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Egyptology, a field in need of reimagination

Solange Ashby

In April 2019, a photograph circulated around the world. A young Sudanese woman, Alaa Salah, stood atop a car in Khartoum, dressed in white, leading protest chants against the military dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. The crowd called her a *kandaka*, a Nubian queen. That word, *kandaka*, is not a metaphor. It is a Meroitic royal title, over 2,000 years old, held by the queen mothers of the Kingdom of Kush in ancient Sudan, some of whom were ruling queens. Queens like Amanirenas, who fought Rome. Queens like Amanitore, who presided over a golden age of temple-building, art, and religious revival. And yet, most people—even most scholars of the ancient world—have never heard their names.

Why has the history of one of the great ancient civilizations been rendered invisible? And what does it take to see it again?

There is a long and vibrant tradition of studying the ancient Nile Valley in the African and African diasporic intellectual community. Scholars like W.E.B. DuBois, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Jacob Carruthers built a century-long legacy of this work. But the discipline of Egyptology was not built for us, and it was not built to tell the stories I am trying to tell.

Egyptology was born in the 19th century at the intersection of European imperialism and the development of so-called "racial science." The field's founding

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figures did not simply study the past—they constructed a past that justified the present. Samuel Morton measured skulls to rank races. James Henry Breasted, the father of American Egyptology, placed ancient Egypt at the origin of a "Great White Race" that stretched from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe, claiming that civilization itself was a white inheritance. The people of Africa, south of the Sahara, Breasted wrote, "were without any influence on the development of early civilization."

The Hamitic hypothesis, a theory of racial hierarchy rooted in the biblical story of the curse of Ham was a part of the intellectual architecture that made these claims possible.

Drawing on this myth, European scholars and slaveholders argued that the descendants of Ham—identified as the peoples of Africa—were divinely ordained for subjugation. When the achievements of ancient Egypt made it impossible to dismiss all Africans as uncivilized, "race science" invented a workaround. They hypothesized the existence of the "Caucasian Hamite." In short, Egypt's glory could be acknowledged only if its people could be claimed as white.

This logic shaped the very structure of the discipline. Even now, Egyptology departments are almost universally housed in programs of Near Eastern Studies oriented toward the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome. Nubia is absent from the curriculum—even at universities like Chicago, Penn, Harvard, and Yale that hold extensive collections of Nubian artifacts. During my entire doctoral training at the University of Chicago, no course on ancient Nubia was offered.

As an Egyptologist, I am an intellectual descendant of James Henry Breasted—a connection that I like to think would trouble the man greatly. Moreover, I use Black feminist theory to recover the history of people who have been doubly erased—as women and as Africans. Traditional Egyptology valued powerful kings, imperial conquest,

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monumental pyramids, and gold. But when I shift my view southward and bring women to the fore, a different history emerges—one that was always there but ignored for centuries.

Nubian women—royal wives, priestesses, ritual dancers, and powerful religious practitioners—played vital roles in ancient Egyptian religion and, by extension, in the legitimation of royal power in both Egypt and Kush. Take Queen Ashayet, a woman portrayed with chocolate brown skin, holding the title of Priestess of Hathor, and wife of the Egyptian king Mentuhotep II around 2000 BCE. Mentuhotep married Ashayet and five other Nubian women—all priestesses of Hathor—before conquering northern Egypt and reunifying the land. He was the first Egyptian king to call himself a "son of Hathor." Through these marriages, Mentuhotep sought divine legitimacy by incorporating the religious authority of Nubian women and their ancient worship of a divine cow-mother—traditions rooted in the cattle-herding cultures of the Green Sahara, stretching back thousands of years.

Two thousand years later, in the Kingdom of Meroe, we see the same pattern amplified. Meroitic queens were not merely consorts. They held the title *quore* (ruler) and kandake (queen mother), the woman through whom royal legitimacy descended. Depicted as the same size as their husbands or ruling sons, accorded independent wealth, bare-breasted on temple walls to signify their sacred fecundity, these queens were indispensable to the political and religious order. There is no representation of a Kushite coronation that excludes the king's wife or mother. Their presence was not ceremonial. It was fundamental.

The German philosopher Hegel declared that "Africa has no history." Oxford's Hugh Trevor-Roper repeated the claim in the 1960's. These are not relics of a distant past—they are the inherited assumptions that still shape what gets studied, what gets

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funded, and what gets taught. When Egyptology severs Egypt from Africa and ignores Nubia altogether, it perpetuates the Hamitic theory by other means.

By drawing on a concept from the Twi people of Ghana: *Sankofa*—the imperative to return to the source in order to move forward, we stand to recover a history in which Africa is central and women are vital. A history through which a non-hierarchical worldview rooted in the traditions of the Sacred South—the cattle pastoralists, the star-gazers, the priestesses and mothers—can be resurrected. Not as nostalgia, but as a guide to help us build a viable, alternative future for the study of the ancient world.