

Title: Ancient Egyptian Self-Identity
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Table of Contents:

- I. Abstract
- II. Introduction
- III. Physical Appearance: Ancient Versus Modern
- IV. Written Evidence
- V. Artistic Evidence
- VI. Egyptians' Comparison With Others
- VII. Uses of Foreigners
- VIII. Us versus Them
- IX. Egyptians Outside of Egypt
- X. Foreigners Becoming Egyptian
- XI. Conclusion
- XII. Bibliography
- XIII. Endnotes

I. Abstract

In this article, I discuss how the ancient Egyptians determined their own racial or ethnic identity. While the common practice in many areas of the world today is to define race as an immutable part of each person, ancient Egyptians conceived of their identity in terms more ethnic than racial; that is, it was possible for an individual's identity to change between birth and death. Drawing from sources such as artwork, and primary texts and records, I demonstrate that "racial" identity in Egypt was fluid and could and did change depending upon the circumstances; it was closer to the modern concept of ethnicity than of race.¹

II. Introduction

Race and ethnicity are topics of great weight in the modern world, with multiple studies covering the various aspects of identity associated with them. Race is often seen as static and unchangeable, as determined by one's physical features and family background, while ethnicity is a more fluid entity, one that is similar to race but that can be manipulated depending on the particular situation and intent of the individual. These definitions, though, are not necessarily longstanding in the history of humanity. Throughout history, many societies have used very different criteria for determining an individual's race or ethnicity, often by making both categories more fluid than a modern audience might think possible. This raises the question of how, then, a society defines itself racially or ethnically. In some cases this is relatively simple to determine, but in the case of ancient Egypt² one must study many different aspects of their society in order to infer their self-identity. By examining their records, both written and visual, as well as following the movement of people, goods, and ideas, it becomes clear that the ancient Egyptians defined their own identity as people who embraced the culture of Egypt; this included elements of geography, religion, language, names, and a basic assimilation into the ideology that governed ancient Egyptian society from the Early Dynastic period through the New Kingdom. Ancient Egyptians did not recognize the concept of "race," as used in recent times, and while they did note physical and cultural differences between themselves and others, the "others" had the opportunity to become Egyptian³ based on how well they integrated themselves into Egyptian society.

III. Physical Appearance: Ancient Versus Modern

One of the criteria with salient importance for categorizing people in the modern period, while being of lesser significance to defining ethnicity in the ancient past, is that of physical

appearance in general, and skin color in particular. Skin color has received much attention from scholars in regard to Egypt, especially those with an underlying motive, usually to prove⁴ that Egypt either had little to do with Africa and could therefore be seen as a “civilized” culture, or that it was the predecessor to the entire African continent, so that Africans—and, in particular, African-Americans—can “claim” the great Egyptian civilization as their own. In both cases, these scholars impose modern views and categories of race on an ancient culture, which had a very different perspective on race and ethnicity than their own.

IV. Written Evidence

In order to determine how Egyptians saw themselves ethnically we must use the written and artistic material they left behind. First, the terminology the Egyptians used to refer to themselves, their surroundings, and others, grants some insights into what was important in their identity. For example, one commonly used word for Egypt is *kmt*, which literally means “the black,” referring to the cultivated land of Egypt that is surrounded by desert, the red land (Allen 2001:470). To some Afrocentrists, though, the use of the term “black” in reference to Egypt must mean that the Egyptians were referring to *themselves* as black rather than using the color symbolism that permeated their culture (Diop 1989:20). Holders of this belief completely ignore the fact that black was, in general, a positive color in Egypt, possibly due to the color of fertile soil. If the soil was black, it could sustain life; if red, death would result. The term *kmt*, “black,” contrasted with *dsrt*, or the “red” of the desert (Allen 2001:22). These two colors were also in use for writing; a scribe’s case had space for two cakes of ink, red and black. Black was used for most writing while red was for headings (Mertz 1966:135). Although this could simply be due to the availability of the two pigments, it does indicate that the two colors were both opposing and linked. Simply claiming that the term *kmt* for Egypt meant that the Egyptians saw

themselves as black the same way that modern populations do ignores the significance behind the colors that the Egyptians used for various purposes. It also ignores the fact that *kmt* is part of one of many oppositions that permeate the Egyptian worldview; for example, the most common term for Egypt, in fact, was *t3wj*, or “Two Lands” (Allen 2001:22). Egyptians saw their world as consisting of opposing forces: the Two Lands (Upper and Lower Egypt, which could be identified by various symbols of duality such as the bee and the sedge, the white and red crown, and so forth), order and chaos, the Black Land and the Red Land. To the Egyptians, this was a significant part of their lives: the constant opposition of two forces, the linking of two entities. Thus the reference to Egypt as “the black” had much more to do with the cultivated land versus the desert than it did to the skin color of the land’s inhabitants, which seems to have been irrelevant to the definition of an Egyptian.

V. Artistic Evidence

In addition to the written material the Egyptians left behind, we must also turn to the artistic evidence. It is difficult, however, to interpret the ethnic significance of Egyptians’ own depictions of themselves; early in Egyptian history, by at least the time of the Narmer palette (Early Dynastic Period, c. 3100 BCE), Egyptians had established a canon to follow in all their standard artwork. With few exceptions, humans (and, in particular, Egyptians) were always shown in more or less the same style; as an artistic tradition, Egyptian art did not change much over the two thousand years or so of Pharaonic history. This is quite unusual for any society; while certain aspects of the artistic tradition did change somewhat during the course of Egypt’s ancient history, in general the iconography and style remained constant, such that most Egyptian art is easily distinguishable from any other artistic tradition.

It is widely recognized that Egyptian art is not usually an accurate representation of the subject's appearance. Rarely is anyone portrayed as ill, or middle-aged, or anything other than young, vigorous, and perfectly proportioned (to the Egyptian's standards of perfect proportions in artwork, which can be observed and measured on nearly all of the royal and religious art). Exceptions to this rule are usually unofficial sketches on stray bits of ostraca (pottery shards and limestone flakes used as a cheap alternative to papyrus), papyrus, or a handy wall for graffiti; they deviate considerably from the accepted court style, and do not follow the artistic canon developed for religious and political artwork (Aldred 1998:205). Variation can also be found in standard forms in tomb paintings, in which what appear to be the same individuals show up in multiple tombs, suggesting that there was a cast of characters in use for certain portrayals on tomb walls. Deviations from the perfect form also include standard symbols of wealth and power, such as obesity, which is delicately implied in small rolls of fat on the figure's abdomen. This, rather than hinting at an unhealthy individual, was meant to demonstrate that he was wealthy and always had enough to eat, even to excess. Likewise, the depiction of a person as aged was meant to counter his youthful portrait; his youthful self demonstrated his vigor while his aged self represented the knowledge and wisdom he had gained throughout life.

With the de-emphasis on realistic representations of the subjects in mind, one can turn then to the colors used on the figures' skin. Men are usually shown with red skin, women with yellow. This is the proof offered by many that the Egyptians were not "black" Africans—their skin is not shown as black—and contributes to the image of Egypt as somehow separate from the African continent. But, as discussed above, portrayed appearance had very little to do with actual appearance in Egyptian art. The gender differentiation in coloring has been interpreted as a reference to the separate gender occupations: men generally worked outdoors in the sun while

women remained in the house (Allen 2001:32). While there may be some validity to this, it is too simplistic and too literal an explanation for an artistic tradition that placed so much emphasis on symbolism. Some have offered the suggestion that the differing skin colors had religious significance (Keita and Boyce 1996:23), while others propose that the red for men was symbolic of vitality and the female yellow for fertility (Brunson 1989:53). Other, less common skin colors are green—used exclusively for the god Osiris to symbolize vegetation and rebirth—and black, such as on the statue of a Middle Kingdom pharaoh, which may have been referring to the Black Land in an allusion similar to that of Osiris' green skin (Malek 1999:166). While it is true that many Egyptians probably had dark complexions, given their geographic position, there is more at work in Egyptian art than simple portraiture. Whatever the actual meaning of the skin colors, it is clear that the skin colors themselves cannot be taken as evidence of how the Egyptians saw themselves physically.

While portrayed skin color may not be an accurate representation of what Egyptians looked like or how they saw themselves, it is possible to glean some information from other aspects of portraiture. Facial features, as shown on three-dimensional art in particular, give some hints as to the Egyptians' conception of themselves. While most sculptures demonstrate the homogenized and idealized characteristics that dominate Egyptian art, others show atypical features that hint at ethnic diversity. One of the most conspicuous examples is the Sphinx at Giza. This is pointed out by Afrocentrists as an obvious indication of Negroid features, particularly in the pronounced prognathism as seen in profile. While this is seen by Afrocentrists as proof positive that all Egyptians were black, what it merely shows is that this particular individual demonstrated facial features normally found in black populations—that is, if this sculpture can be trusted as an accurate representation of the Pharaoh Khafre's features. Given

the dubious realism of Egyptian art, it is possible that the actual person represented in the Sphinx looked nothing like his sculpture; however, since the artistic canon that had been set since the time of the Narmer palette does not usually include these pronounced features, it is possible that the artists who carved the Sphinx chose to deviate from the canon enough to create a more accurate representation of their sovereign. The Sphinx is not the only example of Old Kingdom sculpture with “black” features, though. The limestone head of a woman from the 4th Dynasty, found in a royal tomb, displays unusual elements for an Egyptian sculpture, particularly a wide nose and thick lips that are usually associated with inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, it is unknown if this sculpture is of an Egyptian or a Nubian⁵ woman (Snowden 1996:106). She may have been a foreigner who was integrated into Egyptian society, and was therefore shown in the style of Egypt but with some of her own features emphasized; or, it may indicate that, in this particular time period, the ruling class was comprised of individuals of a more Nubian appearance; or, it may suggest that having Nubian features was popular at the time and they made their way into portraiture. Or, again, it may simply be another indication of the range of physical variation within Egyptian society. Whatever their reasons for doing so, it seems likely that the sculptor of this woman deliberately suggested Nubian features, since compared to other works of sculpture these features are easily recognizable as deviating from the standard.

Egyptian artwork, despite its complications when used to infer self-identity, still contains indications of how Egyptians saw themselves. For the most part, individual traits were not important to Egyptian art, although some pieces demonstrate characteristics identifiable as different from the structured artistic canon, which indicates some possible attention to personal taste or appearance. These idiosyncrasies can then be interpreted in a variety of ways; perhaps the individual’s appearance was unusual enough to warrant attention by Egyptian artists, or

perhaps certain traits were popular for portraiture at that time whether or not the subject of the piece actually had them. This prompts the question, then, of *why* certain features would be favored at various times, such as the Negroid features of some Old Kingdom sculpture. If, as Afrocentrists claim, all Egyptians were “black,” then this might be an expression of that fact. Or, given that “black” features are not particularly widespread in the Egyptian canon, it might instead be an indication that at that time persons of “black” features had a strong influence on the country. Whatever the reason for those particular examples of Negroid features, it is more an indication of Egypt’s variety than its uniformity, since throughout the Egyptian artistic tradition the features that are emphasized change to some extent, suggesting that the artistic ideals—and perhaps the humans they were based on—were also changing.⁶

VI. Egyptians’ Comparison to Others

While focusing solely on Egyptian depictions of themselves raises multiple problems of interpretation, one of the more telling ways to determine how a society like the Egyptians saw itself racially or ethnically is by its own comparison to others. Despite Egypt’s unique geographic position that gave it relative protection, Egyptians were not completely isolated; throughout the Pharaonic period they had contact with several other civilizations and groups of people, which they recognized as different from themselves. Examining what differences they noticed, and what they emphasized, can offer significant insights into what the Egyptians perceived as “other” and, therefore, what they saw as belonging to themselves.

Given the standard nature of the Egyptian artistic canon, it is relatively simple to pick out the foreigners in Egyptian art. They are shown with identifiably different traits from the Egyptians, and a separate canon seems to have developed in regards to foreigners, resulting in foreigners of a few distinct groups shown alike to each other and separate from Egyptians. The

Egyptians seem to have recognized four⁷ distinct “races”⁸ of humans, as shown in both their artwork and written material. They, the Egyptians, were the greatest of the four, the defenders of order against a world of chaos (Malek 1999:27). This is yet another instance of Egypt’s dualistic worldview: the Two Lands were one force, in contrast with everywhere else. Chaos was embodied in those foreign to Egypt, although the Egyptians further differentiated these outsiders by placing them into three distinct groups: Kushites⁹ or Nubians, Libyans, and Syro-Palestinians or Asiatics (Yurco 1996:109). These groups are well-illustrated in a painted wall relief in the tomb of Ramses III. All four races stand lined up, one after the other, their features and dress distinct from one another, while hieroglyphs name each group.¹⁰ The detail that the Egyptians included in their portrayals of foreign groups indicate a familiarity with their appearances such that they were either drawn from life (Donadoni 1990:225) or that the Egyptians had developed a canon applicable to each foreign “race” that allowed them to use the depiction of each foreigner as an icon of that group. Given universal human variation, it is unlikely that every individual from Libya was identical as shown on this relief. It is possible that the Egyptians had difficulty in differentiating between individuals in foreign groups and thus chose to depict them all alike; it is more likely, though, that the Egyptians recognized the different attributes of foreigners as both distinct from those of Egyptians and from other foreign groups, and so developed a canon for showing foreigners just as they had a standard way of showing Egyptians.

In general, foreigners appear in Egyptian art in a limited number of roles: enemies during war, captives, tribute-bearers, and ambassadors. In the ambassadorial position, foreigners are shown as either the same size as, or smaller than, their Egyptian counterparts. Size is an indication of power in Egyptian art, and thus foreigners are not shown larger than Egyptians—at least, Egyptians of high social standing. A scene from General Horemheb’s tomb at Saqqara

displays this clearly. The largest figures are Tutankhamun and his queen, followed by Horemheb, bedecked in jewelry, who is greeting a party of ambassadors much smaller than himself. These Syrian chiefs are easily distinguished from Egyptians, with hats and long pointed beards, and are throwing themselves at his feet, arms raised as if in supplication or praise (Malek 1999:289). This same tomb shows captives from elsewhere in Africa, squatting in a huddle and distinguishable by their haircuts, large hoop earrings, and prognathism.

These types of depictions of foreigners, while not necessarily flattering, are at least relatively peaceful. Other portrayals of foreigners are more violent; scenes such as Ramses II's relief of the siege of Dharpur (Clayton 1994:150), in which Ramses II is a monumental figure trampling his small, helpless enemies, are not quite so tranquil. In other places, some of Egypt's captives are shown about to be slaughtered by the king. This theme reaches as far back as the Narmer palette, continuing through Thutmose III and beyond. In the Karnak temple is a relief of Thutmose III, one hand holding a brace of captives by the hair and the other arm upraised to deal a death blow (Malek 1999:212). The king's sandals were often decorated with bound captives so that the king could tread on his enemies wherever he walked. These types of images serve to belittle foreigners and exalt over them; they reinforced the ideology of Egypt as a land of peace and order while the lands of foreigners were barbaric and chaotic. It fell to Egypt to subdue these enemies of order, and thus they are portrayed as being perpetually trampled and destroyed (Leahy 1995:227). Foreigners as enemies were a familiar theme in Egyptian art; they were anyone who was *against* Egypt.

While in some ways it is as straightforward as artistic depictions, the literature on foreigners is a complex issue. While the Egyptians, as did many human groups, drew a very definite line between "us" and "them," they also made room for foreigners in their ideology and,

as will be discussed later, gave them the opportunity to lose their foreignness and become Egyptian. Still, in their written material, the Egyptians differentiated in many ways those who were decidedly foreign. To begin with, the terminology very clearly labeled those who were Egyptian and those who were not. All of humanity fit under the term *'nhw*, or “the living,” as opposed to the gods and the dead (Allen 2001:31). Aside from titles, further divisions were made by distinguishing the Egyptians as *rmt*, “people” (Allen 2001:32). Either someone was *rmt*, a person, or a foreigner—not really a person. The hieroglyphic determinative to use for “foreigner,” a seated man holding a crooked stick, was used to distinguish them from Egyptians (Allen 2001: 425). The crooked stick by itself was the determinative for “foreign” in general, and for some of the foreigners who were then further differentiated by their individual nationalities: Asiatics, Libyans, and so forth. While these terms for foreign groups rarely carried a stigma¹¹ themselves (Leahy 1995:232), they do show that Egyptians distinguished foreigners from themselves and established them in separate groups. The Egyptians saw themselves as people and everyone else as something less. Kush was referred to as “wretched Kush” and Asiatics were “*only* Asiatics” (Mertz 1966:35). Many texts gloat over the tribute brought to them by people of foreign lands, and describe the crushing defeat of various foreign groups. After a Nubian defeat, Thutmose III had a hymn of victory composed, ostensibly as coming from the mouth of the god Amun-Re:

... Thou hast smitten the hordes of rebels according as I commanded thee.
The earth in its length and breadth, Westerners and Easterners are subject to thee,
Thou tramplest all countries... (Breasted 1962: volume II, page 263).

Many other texts follow these same general lines: the king, a representative of Egypt, overcame many foreign lands, whose inhabitants were described as the enemies of Egypt, rightfully conquered and brought back as slaves. The tone of these writings is one of celebrating Egypt and scorning foreigners, which in these cases may have a political agenda as well: justifying

Egypt's imperialistic actions. But, the texts also followed the Egyptian ideology of the dual nature of the universe.

VII. Uses of Foreigners

Foreigners and foreign lands, while obviously inferior (to the Egyptians), did have their uses. Much of the surviving Egyptian correspondence and literature contains evidence of the trade of goods and services between countries. The famous expedition to Punt¹² in the reign of Hatshepsut brought gold, incense, and other foreign goods to Egypt, and stimulated an interest in the exotic (Bryan 2000:242). Soon a bustling trade in luxury goods from Nubia sprang up, manifesting itself in the archaeological record by the numerous tomb paintings of Nubians bearing tribute (Bryan 2000:242). At many times, Lower Nubia seems to have been almost considered Egyptian, given the number of trade goods brought to Egypt (Baines and Malek 2002:20). There is practically no record of what the Egyptians gave in return, but it is clear that many raw materials came from Lower Nubia, and it was also the route through which other exotic goods traveled (Baines and Malek 2002:20).

The trade in exotics was not limited to goods. Foreign women were brought to be singers and dancers in brothels (Bresciani 1990:236), and dwarfs (or pygmies) were also imported as objects of curiosity. Pepi II heard of a captured pygmy who was on his way to Egypt, and sent word ahead to the expedition to treat the pygmy carefully, as he wished "to see this dwarf more than the gifts of Sinai and of Punt" (Clayton 1994:67). While Pepi II was eight years old at the time, his enthusiasm still shows the interest the Egyptians had in the exotic and thus provides a partial explanation for their continued trade with foreign nations. Other common positions that foreigners occupied were as laborers and soldiers. Here, too, we see Egyptians separating foreigners among themselves on the basis of nationality. Palestinians were known for their

wine-making skills, Africans for baking (Bresciani 1990:230), and Nubians were widely sought-after as fan bearers (Leahy 1995:229) and bowmen. Here the Egyptians, while recognizing some expertise foreigners had in various activities, were also stereotyping them on the basis of nationality or race. It is very similar to the “type” of each ethnicity that they developed for artistic depictions: Nubians all have *these* characteristics, Asiatics have *those*, and thus all groups fit neatly into numerous categories that the Egyptians devised. It seems very straightforward and in keeping with the modern concepts of race.

Recognizing the skills possessed by—or assumed to be possessed by—foreigners manifested itself in other forms as well. Some religious texts speak of one of the gods creating humanity in several distinct groups, each with their own generally positive attributes. A hymn to the Aten from the reign of Akhenaten reads:

The lands of Khor¹³ and Kush and the land of Egypt: you have set every man in his place, you have allotted their needs, every one of them according to his diet... Tongues are separate in speech, and their characters as well; their skins are different, for you have differentiated the foreigners (Simpson 1972:292-3).

This passage brings up several interesting points. Although it is from the reign of the religious heretic Ahkenaten and should, therefore, be treated with caution when applying it to the rest of Egypt’s history, other, similar texts were written at other times for other gods such as Khnum (Bresciani 1990:227). Excerpts like this one demonstrate that the *ideology* of Egypt, at least, considered foreigners to have been created by the same gods that ruled Egypt and were in some sense “separate but equal.” Still, the hymn to Aten mentions setting every man “in his place,” leaving room for the superiority of Egyptians. It also, interestingly enough, mentions different skin colors. References to skin color were relatively rare in Egyptian writings, while mentions of Nubians’ “wooly or tightly-coiled hair” were more common (Snowden 1993:106). This recognition was demonstrated in paintings of foreigners, but while that was, in part, an idealistic

portrayal, here was written very clearly that the Egyptians recognized the physical differences between themselves and others.

VIII. Us versus Them

What the Egyptians seem to have highlighted in their records, both visual and written, of foreigners' differences seem to be their behavior: homeland, food, dress, language, burial customs, and their general appearance: skin color, hair, and facial hair and features. Foreigners are repeatedly shown in Egyptian art and described in writings as aliens, very different in their ways of life from Egyptians, and often as Egypt's enemies who must be crushed and subdued for the order of the universe to be maintained. Thus, the division between Egyptians and foreigners is made clear: foreigners live in distant lands, practice customs alien to those of Egyptians, and are markedly different in appearance from Egyptians, in part because of their customs and dress, and in part because of their geographic location and separate gene pools. Taking all this into account, it seems easy to describe what it takes to be an Egyptian. An Egyptian is someone who lives in the Nile Valley, speaks Egyptian, dresses and worships as an Egyptian, is buried in Egypt, and, in general, fits into the ideology of a citizen of the nation responsible for upholding *ma'at* (justice or order) rather than embodying the chaos of foreign lands.

IX. Egyptians Outside of Egypt

These two neat categories of "foreigner" and "Egyptian" become blurred, however, when taking into account two groups of people: Egyptians in foreign lands, and foreigners who *became* Egyptian. Egyptians who left Egypt thereby renounced one of the qualifications of being Egyptian; does this, then, mean they were no longer Egyptians? The surviving literature on the subject is mostly concentrated in narratives, particularly two Middle Kingdom tales, *The Shipwrecked Sailor* and *The Story of Sinuhe*. In each of these, an Egyptian is in a foreign land

for a while, either by an accident as in *The Shipwrecked Sailor* or as a fugitive as in the *Story of Sinuhe*. In *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, the sailor has been marooned on an island of wonders: abundant food, myrrh, *heknu*-oil, and a serpent-god who cares for him. Still, the god informs the sailor that he will soon be re-united with his kin, that he will “die in [his] village” (Simpson 1972:52, 55). The sailor is overjoyed to hear this and offers the serpent future gifts, “as should be done for a god who loves the Egyptians in a distant land which the Egyptians do not know” (Simpson 1972:55). This suggests that not only is being in Egypt among kin more important to the sailor than being on an island of plenty, but also that a foreign deity can be honored by Egyptians if the deity cares for them. In this story, the geographic location of Egypt is stressed as a key feature of Egyptian identity, but the inclusion of the foreign deity into Egyptian veneration indicates flexibility in regards to foreigners: if the foreigners (particularly deities) support Egyptians, they may be treated as something other than foreign and welcomed, to some extent, into Egyptian consciousness.

The Story of Sinuhe is even more telling in regards to Egyptians outside of Egypt. Sinuhe fled Egypt when the ruler changed, for reasons not explicitly stated. He lived among the Asiatics for a time, until his wish to return was great enough to contact the king of Egypt. The king then replied, welcoming Sinuhe back, informing him, “you shall not die in a foreign land... Take thought for your dead body and return” (Simpson 1972:68). Even though he had prospered while abroad, Sinuhe’s main concern was for a proper burial, one that he could only get in Egypt. When he did return, the king announced to the royal family:

Here is Sinuhe, who has returned as an Asiatic whom the Bedouin have raised... They said before His Majesty: It is not really he, O Sovereign, my lord. His Majesty said: It is he indeed (Simpson 1972:72).

The royal family did not recognize—formally—that Sinuhe was truly himself, for he appeared to them as an Asiatic. Later, Sinuhe was reinstated and he recorded that:

A load was given to the desert, and clothes to the sand-dwellers... I passed the night on a bed. I gave the sand to those who live on it and wood oil to those who rub themselves with it (Simpson 1972:73).

In this passage, Sinuhe removes the trappings of Asiatics and behaves, dresses, and sleeps as an Egyptian. These two sections of the story suggest that, when outside of Egypt and behaving as a foreigner, an individual was not necessarily an Egyptian. He could reclaim his Egyptianness, though, by returning to Egypt and once more behaving as an Egyptian does, observing the customs of cleanliness, dress, and so forth. In this example, being Egyptian seems somewhat malleable. Even if an Egyptian left Egypt and became, in a sense, a foreigner, he still had the option of becoming Egyptian again. This suggests that being Egyptian involved a geographic aspect (living in Egypt) and a cultural aspect: assuming the habits of the Egyptians. It also, in the cases of both Sinuhe and the shipwrecked sailor, implies a genealogical aspect. Both men were Egyptian to begin with, and so their returns to Egypt and Egyptian ways were not contested. This raises the question of how important genetics were to Egyptian identity. Could a foreigner become Egyptian?

X. Foreigners Becoming Egyptian

Abundant evidence points to the fact that many foreigners did, indeed, become Egyptian, in as full a sense of the word as a modern audience can grasp. While many foreigners were brought to Egypt against their wills, as captives and slaves, this did not prevent them from rising in Egyptian society to become, essentially, Egyptian. This defies the modern sense of “race,” and suggests that the Egyptian concept of “race” was more like the modern concept of “ethnicity”—something that could change, without regard to the birthplace or physical appearance of the individual. The transformation into Egyptians can be traced through foreigners’ adoptions of Egyptian names, styles of dress, language, tomb portrayals, and places in society.

Two common ways in which foreigners entered Egyptian society were through the military and as slaves. Much of Egypt's military, beginning as far back as the Old Kingdom, consisted of non-Egyptians; the earliest were Nubian soldiers but eventually Libyans, Asiatics, and others were included (Leahy 1995:228). Slaves, too, were brought into Egypt in considerable numbers, in order to sustain building projects and as private servants (Leahy 1995:228). Slavery, though, was not limited to foreigners; by at least the later Middle Kingdom there is evidence that both foreigners and Egyptians could be enslaved (Brewer and Teeter 1999:82). Thus slavery probably did not carry the racial connotations that it has in other societies; if slaves could be either Egyptian or foreign, and if foreigners were known to perform other roles in Egyptian society, then slavery did not necessarily equal non-Egyptian.

Foreigners also had the option of rising in Egyptian society. While social classes were in many ways immutable, they were not completely so; the Middle Kingdom *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* describes a man, Khunanup, who is a peasant and near the bottom of Egyptian society. Through his eloquent speaking, however, he is rewarded by the High Steward with the land and goods of the one who had wronged him (Simpson 1972:31-49). While this is a work of fiction, historical figures such as the 18th-Dynasty Senenmut had similar experiences. While he came from humble origins, through his successes as an architect and army scribe Senenmut eventually achieved a long string of titles, particularly that of Hatshepsut's chief advisor (Johnson 1998:83). While these were Egyptians making such achievements, it was not impossible for foreigners either. One impressive case is that of a Semite living in Egypt near the end of the 18th Dynasty who gained the rank of vizier—the highest administrative position in Egypt (Bresciani 1990:242). While not all cases were this remarkable, it does illustrate that such occurrences were not unknown.

Some systems were in place that even encouraged a foreigner's advancement. Occasionally the government encouraged assimilation into Egyptian society by offering language instruction for foreign captives, and by promising land in return for service in the army, thereby persuading foreign soldiers to integrate into Egyptian society (Leahy 1995:232). Marriage was considered a private concern, so there was no barrier imposed by the government to foreigners marrying Egyptians (Leahy 1995:232). Marriages of foreign royalty to Egyptian kings have been documented. Ramses II married two Hittite princesses, giving at least one an Egyptian name to replace her foreign one (Clayton 1994:147). This, while political in nature, did serve to bring foreigners into the country as a part of Egypt's society. Another state institution, the *Kap* or royal nursery, was made up of royal Egyptian children and Nubians of high social class and, later, Asiatics (Bresciani 1990:231-2). Here they were all trained and educated together, whereupon the foreigners either took places in Egyptian society in the palace, administration, or army, or else they traveled back to their own countries with the political and cultural links to Egypt intact (Bresciani 1990:232). While this was a shrewd political move on the part of the Egyptians as it helped establish alliances with foreign nations, it was also an avenue through which high-class foreigners could become Egyptian. Assimilation was not always voluntary, though; Ramses III brought conquered Libyans back to Egypt where they were "placed in fortresses" and forced to adopt Egyptian language and culture in place of their own (Bresciani 1990:245).

Whatever the motivation, it is clear that Egypt had a long history of foreigners becoming Egyptian. This can be documented by foreigners in high places in Egyptian society, as discussed above, and also by foreigners' acceptance of Egyptian culture as indicated by their adoption of Egyptian names and funeral practices. There is considerable evidence of foreigners living in

Egypt throughout its history, particularly in the New Kingdom, since such people were referred to as an “inhabitant of a foreign land” or “speaker of a foreign tongue” (Leahy 1995:232). Later in their lives, many of these foreigners took Egyptian names and became indistinguishable from other Egyptians in the historical record were it not for the foreign names of their parents (Bresciani 1990:241). Some used both their original names and their adopted Egyptian ones, such as the Syrians whose double names appear in documents of the Middle Kingdom (Bresciani 1990:233).

Foreigners who strove to become Egyptian not only took Egyptian names and Egyptian places in society, but also portrayed themselves *as Egyptians*, appearing in no way different from “native” Egyptians by their features or clothing. This is particularly apparent in their tombs. Benya, a man with Asiatic parents and a “child of the nursery” (the Kap) who held important administrative positions under Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, had a tomb no different from that of any other high-class Egyptian (Leahy 1995:233). There is little evidence of anything half-done in Egyptian art; either an individual was a foreigner, shown complete with physical characteristics and dress inappropriate to Egyptians, or that person was an Egyptian shown in full Egyptian regalia and style. Examples such as the woman with Nubian features and Egyptian dress (section: “Artistic Evidence”) only support this; the artist might choose to render facial features differently, but the individual would still be portrayed as an Egyptian would. Even if an individual was of a different genetic background from the main body of Egyptians, he or she could still be considered Egyptian.

XI. Conclusion

Egyptian society, while appearing on the surface to be a homogenous “race” given their continuity of artistic and writing style, was in actuality internally diverse and integrated with the

nations around them. Egyptians based their Egyptianness on several categories. In order to be Egyptian, one had to live in Egypt (along the Nile Valley from the Mediterranean Sea to the Nile's first cataract), and behave as an Egyptian complete with an Egyptian name, dress, and burial customs. This can be demonstrated particularly by Egyptians who left Egypt and then returned, and also by foreigners who became fully Egyptian. Accounts of Egyptians who left Egypt for a time are particularly preserved in stories, which highlight not only the individual's wishes to return to Egypt for a proper burial, but also their re-adoption of Egyptian ways upon their return; only then are they seen as true Egyptians again. Egyptians allowed foreigners to become Egyptian as well, provided that the foreigners assimilated into Egyptian culture, adopting its language, dress, and customs. In this way, such potentially liminal individuals renounced the role as symbolic enemies of Egypt and aligned themselves with the ideology of Egypt as the maintainer of order in the universe. While the Egyptians did recognize an Egyptian "race" as separate from the Asiatic, Libyan, or Nubian "races," they also allowed their own category to include those who chose to renounce their origins and align themselves with Egypt, making the Egyptian term "race" more synonymous with the modern term "ethnicity," as something that could change. In this way, Egyptians defined themselves as a people who lived in Egypt and behaved as Egyptians, whether they were born in Egypt or not.

XII. Bibliography

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XIII. Endnotes

¹ Throughout this paper, “race” and “ethnicity” are used in the modern sense to avoid confusion.

² Specifically from the Early Dynastic period (c.3150 BCE) through the New Kingdom (1070 BCE).

³ Throughout this text, “Egyptian” refers to “ancient Egyptian” unless otherwise specified.

⁴ This tends to be very subtle, involving discussion of Egyptians as a “red-brown” people and minimizing discussion of their connection with the rest of Africa (Payne 1988).

⁵ Nubia was the area along the Nile south of Egypt (in modern-day southern Egypt and the Sudan). It is usually defined as beginning at the First Cataract, although the border often shifted during Pharaonic times.

⁶ While this seems contrary to the consistency of the artistic canon, it is not. Egyptians maintained the same general rules for their artwork for thousands of years, while more subtle changes throughout time mark their changing tastes. This usually involved the colors favored, or the way in which the facial features were rendered.

⁷ Although other “races,” or groups, came and went at relatively brief times throughout Egypt’s history, four were most widespread and recognized from the Early Dynastic period to the New Kingdom.

⁸ Religious writings such as hymns to the Aten and Khnum distinguish foreigners as separate creations of these gods, which suggests the biological component that is the main factor in race versus ethnicity. As later evidence in this paper will show, however, the differences in the “races” were not as immutable as they seem from these hymns.

⁹ Kush was a district of Nubia south of the Second Cataract, beginning in the 12th Dynasty (Kendall 2001:250).

¹⁰ This painted relief has been used by many to prove that Egyptians saw themselves as “black,” like other Africans. This was entirely based on a 1913 drawing of the wall, in which the artist selected a figure from each group as a representative for the entire “race.” The artist, however, made what is unquestionably a mistake: he took an individual from the Kushite group and labeled him an Egyptian! When examining the actual wall, it is easy to see that the Egyptians portrayed themselves as they usually did, rather than as anything similar to the Kushites (Yurco 1996: 110).

¹¹ Except in the Middle Kingdom, in which so many foreign slaves were Asiatic that the term *‘3m* “Asiatic” became equivalent to “slave” (Leahy 1995:229).

¹² While the actual location of Punt is disputed by scholars, it is generally recognized to have been south of Egypt, either on the coast of the Red Sea (Baines and Malek 2002:13) or on the Nile, somewhere south of the fifth cataract (Shaw 2000:323).

¹³ The northeast portion of Syro-Palestine (Simpson 1972:292).