

Ancient Egypt in Brazil: A Theoretical Approach to Contemporary Uses of the Past

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we consider archaeology as a product of social interaction, and discuss how ancient Egyptian materiality has been an important part of identity building in Brazil. We begin by reviewing our theoretical setting, and suggest that a postmodern approach is most helpful to our goal of understanding the social context of the public uses of archaeology. The paper then turns to the trajectory of "Egyptomania" in Brazil, from the 19th century onwards, highlighting the importance of cultural movements such as Kardecism and Masonry in this trend. We argue that the use of Egyptian subjects in Brazil has connections with social inequality, racism, and gender biases. Finally, we present a case study on positive recent trends in the presentation of ancient Egypt in school textbooks which highlights critical approaches to the use of ancient Egyptian subjects in contemporary Brazil.

Résumé: Dans cette étude, nous étudions l'archéologie en tant que produit de l'interaction sociale, et examinons dans quelle mesure la réalité de l'Égypte antique a joué un rôle déterminant pour construire l'identité au Brésil. Nous commençons avec l'examen de notre cadre théorique pour affirmer qu'une approche postmoderne est la plus appropriée pour atteindre notre objectif, qui consiste à comprendre le contexte social des utilisations publiques de l'archéologie. L'étude se penche ensuite sur l'évolution de « l'égyptomanie » au Brésil, depuis le XIXe siècle jusqu'à nos jours, en soulignant l'importance des mouvements culturels dans ce courant, comme le Kardecisme et la Franc-maçonnerie. Nous montrons que l'utilisation des thèmes égyptiens au Brésil a des liens avec l'inégalité sociale, le racisme, et les préjugés sexistes. Pour terminer, nous présentons une étude de cas sur les tendances manifestes actuelles de la présentation de l'Égypte antique dans les livres scolaires, qui souligne des approches

décisives pour l'utilisation des thématiques de l'Égypte antique dans le Brésil contemporain.

Resumen: En este trabajo consideramos la arqueología como un producto de interacción social y sostenemos que la materialidad de los antiguos egipcios ha sido una parte importante de la construcción de identidad en Brasil. Comenzamos revisando nuestro trasfondo teórico y sugerimos que el enfoque posmoderno es el más útil para nuestro objetivo de entender el contexto social de los usos públicos de la arqueología. A continuación, el trabajo aborda la trayectoria de la "Egiptomanía" en Brasil, a partir del siglo XIX, destacando la importancia de movimientos culturales como el kardecismo y la masonería en esta tendencia. Lo que sostenemos es que el uso de temas egipcios en Brasil está relacionado con la desigualdad, el racismo y los prejuicios de sexo. Para concluir, presentamos un estudio de caso sobre las recientes tendencias positivas en la presentación del antiguo Egipto en los libros de texto de las escuelas, que destacan los enfoques críticos en el uso de los temas del antiguo en el Brasil contemporáneo.

KEY WORDS

Ancient Egypt, Brazil, Identity

Introduction

Archaeological theory has moved from a "loss of innocence" (Clarke 1973) to a clear political engagement with present day concerns. Since archaeology is the product of particular social forces and is socially contextual, this paper argues that in evaluating the origins of knowledge it is important to consider the context of past and present thought. The notion of the "invention of Brazil" has been widely studied for several generations, but little attention has been paid to the role of Egypt in this process. Egypt, however, has been at the forefront of the Brazilian imagination since at least the 1822 beginning of the nation state. The influence of Kardecism or Spiritism, in the 20th century, contributed to the popular appeal of Egypt, as did the continued influence of Masonry. Ancient Egypt is the most popular school subject in Brazil: more popular than any other historical subject, civilisation or period. School textbooks pay special attention to ancient Egypt, and particularly to the celebrated achievements of the Pharaonic era. In Brazil, newsstands carry a weekly magazine that deals exclusively with Ancient Egypt, attesting to the massive popular appeal of the subject.

As Ucko (1995:16) suggests, since the early 1980s and the founding of the World Archaeological Congress, the fiction of a factual, objective archaeological science has faded. A worldwide Polyphony of theoretical voices and perspectives has also been widely acknowledged (Gamble 1995:xvi). No archaeologist can now separate themselves from their data since archaeological narratives always compromises this distinction. Additionally, no archaeologist can afford to ignore previous interpretations of evidence, and it is increasingly accepted that the archaeologist, through her narrative description, is fully implicated in any representation of the past. By exploring how we represent the relationship between ourselves and the past we might see ourselves as creators of the past through its materiality (Munslow 1997). Foucault (1984:50) stated that

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at on and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibilities of going beyond them.

Foucault's words resonate with the well-known Socratic motto, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, *Apology* 38a). It is also not far from Clarke's (1973) warning of a "loss of innocence". Archaeology, as with other social sciences at the brink of breaching self-evidences, entered the post-modern condition denying the natural as an explanatory model (Foucault 1991:76; Hamilton 2003:154). Consequently, if there is no ineffable truth, then the archaeologist must never claim that his or her account and interpretation is the only, or the natural, way of telling the story of the past (Arnold 2000:93; Hingley 2008).

Archaeological narrative is always subjective, and rooted in social and cultural values (Augé and Colleyn 2004:118). Increasingly the discipline recognizes that archaeological knowledge cannot be neutral or apolitical, by virtue of its very nature as a human endeavor (Veit 1989:50), and that archaeological work should result in a motivation for the development of critical thought (Sanoja and Vargas 1990:53). The observation that archaeologists produce evidence to be turned into knowledge, "sein Wissen ist - wie noch Kant sagt—cognitio ex datis" ("knowledge is, as Kant said, the result of thinking from rough data") (Kittsteiner 1997:6), has also been acknowledged in Brazil. But so have the ironic words of a senior French archaeologist who has worked in Brazil since the 1960s: "tout ce que l'ont fait ou trouve est nouveau... ce qui n'encourage ni à l'autocritique, ni à fuir la routine" ("everything we do and find is something new in the

Brazilian context, so that this does not encourage people to be self-critical and indeed discourages the search for new paths”) (Prous 1994:11).

Archaeology has been used to forge national identities and reinforce dictatorships in Europe (Legendre et al. 2007; Galaty and Watkinson 2006; Funari 2008a), as well as in Latin America (Funari et al. 2009). In this paper we follow in the steps of Ucko (2003:v) in examining the changing appropriations of Ancient Egypt in Brazil over time (Bakos 2003). “Egyptomania”—the recycling and reinventing of Egypt’s icons and images—has been an active field of research for a number of years (e.g. Humbert 1994; 1996; Fazzini 1996; Shaw 2004:137–159), and the “invention of Brazil” has similarly been a popular research topic for several generations (e.g. Monbeig 1976; Broggio and Droulers 2005). However, and interestingly, little attention has been paid to the relationship between Egyptomania and the invention of Brazil. With this paper we aim to fill this gap, and thus we explore the role of Egypt in inventing Brazil and Brazilians.

Ancient Egypt in Brazil

Egypt has been in Brazilian minds since at least the 1822 beginnings of the nation state (Bakos 1996; 1998; 2004; Saballa 1998). In 1808 the Portuguese Royal House transferred the capital of the empire to Rio de Janeiro, in their flight from the Napoleonic thrust in Europe. Brazil was raised to the status of part of The United Kingdom of Portugal, and thus cities such as Algarve and Rio de Janeiro received an array of Imperial institutions, including the National Museum (Beltrão and Kitchens 1990).

In 1822 Peter I (son of John VI), heir to the Portuguese throne, proclaimed the independence of Brazil but kept most of the Imperial institutions as the backbone of the new nation. The National Museum was modelled after other European, Imperial Museums, and Peter I decided to have Egyptian antiquities at the core of the museum’s collection as a sign of the Imperial pretensions of the new country. During the Imperial Period (1822–1889) Egyptian antiquities were a potent sign of the universal ambitions of the Brazilian Royalty, for them, Egypt represented the first and most enduring civilisation, the ultimate origin of Brazil even. Pharaohic Egypt was a stable theocracy with strong centralised power in the hands of the Pharaoh, who was considered a God (Funari 1997; 1999; Gralha 2002; 2005)—certainly a laudable model in the eyes of Brazil’s Royals.

Even though the Brazilian Emperor was not God, he ruled as the supreme and sole representative of God in the New World, a ruler blessed directly by the Catholic Church. The importance of the Egyptian connection is highlighted by the fact that Peter I ordered the purchase at auction of an entire collection of Egyptian antiquities, what would become the core

of the National Museum, in Rio de Janeiro. Additionally, Peter I had written the Brazilian Constitution himself—overruling the proposal by the representatives in Parliament—and he introduced to the constitution a fourth branch of government: the “power of the moderator”, that is the Emperor, which rules over the classic trio of the legislative, judiciary and executive branches. Though perhaps not directly inspired by the Egyptian experience, the timeless Egyptian antiquities served to legitimise these Imperial arrays of power.

Brazilian imperial elites exchanged experiences through Masonic meetings and this contributed to the spread of Egyptian fashions in general, but mainly to the adoption of Egyptian motifs in architecture (Bakos 2003). Although Brazil was officially a Catholic country (and other religions were not recognised), the imperial elites kept close relations with the Masons, for whom Egyptian iconography played a central role. During the Imperial period, the influence of Egyptian fashion did not reach ordinary people, as the majority of the inhabitants of the country were slaves or illiterate, poor peasants and workers.

The era of the Republic (beginning in 1889) led to a series of changes in society, not least significant the genesis of primary education for the wider public. A focus on Pharaonic Egypt continued in the National Museum, and it was introduced in school textbooks as the first civilisation and the root of Western Civilisation. The clear message was that history began with Egypt.

The primacy of Egypt in Brazil is again emphasized through a comparison of its influence with the influence of the 17th century Brazilian Maroon community, Palmares. School textbooks devote at most about a half page to Palmares, and usually a single paragraph. This, even though Palmares is a national heritage site and its leader, Zumbi, officially considered a national hero. In contrast, school textbooks pay special attention to ancient Egypt, and particularly to what is considered its main achievements and mythic lures: the construction of the Pyramids and other monuments, its mysterious religion, and its success in producing economic surplus. All Brazilian history textbooks for 11-year-old students (6th grade) include at least a ten page long chapter on the Egyptian civilisation. High school history textbooks for 16-year-old students also devote at least a full chapter to Egypt. From this comparison we surmise that black resistance is thus at least twenty times less relevant than Egypt as a textbook subject (Funari and Carvalho 2006).

Despite this intense interest in everything Egyptian, it is interesting to note that Egypt after the Pharaohs is completely ignored. This is also seemingly the case elsewhere in the Western World. The Arab period represents the end of ancient Egypt and, consequently, in the end of Brazilian interest in Egypt. Due to historical reasons, however—not least the fact that Portugal had been under Arab rule for several centuries and that both vocabu-

lary and material culture attest to these Arab roots—the oblivion of Arab Egypt is telling. In part this is due to the persecution of Arab culture by the official Catholic hierarchy for the last several centuries in both Portugal and Brazil. Ancient Egypt is represented in Brazil as uprooted from its historical context, as if there was no relation between two completely different civilizations in the same Nile Valley: the ancient Egyptian civilization and the later, Arabic one.

It is the same exclusion from history accepted within Brazil, a country considered as unrelated to the native inhabitants and cultures before the arrival of the Portuguese. Pupils in Brazil have much more information on Ancient Egypt than about the indigenous inhabitants of the country. Prehistory is a subject still neglected in school textbooks and most teachers are not trained to deal with it. All teachers in training in Brazil study ancient civilizations, such as Egypt, but prehistory is rarely mentioned. Brazilian anthropologist Carlos Fausto (2000:30–36) stated that “the Amazon is our Nile”, but Indians are as excluded from the Brazilian past just as the later Arabs are from Egypt.

The spread of Kardecism in the twentieth century also contributed to the popular appeal of Egypt. By the end of the 19th century, the spiritism of Alan Kardec, born in France, came to Brazil. This religion mixed some of the karmic conception of Hindu inspiration with Christian precepts and a certain 19th century rationalism. Kardecist spiritism flourished in Brazil. It was, from the beginning, a middle class religion, though it also had blacks and the poor among its followers (Prandi 1997:7). Kardecism is a religion based on the belief in the communication with the spirits of dead people and it is inspired partially in the Ka/Ba concepts of ancient Egyptians. Kardecism, or Spiritism, was developed as a religious movement in France, spearheaded by Hippolyte Leon Dénizard Rivail, born in Lyon, France, in 1804. Under the adopted name of Allan Kardec, the religio-philosophic doctrine of the transmigration of souls has been hugely successful in Brazil, since the mid 19th century (Hess 1991). The Book of the Dead is one of the books read by Kardecists as a source for their creed.

Novels both by Brazilian authors and foreigners, with plots set in ancient Egypt are popular. The most popular, and considered a classic Spiritist book, is *The Voice of Ancient Egypt*, republished several times since 1946 (Lorenz 1946). Hollywood films with Egyptian subjects drew huge audiences in Brazil throughout the 20th century (Funari 2008a). Scholarly books on ancient Egypt were translated into Portuguese and, from the 1980s onwards, several scholarly books by Brazilians were published (e.g. Cardoso 1982). The principal archaeology museum in the country, The University of São Paulo Archaeological and Ethnological Museum, founded in the 1960s, has an Egyptian antiquities section. The Egyptian antiquities section in this Museum is the most popular section of the exhibition.

The Egyptian section of the museum plays the same function as the Egyptian chapter in school textbooks: it is there to remind people that Brazilian history begins in Ancient Egypt. Today, there are several Egyptologists in Brazil, some of them working with British and French scholars, such as Cardoso (1986), Bakos (1993), Brancaglione (1993) and Gralha (2002). In recent years, several books for children on Egypt have been published, some of them written by Brazilians (e.g. Raquel Funari 2001).

In recent years in Brazilian newsstands have sold a weekly magazine focused solely on Ancient Egypt. Each issue features several topics relating to ancient Egypt and every 4 weeks or so the reader also gets a small reproduction of an Egyptian artefact, such as a statuette of an Egyptian god or goddess. In 2001, there were two major exhibitions of ancient Egyptian antiquities in São Paulo, attracting more visitors than any other similar exhibitions. One was held in the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) and the other one in a private hall, the Fundação Álvares Penteado (Faap), both under the auspices of several private and public institutions and chaired by the Brazilian Egyptologist Antonio Brancaglione. The collection came from the Louvre as well as from other Brazilian collections. The images associated with these exhibitions were of the greatness of our forefathers, the ancient Egyptians.

Egyptian material culture plays a unique role in Brazil, quite distinct from other Latin American countries. There are scholarly archaeological studies of Egyptology in other South American countries, particularly in Argentina. The Argentine Science Foundation (CONICET) supports several Egyptology projects (cf. Campagno 2006). However, in Argentina as elsewhere in Spanish-speaking Latin America, Egypt does not play a special role in popular identity building.

Brazilian Pupils and Egypt: A Case Study

Ancient Egypt is an important subject for Brazilian pupils (Funari 2006). History syllabi often include a discussion of ancient Egyptian history and culture and the subject is usually studied by fifth or sixth graders and again by High School pupils. The perceptions of students are shaped by several factors, not least their social and religious background. Religion plays a particularly important role, as Ancient Egypt is a subject of Sunday church classes, as well as the Catholic catechism and in other creeds, such as Kardecism and Judaism. As for social imbalances, several pupils perceive Egyptian themes as an allegory for their own subaltern situation. Last but not least, gender differences are also related to the perceptions of ancient Egypt, as girls are generally interested in cultural issues and boys in military subjects (Funari 2008a, b).

Narratives about the past are a series of arguments about the world and society, and they can be interpreted in many ways through different understandings. Books are part of developing learning strategies, the basic tool for understanding history and archaeology as a narrative of the past. What is written and taught about the past in this way is connected to current reality. For the study of ancient history in general and ancient Egypt in particular, archeology plays a special role in the books used by Brazilian pupils. Interestingly, Ancient Egyptian materiality is now increasingly used to challenge social imbalances and to foster critical thinking, respect for cultural diversity, and gender, religious and racial justice.

In the textbook *Navegando pela História* ('Navigating History') by Sílvia Panazzo and Maria Luisa Vaz (2004:85), the following activity is proposed:

Imagine you own a travel agency, and name it. Collect what you have learned about Ancient Egypt as well as contemporary Egypt to organize a trip to that country. Write a short text on Ancient Egypt so as to raise the interest of tourists. In this leaflet, include short trips to the Nile River and a visit to the Pyramids, religious temples and other monuments built in the Middle Kingdom. You and your group should add pictures of the places to be visited. Beside each picture, write a short note explaining the importance of the tourist sights, pointing out the transformations that happened in Egyptian society.

This is an interesting proposal since it gives the chance to deal with essential concepts in the understanding of the past, such as time, images and statistics. The pupils build speech and above all, do so in a fun way. The inclusion of present day Egypt as a subject of interest is also laudatory, considering that the pupils are encouraged to understand Ancient Egypt in its present day material and social context. The downside of the proposed activity is the subconscious use of a class bias, for the student is encouraged to consider him or herself to be a proprietor, the owner of a travel agency, not an ordinary worker. Considering that most students are poor or middle class, this bias should be related to an unconscious aristocratic ethos, permeating social relations in Brazil, as suggested by anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1991).

In the textbook *História em documento, imagem e texto* ("History Through Documents, Image and Text") by Joelza Rodrigues (2004:115), there is short passage about "values". Students are asked to compare the contents of a historical text to current social behavioral rules. This exercise encourages students to express their own standpoints, in relation to a sequence of sentences attributed to ancient Egyptians (and supposedly found written in a sarcophagus). The dead person, according to the exercise: "did not commit unfaithful acts against others", "did not harm animals", "did not practice evil acts", "did not contribute to the another's

impoverishment”, “did not lead anybody to suffer or cry”, and “did not kill anybody”.

Students were then asked to answer a series of questions: “Think about each sentence. Did a deceased person when facing Gods and Goddesses say these sentences? Which of these actions would be grounds for punishment? Which would be considered faithful even if not contained in law?” The pupil is thus encouraged to think that the dead person had to face a god in the afterlife, and had to answer for her actions during life. This activity clearly stresses the importance of social norms, in Egypt and today, and may lead the pupils to consider whether social hierarchies, in Egypt and in Brazil, should be natural features to be preserved and respected.

In the textbook *Nova história crítica* (“New Critical History” by Mário Schmidt (2004:98,101), there is an item “Critical Reflections,” in which an interesting reflection about racism is proposed based on Ancient Egypt. Egypt is characterized as:

the great dark skinned Civilization. In the cinema and on television, the actors who play the ancient Egyptians are normally white-skinned and even blue-eyed. Nevertheless, Egyptian people were dark-skinned Africans. As you can see in the sculpted panel, the two young nobles in the times of the pharaoh have African features: thick lips and curly hair put up in a plait. They wore make up on their eyes and eyebrows. Unfortunately, for a long time, prejudice from Europeans against dark-skinned people led them not notice who the real creators of the wonderful Ancient Egyptian Civilization were. (Nowadays, however, Arabs, mostly white skinned people, mainly compose the Egyptian people).

In a society like Brazil’s, where racial prejudice is normally concealed, this activity generates the possibility of a discussion on the importance of the points in common when comparing Brazil to this great civilization on the African Continent, stigmatized by slavery (Bernal 1996, 2005; Castilhos 1984). It also gives the opportunity to figure out how images of the past are subjectively created.

Material evidence has also been used to foster critical thinking about the role of Egypt in Brazil. In the collection ‘*A vida no tempo dos deuses*’ (‘Life in the Time of the Gods’), Funari published the book *O Egito dos faraós e sacerdotes* (‘Egypt of pharaohs and priests’) (Funari 2001), designed for students aged eleven. The book draws heavily on the materiality of ancient Egypt. It aims at showing the diversity of cultural aspects of Egyptian society and the role of ordinary artifacts in shaping religious identities. Materiality is used to foster discussion of gender, social, and religious diversity in past and present Brazil. This archaeological approach stresses transformational and hybrid identities, relating Egyptian subjects to present-day power relations (Hingley 2010).

All these activities are related to the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* (National Syllabus), which are the directions set by the government. These propose that cross-cultural themes be explored in the classroom, as well as the concepts of cultural diversity and citizenship. It is understood that people build their identities through history. History as a narrative about the past is interpretation, the work of historians and archaeologists, but also ordinary people and pupils, just as other discourses about the past are (Jenkins 1999).

Conclusion

Ultimately, Brazil's fascination with all things Egyptian comes down to issues of hierarchy and inequality. Egypt as the land of Pharaohs and pyramids, on the one hand, and ordinary fellahin, on the other, in a way, mirrors contemporary Brazilian society. Authorities and elite monuments are as distant to ordinary people as the Pharaohs were to the fellahin. Those same Brazilian authorities, like the Pharaohs, are not only distant rulers, but they raise contradictory reactions in ordinary people, who might also associate themselves with the enslaved Jews. Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) in this case might play an inspirational role as a modern Moses figure, liberating the masses from secular slavery. Archaeology has been playing a role in discussing present day material culture, the fight against oppression during dictatorial rule and other relevant subjects (Funari et al. 2009), but it also has an important part to play in dealing with the contemporary relevance of seemingly distant topics such as Ancient Egypt.

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