise; this act was closely related to Re-Horakhty. Re-Horakhty was the manifestation of the sun god during the daily cycle of sunrise and sunset (O'Connor 2009, 39). Re-Horakhty's meaning was Re (is) Horus of the horizon. The royal falcon and Re both united and were depicted as a winged sun disk (Müller 2001, 123). The sun god Re during his daily descent into the realm of the dead must become Osiris in the Netherworld. Ancient

Egyptians imagined that this was a true union (Hornung 1982, 96).³

5. 2. Conflict between good and evil (Horus and Seth)

In the myth of Horus and Seth, there was displayed a type of contrast between old disorder and new order (Turner 2016, 71). Concerning the duality of Horus and Seth, they had engaged in a battle for the kingship of ancient Egypt. These two gods were called the two combatants: Horus comes first as the royal god, while Seth comes second as the representative of disorder (Te Velde 2001, 269). There was also a dual mythological theme, reflected through Osiris ‘god of fertility’ and Seth ‘god of the desert’ (Lurker 1974, 13). Most of the deities in one way or another were related to the environment and surrounding nature (Silverman 2002, 97). Gods and goddesses were personifications of natural forces or they were the embodiments of human desires and needs (Clark 1991, 142).

Seth was accused of murdering his brother Osiris, so Horus had to take revenge for his father (Wilkinson 2005, 108, 224). The myth of the conflict between Horus and Seth results in the victory of Horus over Seth through this struggle (Hart 2005, 70). When Horus and Seth were paired together, this was an indication for balancing the opposing forces (Wilkinson 2005, 108). There was another principle for the victory of Osiris over Seth; to rescue the fertile land from the encroaching sands (Forman and Quirke 1996, 9; Mojsov 2005, 4).

The group statue of King Ramses III (Egyptian Museum, Tahrir Square, JE 31628) is well-known example for depicting the pairing of both Horus and Seth. This group statue symbolizes the king as handling both good

³ The sun travels through a river from West to East, passing the 12 hours of the night (Zandee 1960, 4).

and evil, so they were under his control. This group statue might be signifying Upper and Lower Egypt. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: Group statue of King Ramses III, being depicted between both Horus and Seth. It is exhibited in the Egyptian Museum, Tahrir Square, Cairo. Its registration number is JE 31628.

(Source: www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/ 2022)


Together these two gods ruled over the world, through the king whom they purify and crown to rule Egypt. But still each of them had his own part: Horus has Lower Egypt, while Seth has Upper Egypt. Horus was the ruler and lord of the black land, the fertile Nile Delta, while Seth was the ruler and lord of the red land, deserts (Te Velde 2001, 269).⁴


5. 3. Male and female opposites



The masculine deities and the feminine deities existed throughout ancient Egypt, so that dualities and opposites apparently existed as counterparts

⁴ Black and red colors were a significance of the symbolic duality of the lands of Egypt (Wilkinson 1999, 113).

(Baines 1997, 46).

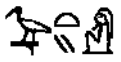
5. 3. 1. God Heh ‘@H’  was the god of infinity; he was always depicted as a man raising his hands holding a palm branch ‘symbol for years’. In the dual Egyptian thought, the alternative word for eternity was

Djet ‘@t’  and was represented as a female deity (Wilkinson 2007, 109-110; Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 140; Servajean 2008, 2).

5. 3. 2. Sia ‘S/A’  and **Hu** ‘@w’  : both of them were personifying the spoken word of Ptah. They were the equivalent of the heart or mind of Ptah. Sia and Hu formed a dyad, as mentioned before the meaning of dyad; they represented the same aspects of the mind and word of Re (Saleh 1981, 8; Quirke 2001, 36; Wilkinson 2007, 130). According to Feucht (2001, 192), Hu and Sia were primeval gods who came from the blood of the sun god Re. Sia was the discernment and perspicacity ‘mind’. Hu was the creative and effective utterance ‘authority’ (Wilkinson 2007, 207; Assem 2012, 21; Bickel 2020, 825). Hu was the creative utterance and Sia was the divine insight (Alford 2004, 4).

5. 4. Male and female partners

5. 4. 1. Male and female partners were well-known and important part of the dual thought of the ancient Egyptian; as a male deity and a female deity could deal with the same job.

Thoth ‘@Hwtj’  was the lord of knowledge sacred word, he

personified the divine speech. Seshat ‘SSi’  , the goddess of

writing and literature, was considered to be his female partner (Doxey 2001, 398). Thoth and his female partner Seshat were the deities of scribes and writing in ancient Egypt (Hornung 1982, 76; Silverman 1991, 42).

5. 4. 2. The pairing of males and females was largely known in the Hermopolitan Ogdoad; it was in the form of a set of four pairs of deities (Černý 1951, 37; Baines 1997, 46; Alford 2004, 60; Schweizer 2010, 189; Shaw 2014, 20). This group was divided into the essential components of life: dark, water, unknown and eternal state of the ancient Egyptian cosmos. According to the Hermopolitan view, the deities were divided into four pairs of males and females: Nun and Naunet ‘water / primeval flood’, Heh and Hauhet ‘infinity / endlessness’, Kek and Kauket ‘darkness’ and Amun and Amaunet ‘hiddenness’. Heh was depicted as a frog, while his counterpart Hauhet was depicted as a serpent. Heh was personified with infinite space (Hornung 1982, 66, 84; Silverman 1991, 34; Lesko 1991, 95; Wilkinson 2007, 16). The feminine partner / counterpart (*rpyt*) (Faulkner 1991, 148) of God Heh was Goddess Hauhet, she was more obscure than her husband. She was a snake-headed woman who ruled over infinity along with her husband. Her name was the same as her husband, added to it the feminine ending (Wilkinson 2007, 109).


Amun and Amaunet made a dyad (Černý 1951, 37; Porter and Moss 1972, 276; Eaton-Krauss 2020, 18).⁵ This divine Amun with his wife Amaunet were mentioned in Pyramid Text Utterance 301, Spell no. 446c

⁵ Amun was depicted as a man with blue skin, wearing a crown of two tall feathered plumes. He could be also depicted as a ram, as he was the symbol of fertility. Amun was known as ‘the Great Honker’, as associated with the goose, the bird who broke the silence at the beginning of time with his honking. Amaunet was depicted wearing the crown of Lower Egypt and carrying a papyrus headed staff (Shaw 2014, 21-22).

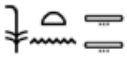
(Lurker 1974, 25):  *Imn Hna Imnt* (Allen 2013, 93),

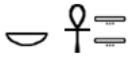
(*Hna*: together with, Faulkner 1991, 172), “Amun together with Amunet,” (Mercer 1952, 156).

5. 4. 3. During the New Kingdom, the sun god Re required

a female doublet Raet,  also known as Raet of the Two Lands (Hornung 1982, 84, 218). She was the female aspect of Re (*Wb* II, 402, 11; Werner 2001, 126-127). She was depicted as a woman with a solar disk upon her head with horns and uraeus (Spence 1990, 132). Rattawy might represent the solar aspect of Iunyt, who was attested during the New Kingdom with the title ‘Daughter of Re’. She was also known as *Raet TAwy* ‘the female Re of the Two Lands’ (*Wb* II, 402, 11; Werner 2001, 126-127).

5. 5. Duality through the deities’ titles: Amun’s name means ‘the hidden one’; he was originally god of the wind (Lurker 1974, 20). God Amun bore many titles, one of them was king of the Two Lands “*nswt*

tAwy”  (Hornung 1982, 231; Černý 1991, 37; Wilkinson 2007,

94). One of Goddess Sekhmet’s titles was ‘*nbt-anx-tAwy*’ 

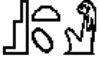

‘mistress of the life of the Two Lands’. Her title was common and known in Memphis (Hart 2005, 138).

5. 6. Same pairing

All unities in Egypt were composed of dualities. For example, Egypt was divided into ‘Two Lands’. While in religion, the pair ‘Horus and Seth’ /

‘Osiris and Seth’ was the same pairing in one gender, and the two sisters ‘Isis and Nephthys’ (Hornung 1982, 217; Armour 1986, 56; Baines 1997, 217).

5. 6. 1. Isis and Nephthys


Isis *Ast*  and Nephthys *Nbt-Ht*  were called the two sisters and the two women (Te Velde 1984, 253; Kucharek and Coenen 2021, 5).⁶ Isis symbolized life, birth, growth and development, while Nephthys symbolized death and decay, as Nephthys assumed some of her husband’s characteristics (Armour 1986, 56; Spence 1990, 98). Nephthys’s role was primarily funerary, as she was the counterpart of her sister Isis in mourning and protecting the deceased (Frankfort 1978, 40; Roehrig 1997, 14; Doxey 2001, 518; Griffiths 2001, 189).

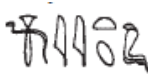
In spite of their opposition of role and function, but they were related together through scenes and texts (Spence 1990, 98). According to their different roles, Isis was associated with day and its light, while Nephthys was associated with night and its darkness (Armour 1986, 56; Doxey 2001, 518). Isis and Nephthys were pair and completing each other as Isis represented the ascending day barque and Nephthys represented the descending night barque (Doxey 2001, 518). Both of them the two females shared their grief and mourning for Osiris’s death (Faulkner 1936, 121; Lurker 1974, 82; Armour 1986, 75). They appeared as pair deities preparing the deceased for the afterlife (Hornung 1982, 42-43; Hollis 2020, 117).

5. 6. 2. Nekhbet and Wadjet

⁶ As Osiris and Seth were called the two brothers and the two men (Te Velde 1984, 253).

Both of them were depicted together as a sign of protection to the king.

Nekhbet was the vulture goddess ; she was represented with her outstretched wings ended with the *shen* sign of eternity between her claws. Goddess Nekhbet was favoured by the southern rulers. Wadjet was

the cobra goddess ; she was always represented rearing up as a symbol of awarding off any evil away from the king. She was the preserver of royal power and authority over northern Egypt. Her southern counterpart was Nekhbet (Hart 2005, 101, 161).

Conclusions

This study presented an in-depth view of the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. The original goal of this study was to sum up the religious thoughts related closely to duality, as religion was the main fundamental base of civilization in ancient Egypt. The river and the desert, concepts of life and death, north and south Egypt were the most important patterns of duality in ancient Egypt. These facts make Egypt a country of contrasts, but these contrasts and opposites complete each other. Opposites came together to make and create unity and equalism.

After studying the previous data about duality in religious thoughts and aspects, the conclusion could be summed up in some main points:

- Duality thoughts in the religious beliefs existed since Pharaonic Egypt.
- Duality thoughts comprised the two opposites, for example: Maat and Isefet, order and disorder, good and evil, life and death, in order to cover the whole aspects of life.
- Some gods and goddesses were sharing the dual aspect through either being male and female, or same pairing (males only or

females only). (Ex. Thoth and Seshat, Horus and Seth, Isis and Nephthys)

- Some titles held the dual aspect either of deities or of kings' titular, emphasizing on the division of the two lands or controlling good and evil.

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