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Dancing for Hathor: Nubian Women in Egyptian Cultic Life

Solange Ashby

In the non-literate and nomadic C-Group culture of Lower Nubia, ritual and worship were not organized around a sacred text, nor were they carried out in a temple.¹ Rather, many important rites of passage and worship were heavily associated with communal performance of dance and music. In such rituals the power of music and movement were harnessed to transport the worshipper into an ecstatic encounter with the Divine. Worshippers, engaged in nocturnal rituals for the goddess Hathor, sought this type of ecstatic encounter. It appears that the ecstatic nature of the dancing performed for the goddess and the spiritual “drunkenness” that it induced were valued in the ritual context of celebrations for Hathor: goddess of music, dance, love, and fertility. Women were the essential performers of the nocturnal dances in the rites. While Egyptian women comprised the majority of the priestesses of Hathor, Nubian women are attested over several millennia as dancers in the celebration of the cult. Earlier Egyptologists reveal a racism that disparaged the type of dance performed by the Nubian women as “wild” and described the women as wearing “barbarous” clothing. Brunner-Traut suggested that, “only as an exception, though, do Negro girls dance in a way that assimilates Egyptian sophistication.”²

Nubian women appear as Hathoric dancers from the Middle Kingdom (2000–1700 BCE) through the Roman period (30 BCE–395 CE). Representations of priestesses of Hathor sporadically, but re-

1 YELLIN, “Nubian Religion,” p. 125. The C-Group is attested archaeologically as an indigenous population of Lower Nubia from the Egyptian Old Kingdom (ca. 2685 BCE) through the Egyptian occupation of Lower Nubia (1550 BCE). While the C-Group people did not disappear from Lower Nubia, their archaeological artifacts became highly Egyptianized: NÄSER, “The C-Group in Lower Nubia,” p. 351.

2 BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Der Tanz im alten Ägypten*, p. 223. See fn. 62 for the full quote.

peatedly, included Nubian³ women dancers, singers, and musicians engaged in religious celebrations of the Beautiful One, the Gold, the Lady of Dance, the goddess Hathor. Tattooed priestesses of Hathor, preserved as mummies from the Eleventh Dynasty (Middle Kingdom), bore designs otherwise found only on contemporaneous C-Group women of Lower Nubia. Beginning in the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE), Nubian women appear in Egyptian tomb and temple art that depicts banquet scenes where those women act as musicians and dancers. In the Ptolemaic period (323–30 BCE) temple at Medamud, the hieroglyphic text of a hymn to Hathor describes the dancing Nubians who accompanied the goddess on her return from Nubia in her manifestation as Tefnut, the Eye of Re. Performing sacred dances for Hathor, Nubian dancers, musicians, and acrobats were a recurring theme in representations of Hathoric rites, jubilees, and banquet scenes for millennia.

Lower Nubian Religion

In the non-literate societies of Nubia, religious practices would have been performed communally and preserved orally.⁴ In contrast to the Egyptian tradition of temples decorated with hieroglyphic texts and scenes of the gods, Nubian religious rites of the C-Group (contemporary with Middle Kingdom Egypt) centered on communal celebrations performed in sacred places, often located on hilltops or in caves. Processions⁵ associated with pilgrimage to sacred sites involved large groups of lay worshippers⁶ who engaged in feasting⁷ and ritual consumption of sorghum beer,⁸ which was likely accompanied by song and dance performed for the gods. Although this practice bears superficial resemblance to the Egyptian incorporation of music and dance into their religious worship, these elements seem to have been central to the religious practices of C-Group peo-

3 I assume these women were of Nubian background based on their depiction with dark brown skin in contrast to the standard Egyptian depiction of women with light brown/yellow skin. There is no need to assume these Nubian women were not resident in Egypt. With a long history of immigration in both directions, both Nubia and Egypt were very heterogeneous societies.

4 I refer to Nubian popular religion as opposed to the elite religion of Nubia during the Napatan and Meroitic periods, which were highly Egyptianized.

5 YELLIN, "Nubian Religion," pp. 136, 141.

6 The addition of porches to temples in the Late Period was closely linked to changes in the composition of processions during the Kushite (Nubian) 25th Dynasty, when laymen joined the priests in procession. See ARNOLD, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, pp. 282–84.

7 SMITH, "Pharaohs, Feasts, and Foreigners," pp. 49, 55–56. Feasting is mentioned in Nubian prayer inscriptions at Philae and Dakka. See, GRIFFITH, *Catalogue of Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenos*, vol. 1, pp. 26–31 (Dak. 30) and pp. 114–119 (Ph. 416). Mentioned twice in each graffito, the celebratory feasting occurred in conjunction with processions and festivals. See also ASHBY, *Calling Out to Isis*, pp. 19, 168, 232.

8 EDWARDS, "Sorghum, Beer and Kushite Society," pp. 74–76. For evidence of the continuing cultural importance of sorghum beer, see REKDAL, "Money, Milk and Sorghum Beer," pp. 368–373, esp. p. 370.

ple who did not have a temple-based religion or sacred written texts, and perhaps did not have a hierarchical priesthood such as those associated with Egyptian temples. The two distinct systems of worship were reflective of the difference between the pastoral lifestyle typical of the C-Group populations and the settled, agricultural society maintained by the Egyptians.

The ancient Nubians worshiped their gods on hilltops and in caves as well as at the graves of their dead. Until the Egyptian conquest of Nubia in the New Kingdom, the ancient Nubians were non-literate. With the exception of the Kerma culture, they did not construct permanent religious structures until after the Egyptians began building temples in Nubia.⁹

In this paper I will suggest that traditional forms of ritual music and dance, a central element in the religious practice of Nubians, were incorporated into Egyptian rites performed for the goddess Hathor whose origin in Nubia and journey to Egypt would have been celebrated appropriately with Nubian music and dance. A type of dance called the *ksks*-dance, attributed to Nubians, was incorporated into Egyptian rites performed for the goddess Hathor during the Middle Kingdom when Egypt colonized Nubia and came into intense contact with the C-Group people living there. The first textual attestation of the *ksks*-dance appears in the Middle Kingdom¹⁰ (c. 2000 BCE) in reference to a cultic dance performed for Hathor and was the name of a dance, performed by black people, described in scholarly literature as “Negertanz.”¹¹ Depictions of dark-skinned women (relative to Egyptian women who are traditionally painted a light brownish-yellow color) continue to appear in Egyptian art during the Ramesside period (c. 1200–1000 BCE), while hieroglyphic textual references from a Ptolemaic temple (c. 150 BCE) at Medamud and Roman-period prayer inscriptions found in temples of Lower Nubia (first century CE) continue to describe the journey to Egypt of Nubian worshippers of Hathor. Meroitic funerary chapel scenes from

9 YELLIN, “Nubian Religion,” pp. 125, 131. The religious structures found at Kerma (2500–1450 BCE) are distinctly different from Egyptian temples. Built to resemble “high places,” the *deffufa* are solid mud brick structures that provide a high place for worship on a flat area at the top. The Eastern Defuffa at Kerma was originally surmounted by a monolithic stela, which was five meters high. At nearby Doukki Gel, Charles Bonnet has also discovered a series of circular structures that predate the temples of Thutmose I of the Eighteenth Dynasty, the earliest Egyptian king to conquer Kerma. See BONNET, “Un ensemble religieux nubien devant une forteresse égyptienne du début de la XVIIIe dynastie,” pp. 98–106.

10 BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Der Tanz im alten Ägypten*, pp. 79–80.

11 Brunner-Traut’s use of the offensive German term *Neger* to refer to the dark-skinned dancers who she deems “foreign” is perfectly in keeping with her racist portrayal of the people and their dance as “wild,” “inflamed,” and “uncontrolled,” which Brunner-Traut contrasts to the elegance of the Egyptian style of dance. For a particularly offensive quote, see *ibid.*, p. 81 “Zusammenfassung”.

the first century CE may depict the same dance, emphasizing the southern origins of this type of dance. European travellers in 19th century Egypt and Sudan commented on the unique dances that they witnessed being performed for important community events. It is asserted here that a continuous method of worshipping the divine is manifested in the Hathoric dances, music, and religious iconography associated with Nubian women worshippers from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman period.

Mythological Description of Hathor's Return from Nubia

In the Tale of the Sun's Eye,¹² an enraged Tefnut, in the form of a bloodthirsty lion goddess, stalked the Earth devouring humanity, which had rebelled against her father Re while he reigned as king in Egypt.¹³ The Egyptian gods Shu and Thoth travelled to Bougem, in southeastern Nubia,¹⁴ where they transformed into monkeys to safely approach the lion goddess. The two gods danced, plied the goddess with copious amounts of wine, and spoke magical spells to pacify and beguile Tefnut so that she might be calmed and enticed to travel to Egypt. Soothed by the dance of Shu and the magical words of Thoth and thoroughly intoxicated on the wine they offered to her, Tefnut was convinced to make the journey from Nubia to Egypt. At the border between the two lands, the flames of the goddess' wrath were cooled in the waters at the source of the Nile that emerge in the vicinity of the island of Philae at the First Cataract, site of a Ptolemaic-period temple. At this initial point of entry into Egypt, Tefnut was transformed by the cool waters and became Hathor, the goddess of music, dance, love, and drunkenness. Her arrival and transformation at the temple complex on Philae would have been celebrated with singing, dancing, and rejoicing to mark the return of the "Distant Goddess" from her sojourn in Nubia.¹⁵

Nubian Priestesses of Hathor

The central social, financial, and cultural importance of cattle to C-Group Nubians, who were East African cattle pastoralists, would have made the imagery of Hathor, portrayed as a cow or a woman with cow ears, appealing.¹⁶ From the kings of Kerma, buried under tumuli surrounded by thousands of cow skulls, to the Napatan kings who offered long-horn cattle and hundreds of milk jugs to

12 SPIEGELBERG, *Ägyptische mythus von Sonnenaue*, pp. 1-8; SPIEGELBERG, "Sonnenaue, Demotischer Mythos vom."

13 DAUMAS, "Hathor," p. 1026.

14 INCONNU-BOCQUILLON, *Le mythe de la déesse lointaine à Philae*, pp. 201-203.

15 DAUMAS, "Hathor," p. 1026.

16 HAFSAAS, *Cattle Pastoralists in a Multicultural Setting*, pp. 12-23.

the temples at Napata (4th Cataract), cattle and milk had long been prominent in Nubian religious and funerary rituals. For C-Group worshippers, the goddess Hathor may have been assimilated to their own cow goddess. In this way, C-Group people, living in a culturally heterogeneous Nile Valley, came to be participants in the Egyptian cult of Hathor.

C-Group women participated in the worship of Hathor by engaging in traditional Nubian dances, which were viewed by the Egyptians as exotic and erotic. A close examination of Egyptian depictions of Nubian women dancing reveals the characteristics of the women's dance and provides the Egyptian name for their style of dance. The *ksks*-dance was acrobatic, involving leaps and flips. The women performed wearing leather skirts, cowrie shell girdles, and bore tattoos on their breasts, abdomens, and thighs. Each of these attributes is well attested in the C-Group funerary assemblages.

Women¹⁷ who bore the titles royal wife, priestess of Hathor, and "Sole Royal Ornament" were buried in six individual, underground tombs surmounted by private chapels on the platform of the funerary complex of the Eleventh Dynasty king, Nebhetepre Mentuhotep II (c. 2000 BCE).¹⁸ Their richly decorated sarcophagi and shrines indicate the elevated positions of these royal wives and Priestesses of Hathor. Additionally, three mummified women who bore multiple tattoos were discovered in the adjacent triangular courtyard north of Mentuhotep II's funerary complex.¹⁹ One woman's name was preserved – Amunet – along with her titles "Priestess of Hathor" and "King's favorite ornament."²⁰ Her left shoulder and breast bore a row of dots encased in two lines; on her right forearm nine rows of dotted marks form another tattoo.²¹ The abdominal region contained two separate tattoos: just above the navel and below the chest were two rectangular shapes composed of vertical patterns of dots and dashes, while a series of horizontal lines covers her lower abdomen and suprapubic area. Multiple diamond (lozenge) shapes made of

17 Not all scholars agree that the three tattooed mummies found at Deir el-Bahari were Nubian women, as I suggest below.

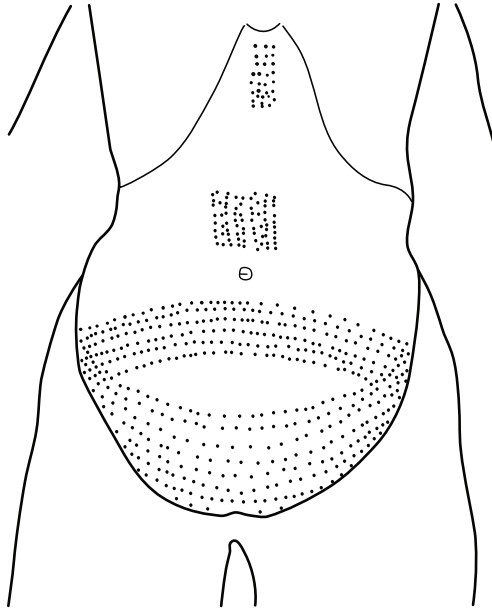
18 NAVILLE, *The XIth Dynasty Temple at Deir el Bahari*, vol. 2, pp. 6–9; WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el-Bahari 1911–1931*, pp. 36–46; MORRIS, "Paddle Dolls and Performance," pp. 77–79; GILLAM, "Priestesses of Hathor," p. 231.

19 WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el-Bahari 1911–1931*, pp. 36–40, fig. 3 (plan of "The Nebhetepetre Temple"). Knowledge of the precise location of Amunet's burial has been lost, but scholars believe that it may have been in tomb 4 or 5, on the north side of the king's complex or, perhaps more likely in the triangular north courtyard: MORRIS, "Paddle Dolls," p. 79; = ROEHRIG, "Two Tattooed Women from Thebes," p. 531.

20 Amunet's second title *hkr.t nīsw.t w't.t* "King's Favorite Ornament" has also been translated as "Sole Lady in Waiting." See GRAVES-BROWN, *Dancing for Hathor*, p. 115.

21 Amunet's left arm may have been tattooed as well. It is not visible because the mummy rests on the left side: TASSIE, "Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia," p. 90.

Figure 1.
Amunet's tattoos
(re-drawn by Lisa
Kennard, after
Bianchi 1988, fig.
2; from Keimer
1948, fig. 9).



dots form a tattoo on her right thigh.²² Evidence of additional scarification is found in the groin area.²³

The other two female mummies, discovered in 1923,²⁴ bear tattoos similar to those found on Amunet. Together, the three women found at Deir el-Bahari are the earliest examples of the practice of tattooing in Egypt.²⁵ However, the practice of tattooing is attested over many thousands of years in visual arts and on mummified bodies in Nubia.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the C-Group people, whom the Egyptians colonized beginning in the early Middle Kingdom, introduced the practice of tattooing women into Egypt.²⁶ A total of forty-three mummified bodies with tattoos have been recovered – almost exclusively female and Nubian.²⁷

22 These same “diamond” or “lozenge” shapes decorate C-Group pottery and figurines buried with the dead. See HAFSAAS, *Cattle Pastoralists*, pp. 80, 170. The “lozenge” pattern of the beadwork embroidered onto leather girdles and skirts or linen was characteristic of the C-Group. See MORRIS, “Paddle Dolls and Performance,” p. 80; HAFSAAS, *Cattle Pastoralists*, p. 95; BIANCHI, “Tattoo in Ancient Egypt,” p. 22.

23 TASSIE, “Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia” p. 90. For a depiction of the tattoos see *ibid.*, fig. 2.

24 WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el-Bahari 1911–1931*, p. 74; KEIMER, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l’Egypte ancienne*, pp. 13–15.

25 BIANCHI, “Tattoo in Ancient Egypt,” p. 22; TASSIE, “Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia” p. 92.

26 BIANCHI, “Tattoo in Ancient Egypt,” 24. “Available evidence, therefore, suggests that Egyptian tattoo was imported from Nubia and developed during the course of the Middle Kingdom.”

27 TASSIE, “Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia” p. 89.

[T]he fact that more mummified remains with tattoos dating to early periods come from the most northerly part of Lower Nubia, an area known as and settled by the Wawat tribe, it may be that they developed the practice of tattooing to culturally identify themselves from the Egyptian civilization to the north and the growing Kerma (Kushite) civilization to the south in Upper Nubia.²⁸

The lozenge-shaped pattern found on the tattooed women from Deir el-Bahari also decorates figurines with truncated legs found in both funerary and settlement contexts. Formerly called “concubines of the dead” they are now referred to as fertility figurines.²⁹ Fertility figurines share many stylistic features with paddle dolls interred as funerary equipment: cross-bands worn over the chest, cowrie shell girdles, accentuated pubic triangle, and ornately dressed hair.³⁰ Morris posits that the paddle dolls represented Hathoric dancers, buried with the deceased in order to perform the proper rites in the funerary context.³¹ These two types of figurines are heavily represented at Deir el-Bahari, an area associated with Hathor as the goddess of the West.³² Fertility figurines are often associated with burials in Nubia.³³

Winlock confirms Derry’s earlier description of these women as Nubian: “Derry had already noticed that the features of the tattooed dancing girls buried in the Neb-hepet-Re temple showed marked Nubian traits and that Nubian blood had probably flowed through the veins even of such ladies of the king’s *harim* as ‘Ashayet and

28 Ibid., p. 93.

29 Morris, “Paddle Dolls and Performance,” pp. 71–72.

30 Ibid., pp. 89, 92, 93, n. 105, 94. The cross-bands, cowrie shell girdles, and hair dressed in locks are attested as the traditional attire of Nubian women. See images in KEIMER, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l’Egypte ancienne*, figs. 12, 12a, Pl. XIV, XV.

31 MORRIS, “Paddle Dolls and Performance,” pp. 86, 102–103. “The faience truncated figurines in particular frequently bear the diamond-shaped tattoo marks common to the dancer and the paddle doll alike. [...] These female figurines should be interpreted as the sacred performers that gladdened the heart of the goddess (Hathor) and raised her radiant father (Re).”

32 Each of the three royal funerary complexes located at Deir el-Bahari (Mentuhotep II, Hatshepsut, and Thutmose III) are assumed to have had shrines dedicated to the goddess Hathor. Shrines dedicated to Hathor were associated with the funerary temples of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. While no shrine dedicated by Mentuhotep II has been found, scholars surmise that such a shrine existed due to the high-status burials of Priestesses of Hathor in the king’s funerary complex and due to the large amount of votive objects dedicated to Hathor which have been found in and around the funerary complex. See PINCH, *Votive Objects to Hathor*, p. 22.

33 See Figure 3: clay figurine found in Cemetery T in Adindan. It is noteworthy that of the six areas on which Pinch concentrated her study of votive offerings to Hathor, five are located outside of Egypt proper and two are in Nubia: Faras and Mirgissa. Associated with the wilderness and areas beyond the Nile Valley, Hathor was rightly worshipped at the turquoise mines of Sinai (as *nb.t mfkz.t* “mistress of turquoise”) and at Egyptian fortresses located in Nubia. Each of the Nubian shrines was built by a local administrator atop an older Nubian shrine where Hathor was worshipped by the local community (Faras – Hathor of “Lady of Ibshek,” Mirgissa – Hathor, “Lady of Iqen.”): see PINCH, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, pp. 26, 42.

Figure 2. Tattooed figurine belonging to Neferhotep the Bowman © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais.





Figure 3. Tomb 51, Cemetery T, Adindan, C-Group Phase IIb.

Henhenit. Furthermore, the pictures of ‘Ashayet on her sarcophagus gave her a rich chocolate Nubian complexion, and her companion Kemsit was painted on hers an actual ebony black, just like these little figures.”³⁴ Winlock’s frank description of these priestesses as Nubian makes Pinch’s efforts to deny a Nubian connection for the fertility figurines excavated in the same area highly suspect. While Pinch notes that the figurines found in Mentuhotep II’s funerary complex bear markings paralleled on C-Group fertility figurines, she refers to the mummies of the priestesses of Hathor described above to declare that neither the figurines nor the priestesses were Nubian women:

This need not mean that the Egyptian figurines represent Nubians, since three 11th dynasty mummies of *light-skinned* women with tattoos on their thighs, stomachs, and shoulders were recovered from the precincts of Akh-isut (funerary complex of *Neb-ḥepet-Re* Mentuhotep II).³⁵

Pinch’s assertion that the mummies themselves were “light-skinned” is ludicrous. The melanin that provides skin color does not survive mummification and burial for 4,000 years undamaged and unchanged. However, the depiction of the women in their funerary chapels does indicate that they showed marked Nubian features. A more balanced interpretation of the possible ethnicity of these women is found in Ellen Morris’s discussion of Middle Kingdom paddle dolls:

The visibility of Nubian styles in the court of Nebhepetre has been much discussed, and this co-occurrence of bodily decoration in the Theban court and in Nubia need not be a coincidence.³⁶

Indeed, if the performances in the Hathor temple re-enacted this goddess’ return from Nubia and subsequent mollification by her devotees, Nubian dancers would have been particularly appropriate performers in such a celebration.

While no evidence of tattooed Egyptians has been found before or during the Middle Kingdom,³⁷ several contemporary tattooed female mummies have been found in C-Group burials in Lower Nubia and at Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt. Even earlier depictions of tattooed women have been found in Nubia and Sudan.

34 WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el-Bahari 1911–1931*, pp. 129–130.

35 PINCH, *Votive Offering to Hathor*, pp. 212–213. Emphasis added.

36 MORRIS, “Paddle Dolls and Performance,” pp. 80–81.

37 TASSIE, “Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia,” p. 92.

Rare figurines of tattooed or cicatrized steatopygous women are also associated with burials of the Nubian A-Group and Sudanese Kadada cultures. Figures with even more exaggerated features and tattooing appear in Saharan rock art as well as Nubian C-Group pottery drawings and figures.³⁸

Firth discovered a tattooed woman in Cemetery 110 near Kubban, across the Nile from Dakka, in Lower Nubia (*Wawat*).³⁹ This area was the northernmost of three traditional C-Group population centers in Lower Nubia.⁴⁰

Three tattooed women were excavated in the Middle Kingdom Nubian cemetery at Hierakonpolis (HK27C), discovered in 2001.⁴¹ A sizeable, reasonably prosperous, C-Group community resided at Hierakonpolis. Its members were not the typical settlements of Nubian mercenaries; the community consisted of entire families. Of those 100 individuals excavated thus far, three women have been found to have tattoos. One of the tattooed women was buried with a brightly colored and intricately perforated leather garment, probably a skirt.⁴² Such skirts have been found in burials in Kerma and at the C-Group site of Kubbaniya, 70 kilometers south of Hierakonpolis, near Aswan at the First Cataract. Finds at Deir el-Bahari suggest that this skirt, part of C-Group woman's traditional attire, was associated with the performance of dancing and musical rites for Hathor. Winlock described figurines found at Deir el-Bahari that wore a similar type of skirt:

These figures obviously represent negro slave girls from far up the Nile, jet black and wearing strange skirts covered with barbarous designs in gaudy colors, and many colored beads around their foreheads and necks.⁴³

Friedman notes the appearance of such articles of clothing in the C-Group cemetery at Hierakonpolis:

38 KENDALL, "Ethnoarchaeology," p. 655 with references. Images of tattooed C-Group figurines are found in WENIG, *Africa in Antiquity*, vol. 2, pp. 124-125, 127-128. The practice of tattooing is attested in Meroitic Nubia at Aksha at the 2nd Cataract, not far south of Abu Simbel and Faras, where male and female mummies exhibited blue tattoos in similar positions to those on the C-Group mummies. Some mummies at Aksha also bore face and hand tattoos: VILA, *Aksha II*.

39 FIRTH, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia*, p. 54. The tattooed female was buried in cemetery 110 near the village of Kubban (grave 271).

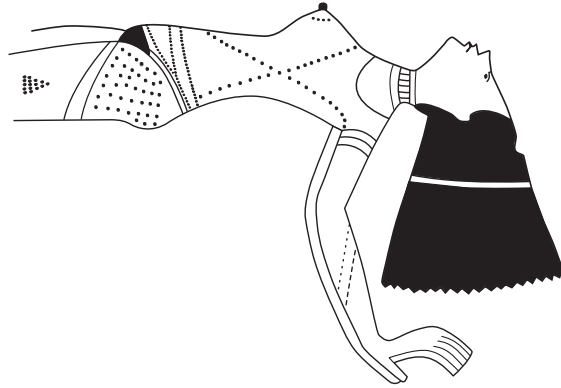
40 Ibid., 48-50, 62-63, 163. The largest cemeteries from north to south are located in those three areas at Dakka, Aniba, and Abu Simbel/Ballana/Adindan.

41 PIERI & ANTOINE, "A Tattooed Trio at HK27C," pp. 28-29; FRIEDMAN & PAULSON, "More Tattoos!" p. 26; HAFSAAS, *Cattle Pastoralists*, p. 64; FRIEDMAN, "The Nubian Cemetery at Hierakonpolis, Egypt," p. 47. The tattooed women were found in graves 9, 10, and 36.

42 FRIEDMAN, "The Nubian Cemetery at Hierakonpolis," pp. 49-50.

43 WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el Bahri 1911-1931*, p. 129.

Figure 4
Ramesside dancer
with tattoos
on arm and
thigh wearing
perforated
leather skirt.
From Vandier
D'Abbadie, 1959:
Pl. CXXIII (2868).



Garments made of a patchwork of brown, beige, pink, red, and yellow leather panels were found in several graves, but almost exclusively those of women. In these cases, they may be the multi-coloured skirts as described by Reisner [Kerma] (1923, 304), discussed by Junker [Kubbaniya] (1925, 18) and depicted on Nubian women in the tomb of Huy (Davies and Gardiner 1926, pl. xxx; colour facsimile in Wilkinson 1983, fig. 42).⁴⁴

Similar attire is seen on tattooed dancers on Ramesside ostraca, one of which, clearly shows dancing girls, some of whom are tattooed in a manner similar to the female in Tomb 9 (Hierakonpolis), wearing cut-work, presumably, leather loincloths as part of their special performance apparel.⁴⁵

Thus, the tradition of tattooing women in Nubia is long-lived and indigenous. Tattooing may well have served as a cultural marker for many Nubian tribes, which was incorporated later into the attire of Egyptian Hathoric dancers. Employing the Nubian tradition of tattooing effectively linked Hathoric dancers with the goddess because Hathor was so closely associated with Nubia, as a goddess who originated/sojourned in Nubia and returned to Egypt with a retinue of worshippers from the many tribes of Nubia.⁴⁶

The *ksks*-dance

Attestations of Nubian women dancers are found in tomb decorations of the New Kingdom. The late Ramesside tomb of Ki-nebu in

⁴⁴ FRIEDMAN, "The Nubian Cemetery at Hierakonpolis," pp. 49–50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49 n. 4. For image, see PECK, *Egyptian Drawings*, pl. VI [ostrakon Turin 7052] and fig. 68 [ostrakon IFAO 3190].

⁴⁶ See the section titled "Hathor Returns to Medamud" below for reference to a hymn engraved in hieroglyphs on that temple's walls, which gives names of individual Nubian tribes along with their traditional form of worship of the goddess Hathor.



Figure 5. Dancers from Tomb of Ki-Nebu TT 113. From Henri Wild, *Kush* 7 (1959): pl. XIX.

Thebes (TT 113)⁴⁷ contains a wall painting of four female dancers, three of whom were daughters of Ki-nebu. The fourth dancer, a black woman, bore the Egyptian name Rekhtoui-em-Mut.⁴⁸ Dressed, like the daughters of Ki-nebu, in a diaphanous full-length gown, which fully reveals her body through the sheer fabric, Rekhtoui-em-Mut alone wears earrings and bracelets, her forearms decorated with tattoos.⁴⁹ In each of several scenes, the dancer raises her right arm, her left arm extended down behind her.

A dancing girl depicted in a similar pose, with both arms extended, one up and one down behind her, decorates a leather drumhead found in Akhmim. There, the small girl dances on a platform before the goddess Isis while a woman plays the tambourine behind the dancer. Although the text before the seated goddess identifies her as Isis, the face of Hathor, identifiable by her tresses and cow ears, decorates the wall above the scene. Another dancer is depicted performing the same dance in a rock tomb in Debeira, 20 kilometers north of Wadi Halfa near the Second Cataract in Nubia. The image decorates the upper half of the north wall, where a banqueting scene includes the image of the dancer surrounded by five female musicians. The tomb belonged to Djehuty-hotep, who was “Chief of Teh-khet” (*wr thht* – Serra, north of the Second Cataract), *hrp* of the queen, and “scribe of the south.”⁵⁰ He is thought to have lived during the reign of Hatshepsut in the early Eighteenth Dynasty when Egypt was reestablishing its rule over Nubia.⁵¹ Kneeling before the dancer, three women clap the beat, while to the right a woman plays the double flute and to the left another woman plays a long, narrow drum with two heads (barrel drum) suspended by a cord over her shoulder. While the five musicians are painted light-brown, the central dancer is a very dark color, almost black. She strikes a pose

47 PORTER and MOSS, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Statues, Reliefs and Paintings*, 1:231.

48 WILD, “Un danse nubienne d’époque pharaonique,” pp. 81–83. The inscription above the dancer identifies her as a family servant (*hm.t*).

49 See *ibid.*, pl. XIX which contains two scenes featuring the Nubian dancer, one of which is reproduced here as Figure 5.

50 SÄVE-SÖNDERBERGH, “The Paintings in the Tomb of Djehuty-Hetep in Debeira,” pp. 27–29; WILD, “Un danse nubienne,” 76.

51 *Ibid.*

similar to the dancers described above – her right hand extended upward before her while her left hand extends down behind her.

The name of the dance described in each of the scenes above is preserved in the tomb of Ki-nebu in Thebes. Called the *ksks*-dance,⁵² this relatively rare term is found in an inscription from El-Kab and on a papyrus containing the Rituals of Mut. The El-Kab inscription states, “The *krw* dance (*ꜥb < iꜥb*), the *kwr* dances (*ksks*).”⁵³ Both Egyptian words for “dance” (*iꜥb* and *ksks*) describe the action of a different performer. *Krw*, interpreted by Wild as “baboon”⁵⁴ may refer to the gods Shu and Thoth who transformed themselves into primates to dance before the raging goddess Tefnut. The *kwr* who performed the *ksks*-dance was the king of Kush, *kwr* being an Egyptian rendering of the Meroitic word *qore*, meaning king.⁵⁵ Indeed, in a hieroglyphic text at Edfu, the king is said to have danced in the role of the god Shu before the returning goddess.⁵⁶ In the Esna inscription the *ksks*-dance was associated with the king of Kush. His Nubian subjects also performed the dance.⁵⁷ Brunner-Traut credits the imperial expansion of Egypt during the New Kingdom with the introduction of new foreign dances into the country, noting, however, that Egypt had already been exposed to Nubian dances as early as the Middle Kingdom’s expansion into Nubia and Kush.⁵⁸

The Neck Dance

Kendall has undertaken an ethnographic study that includes a discussion of dance as depicted in Meroitic art and its similarities to

- 52 ERMAN & GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 5: pp. 141–142, 5 *ksks.t* as a Middle Kingdom woman’s title *Tanzerin*. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Der Tanz im alten Ägypten*, pp. 79–80; id., “Tanz,” p. 216. “*ksks* (Sprungtanz, lebhaft bis wild, besonders für nubische und Negertänze, libysche Tanz).” DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 66.
- 53 WILD, “Un danse nubienne d’époque pharaonique,” p. 86.
- 54 Ibid. Dancing primates feature prominently in the Hymn to Hathor inscribed in the kiosk of the Ptolemaic temple at Medamud, which will be discussed at length below. See DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” pp. 80–84 where *kyky* and *kri* apes are said to praise the goddess with *spn*-staves and *ssndm*-sticks in their hands. Darnell refers to the lute-playing ape depicted in the temple of Hathor at Philae in *ibid.*, n. 190.
- 55 The term *Kwr* was also used as a toponym. See WILD, “Un danse nubienne d’époque pharaonique,” who defined the word Kouri as follows: “région qui constitua ‘pendant une longue période la marche méridionale de l’empire égyptien,’ ou bien le souverain du royaume de Koush.” For the embedded quote, see LECLANT & YOYOTTE, “Les obélisques de Tanis,” p. 72. For *Kwr* as reference to the king of the region, see SAUNERON & YOYOTTE, “La champagne nubienne de Psammétique II et sa signification historique,” fig. 1, p. 185. This Meroitic word for king (*qore*) has an equivalent in the Fur language of Darfur in Western Sudan *aba kuri* = sultan. See ARKELL, “An Egyptian Invasion of the Sudan in 581 B.C.,” p. 94 and *id.*, “Kur,” pp. 123–124.
- 56 JUNKER, *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien*, pp. 31, 45–46, 70–72; *id.*, *Die Onurislegende*, pp. 100–101; BRUNNER-TRAUT, “Tanz,” p. 224 n. 103.
- 57 “Insistons bien [...] que c’est encore le terme *ksks* qui désignerait ainsi la saltation du souverain de Napata, come il désigne la danse nubienne du tombeau de Ki-nébou et les mimiques des babouins venus de Koush.” WILD, “Un danse nubienne d’époque pharaonique,” p. 87.
- 58 BRUNNER-TRAUT, “Tanz,” p. 223, n. 84; *id.*, *Der Tanz im alten Ägypten*, p. 46.

the modern Nubian *rakaba* dance, also known as the “neck dance.” The Kingdom of Meroe (300 BCE–300 CE) consisted of the southern part of Lower Nubia (south of the Second Cataract) to lands that stretched south of the Sixth Cataract. Meroe, the capital city, was located north of the Sixth Cataract and the modern city of Khartoum. The “neck dance” was depicted on the front of the pylon, which stands before the burial of a queen in the royal cemetery of Meroe (Begrawiyah North cemetery tomb 11, abbreviated Beg. N 11). There, female dancers perform a funerary dance, clapping time while others carry palm staves, and throw their heads back in time to the rhythm.⁵⁹

The Nubian *rakaba* dance performed today is accompanied by the beat of the double-headed drum (barrel drum), called a *daluka*, the same drum typically depicted with Nubians in the pharaonic period.⁶⁰ The *rakaba* dance has an important function in modern Nubian culture where it is performed at various community events.⁶¹

This dance is performed in one variation or another at almost all ceremonial occasions, such as child-namings, circumcisions, marriages, zars,⁶² or funerals.⁶³

In 1844, Lepsius witnessed a performance of this dance at a funeral in a small town near Sennar, about 160 miles southeast of Khartoum.

Bending the upper part of their body in convulsive and strained twistings and turnings, and slowly balancing themselves, they move their feet forwards, then suddenly threw their breasts upwards with violence and their heads back on their shoulders, which they stretched out in all directions, and thus with half closed eyes, gradually glided forwards. In this manner they went down a slight incline of fifteen or twenty paces, where they threw themselves on the ground, covered themselves with dust and earth, and turned back again to recommence the same dance. [...] This dancing procession was repeated over and over again. Each of the mourn-

59 Ibid., p. 735 fig. 3.

60 In the tomb of Djehuty-hotep, a girl played the barrel drum to accompany a black woman who performed the *ksks*-dance. See fn. 50.

61 KENDALL, “Ethnoarchaeology,” pp. 658–661.

62 “The term *zar*, referring both to a ceremony and a class of spirits, is usually associated with Ethiopia and may be of Amharic origin. However, the *zar* is also found the length of the Nile, from Alexandria to at least Khartoum in the Sudan. In Egyptian Nubia, the purpose of a *zar* ceremony is to cure mental illnesses through contact with the possessing spirits which cause such maladies.” KENNEDY, “Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy,” p. 185.

63 KENDALL, “Ethnoarchaeology,” p. 659.

Figure 6.
Performance
of the “Neck
Dance” depicted
on the pylon of
a Meroitic royal
burial (Beg. N 11).



ers is compelled at least to go through this once, and the nearer the relationship so much the more frequently is it repeated.⁶⁴

Lepsius’s lengthy description could just as well refer to the funerary dance performed by the black woman depicted in the Debeira (Nubia) rock tomb of Djehutyhotep, the drum face from Akhmim or in the Theban tomb of Ki-Nebu: in each case the dancer exhibits twisted shoulders and outstretched arms – one up and one down. The same dance is performed at Nubian wedding ceremonies where it is the bride herself who dances while wedding guests hold apotropaic palm fronds.⁶⁵

Brunner-Traut identified *ksks* as the “national dance” of “die Neger,”

Die Neger haben aber wie die Libyer auch ihren Nationaltanz: Sie drehen bei senkrechter Haltung den Oberkörper und trippeln dabei ganz rasch mit den Füßen an der gleichen Stelle [...]. Soweit es die grossen Fasstrommeln, Holzkeulen und Tierschwänze in den Armen zulassen, mache die Neger lebhaft Sprünge und ausfahrende Gesten [...]. Negertänze sind durch ihre Instrumente und Schmuckgeklirr lärmvoll [...]. Nur ausnahmsweise tanzen auch Negermädchen, aber in einer der äg. Kultiviertheit angeglichenen Weise.⁶⁶

64 LEPSIUS, *Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai*, p. 184, quoted in KENDALL, “Ethnoarchaeology,” p. 660.

65 CROWFOOT, *Popular Rites in the Northern Sudan*, pl. 67a, 68b.

66 BRUNNER-TRAUT, “Tanz,” p. 223.

Negroes, like the Libyans, also have their national dance. They twist their upper bodies in perpendicular position and scuttle with their feet very rapidly in one place [...]. With the large barrel drum, the wooden club, and animal tails worn on the arms, the Negroes perform lively jumps and expansive gestures [...]. Negro dances are noisy on account of their instruments and clanging jewelry[...]. Only as an exception, though, do Negro girls dance in a way that assimilates Egyptian sophistication. (My translation.)

Brunner-Traut's description of "Negro dances" resembles Kendall's description of the "neck dance," which consisted of rapid foot movements in one place and violent swinging of the upper body, accompanied by the beat of the barrel drum and men carrying wooden clubs. The description also sounds very much like what Lepsius witnessed at Sennar: small movements of the feet accompanied by dramatic twisting of the shoulders and upper body accentuated by dramatic extension of both arms. While the body movements could not be captured in the tomb paintings of Ki-nebu, Djehutyhotep, or on the drum face from Akhmim, each painter sought to capture such movement by depicting the twisted shoulders and the outstretched arms.

The erotic and ecstatic nature of the dance cannot be missed: topless women swinging their heads and hair while thrusting their breasts up and forward combined with the pounding of the barrel drums would have created an atmosphere of heightened sexual energy and religious ecstasy.⁶⁷ These are the very characteristics associated with the celebratory festivals performed for the return of Hathor, the goddess of love, music, and dance.

Hathor Returns to Medamud

Contemporary with the early Meroitic period, the Ptolemaic Temple of Hathor at Medamud, near Karnak, contains the most detailed description of Nubian dancers - men and women - arriving to Egypt with the returning Distant Goddess. Built under Ptolemy VIII (170-116 BCE), the temple stands on the site of an earlier, walled sacred grove established during the Old Kingdom and a Middle Kingdom temple, which had been situated on a circular mound. The extant temple of Medamud was connected to the precinct of Montu at Karnak by a row of sphinxes that stretched 8 kilometers between the two sites in Thebes.

67 KENDALL, "Ethnoarchaeology," p. 660. Nubian Muslims have been encouraged to discard this tradition. Orthodox leaders of many Nubian communities prohibit the performance of this ancient dance, because it seems "a sacrilegious desecration in the sight of God." See KENNEDY, *Nubian Ceremonial Life*, p. 226.

Hieroglyphic texts and reliefs decorate the interior west wall of the central kiosk. The texts record a hymn dedicated to the Gold (*Nwb.t*), the goddess Rat-Tawy as Hathor, the returning eye of the sun.⁶⁸ Text columns 7–10 of the hymn record the praise of worshippers who accompanied the goddess on her return to Egypt: Egyptians, foreigners, and animals.⁶⁹ In the second section of the hymn several Nubian tribes, their dances, and attire are described,⁷⁰

Mntyw-people⁷¹ perform the ceremonial *gs*gs-dance (*kks*) with their (traditional) clothing (*stz.w*),⁷² while the *Styw*-people dance holding their staves (*mdw*);⁷³ the nomads throw themselves down (*sb*n) in front of you, and the inhabitants of Punt (*hbs.tyw*)⁷⁴ declaim (*wšd*) for you.⁷⁵

In texts on the Ptolemaic gate to the enclosure of Mut at Karnak, Puntites are said to bend their hands (in a gesture of worship and praise), while the Libyans dance.⁷⁶ Darnell interprets the action of bending the arm (hand) to be the *hn*-gesture, “appropriate to a Hathoric celebration of nocturnal drunken revelry.”⁷⁷ Both of the actions performed by the people of Punt – declaiming and bending the arm – are strongly associated with the prayer inscriptions of Nubian worshippers found in the Egyptian temples of Lower Nubia during the second and third centuries CE when officials and worshippers arrived from Meroitic Nubia as representatives of the Meroitic king.⁷⁸

68 DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 47.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 64–79.

71 On the *Mntyw*-people as inhabitants of the southern area of Nubia west of the Nile, see *ibid.* pp. 66–70.

72 A dress with a top that consists of “crossed bands” is the attire sometimes worn by women as they dance for Hathor. “The dancers are entering the gate of the temple, and the use of *št* to describe the costume of the *Mntyw* may be intended to recall the ritual garments *štz n k̄ hr ntr ʿnd štz n msz ntr* (WB IV, 558, 13–4), appropriate for dancers welcoming the returning goddess.” DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 73. A figurine, decorated with “crossed bands,” was found in the tomb of Neferhotep the Bowman (Nubian) at Deir el Bahari; paddle dolls frequently are decorated in this manner as well. See MORRIS, “Paddle Dolls and Performance,” p. 89, esp. n. 94 and KEIMER, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l’Égypte ancienne*, pl. XIV–XVII. Nubian women dancers were depicted wearing decorative bands crossed on their torsos in several Ramesside ostraca (see Figure 4), while modern Nubian women can be decorated with cicatrices in this pattern. See *ibid.*, pl. XXXVIII (2).

73 Nubians are depicted with their clubs in the Festival Procession of Opet at Luxor. See THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, *The Festival Procession of Opet*, pl. 32 and 94, commentary pp. 16 and 36.

74 ERMAN & GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 3: p. 255, 15–16.

75 DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 64.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 79. “The *hn*-gesture appears to be particularly associated with the navigation of the returning goddess on her way to the *hieros gamos*.” *Ibid.*, p. 91 with reference to GUTBUB, “Un Emprunt aux textes des pyramides dans l’hymne à Hathor,” p. 61.

78 In those prayer inscriptions, the Nubian priests “call out” (*šll*) to Isis, while one Nubian worshipper speaks of “bending the arm” in praise of the goddess. For *šll*, see GRIFFITH, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenos*, vol. 1, p. 182 #341 with reference to

Nubians at Philae

A unique telling of the Myth of the Distant Goddess at Philae indicates the Nubian focus of the rites performed in that temple. In most versions of the Myth of the Distant Goddess, it was Shu, consort of Tefnut, and Thoth who journeyed to Nubia to entice the goddess back to Egypt. However, the myth as it was depicted in text and temple reliefs at Philae, credits Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs with having guided Tefnut back to Egypt.⁷⁹ Both Arensnuphis⁸⁰ and Thoth Pnubs⁸¹ were gods worshipped in Nubia and Kush; they are not depicted in Egyptian temples north of Philae. Nubian temple inscriptions engraved in the early Roman period (mid-first century CE) cluster around images of Tefnut, Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs, which are prevalent on the columns and walls of the temple forecourt and date to the Ptolemaic Period. This concentration of inscriptions seems to indicate that worship of Tefnut, Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs increased in this period.⁸² During the reign of Ptolemy VI (180–145 BCE), the area before the temple of Arensnuphis (at the southern end of the forecourt) was expanded. A cult association added a porch to the front of the temple.⁸³ An upsurge in worshippers, either Egyptian, Nubian, or both, participating in the rites performed for these three gods would have necessitated the structural changes made to this area of the temple complex at Philae. Annexation of Lower Nubia and construction of temples in the area by the Kushite kings Arqamani II and his successor, Adikhalamani, during the Theban Revolt (206–186 BCE), which began in the reign of Ptolemy IV and ended under Ptolemy V, would have provided the opening and the impetus for an increased Nubian participation in the rites performed at Philae.

inscriptions in which the word appears. For the expression “bending the arm” (*hbe n-t rmn(-i)*), see *ibid.*, 121 graffito Ph. 421, line 3.

79 INCONNU-BOCQUILLON, *Le mythe de la Déesse Lointaine à Philae*, p. 336.

80 WENIG, “Arensnuphis und Sebiumecker,” pp. 130–150.

81 BOYLAN, *Thoth*, pp. 168–172; SAUNERON & YOYOTTE, “La champagne nubienne de Psammétique II et sa signification historique,” pp. 163–167; KURTH, “Thoth,” pp. 510–11; JUNKER, *Die Onurislegende*, pp. 7–11.5

82 HEANY, “A Short Architectural History of Philae,” p. 223, Fig. 3. Cruz-Uribe has suggested that the Kiosk of Nectanebo, relocated in the late Ptolemaic period, served as a shrine dedicated to Thoth Pnubs. See CRUZ-URIBE, *The Demotic Graffiti from the Temple of Isis on Philae Island*, p. 11.

83 See BERNAND, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae*, vol. 2, pp. 116–121 (inscription IGP 11). The Greek inscription commemorated work on the temple of Arensnuphis undertaken by a cult association. The inscription may refer to the addition of the porch, which is no longer standing. See also HAENY, “Short Architectural History of Philae,” p. 220, n. 4.

Roman Period

Doctoral research on the Nubian inscriptions engraved in Egyptian temples of the Dodecaschoenos suggests that worshippers continued to travel to Philae in the early Roman period (mid-first century CE) to perform rites in celebration of Hathor, which coincided with the delivery of the first fruits of the harvest during the season of *Peret*.⁸⁴ This assumption is based on the contents, location, and references to ritual acts in the texts of the inscriptions,⁸⁵ which recorded “agreements” by cult association members to journey annually to Philae from temples in the southern Dodecaschoenos. The annual journey may have been timed to coincide with the first day of a festival celebrating the return of Tefnut to Egypt, which was celebrated at Denderah on 19 *Tybi*, the first month in the season of *Peret*.

Several Nubian inscriptions make reference to wives, daughters, and “all the people who belong to me” being present at the temple with the (male) writer.⁸⁶ I suggest that the wives and daughters who accompanied the Nubian worshippers, priests, and cult association members would have been the women who performed the sacred dances for Hathor that are attested for the earlier pharaonic period: the *ksks*-dance of the C-Group people of Lower Nubia.

Inscribed in Egyptian Demotic in the forecourt, the columned area leading up to the temple that was typically used for public celebration, the gathering of cult association members, and drinking,⁸⁷ one agreement recorded a promise to celebrate rites on a specific evening every year.⁸⁸ Another agreement in the same area made reference to the “procession of the cult association of Thoth Pnubs.”⁸⁹ A prayer inscription, Ph. 28, engraved in 34 CE on a column of the

84 The Egyptian calendar was divided into three seasons: *Akhet* ʔh.t “Inundation,” *Peret* pr.t “Growing,” and *Shemu* šmw “Harvest;” each season consisted of three months of thirty days each. While the final season was called “Harvest,” the collection of “first fruits” occurred in the season of *Peret* as demonstrated by the traditional name of the first month of *Peret*, *šf-bd.t* “swelling of Emmer-Wheat.” Furthermore, presentation of a grain offering at the temples of Esna and Edfu occurred on 8 and 9 *Mechir*, respectively. *Mechir* was the second month of *Peret*. See ALTENMÜLLER, “Feste,” p. 177.

85 I have suggested that Nubians wrote five early Roman period inscriptions found on the dromos at Philae: Ph. 11, Ph. 15, Ph. 24, Ph. 25, and Ph. 36. See ASHBY, *Calling Out to Isis*, pp. 94–112. Three of these five inscriptions are dated to the season of *Peret*. See *ibid.*, pp. 50–113. A calendar of feasts at Denderah indicates that the return of Hathor from Nubia was celebrated with a daily procession from the first day of *Tybi* (first month of *Peret*) – 4th day of *Mechir* (second month of *Peret*).

86 Ph. 254, Ph. 255, Ph. 289, Ph. 411, and Ph. 416. See GRIFFITH, *Catalogue of Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenos*, vol. 1, pp. 84, 90, 113–119.

87 See BADAUWY, “The Approach to the Egyptian Temple in the Late and Greco-Roman Periods,” p. 80.

88 Ph. 24 inscribed in 31 CE; the rites were to be performed on day 24 in the third month of *Peret*, the Egyptian month of *Phamenoth*. See GRIFFITH, *Catalogue of Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenos*, vol. 1, p. 45.

89 *Ibid.*, 48. Graffito Ph. 36 was inscribed in 46 CE. “Procession of the cult association of Thoth Pnubs” in Egyptian *Pꜣ ḥꜣ tꜣ sn.t ḏḥwtꜣ pꜣ nbs*. Griffith transliterated the term for “council” as *knb.t*, while Hughes read the Demotic word as *sn.t*. Both scholars translated the term as “cult

western colonnade in the forecourt recalled the performance of the ʕ-k-procession (“Feast of Entry”⁹⁰) to the shrine of Hathor (*t3 gʕ.t Hwt-Hr*), the “house of greeting” (*pr ʕy*) and the “place of inebriation” (*p3 m3ʕ the*).⁹¹ Darnell notes that the Hathor temple at Philae was called “the place of imploring” (*s.t n(t) ʕs.t*).⁹² The destination of the ʕ-k-procession may have been the small Hathor temple, located east of the Main Temple at Philae or it may have been a simple shrine erected in the forecourt in the area where the graffito was inscribed.⁹³ Graffito Ph. 28 was also inscribed in *Peret*, in the fourth month of that season. Thus, in the first century CE Nubian worshippers were making an annual journey to Philae to participate in rites for Hathor, Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs during the harvest season of *Peret*. Rites enacted in the evening, as promised in Ph. 24, recall the nocturnal celebrations in honor of Hathor, which included drinking, music, dancing, and the *hn*-gesture.⁹⁴ Each of those ritual elements was present in the myth at Medamud.⁹⁵

Circumstantial evidence suggests that such rites were the focus of the early Roman inscriptions at Philae, which were engraved on the structures in the open area in front of the Main Temple. The forecourt was the area traditionally reserved for public celebration of rites, an area accessible to worshippers who were not allowed to enter the temple.⁹⁶ The agreement to arrive at Philae annually on the evening of the 24th day of the third month of *Peret* recalls the invitation to Hathor in the hymn at Medamud to

association.” See HUGHES, “The Sixth Day of the Lunar Month and the Demotic Word for ‘Cult Guild’,” pp. 152–153.

90 GRIFFITH, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenos*, p. 133 #7, p. 138 #35. ASHBY, *Calling Out to Isis*, pp. 126–139.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 47 (graffito Ph. 28); KOCKELMANN, “Zur Kultpraxis auf Philae,” pp. 113–114.

92 DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 50, n. 11.

93 Graffito Ph. 28 was inscribed on column 26 of the western colonnade of the temple forecourt (*dromos*). Kockelmann discusses the possible destinations of the ʕ-k-procession in KOCKELMANN, “Zur Kultpraxis auf Philae,” pp. 114–118. I tend to agree with Pope’s suggestion that the cult statue was carried to a shrine (no longer extant) erected on the *dromos*. See, *ibid.*, p. 114 n. 125; POPE, “The Demotic Proskynema of a Meroïte Envoy to Roman Egypt,” p. 80.

94 References to nocturnal celebrations for Hathor appear in the tomb of Kheruef, royal scribe and steward of the Eighteenth Dynasty Queen Tiye. In a depiction of dancers and musicians performing jubilee celebrations for her husband, Amenhotep III, hieroglyphic text above acrobatic dancers reads, “You spend all night, exalted one, being exalted.” An address to Hathor found above another relief scene of dancers reads, “Pr[ay] to make jubilation for The Gold [...]! Come, arise, come that I may make for you jubilation at twilight (*ht3wy*) and music in the evening. O Hathor, you are exalted in the hair of Re, in the hair of Re, for to you has been given the sky there, deep night, and the stars. Great is her majesty when she is appeased.” THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, *The Tomb of Kheruef*, p. 47, pl. 34.

95 DARNELL, “Hathor Returns to Medamud,” p. 49.

96 BADAWY, “The Approach to the Egyptian Temple in the Late and Greco-Roman Periods,” p. 84 with reference to the hymn for Hathor at Medamud; CAYZAC, “Sur le parvis du temple d’Isis,” pp. 47, 49.

[c]ome, oh Golden One who eats of praise, because the food of her desire is dancing, who shines on the festival at the time of lighting (the lamps), who is content with the dancing at night. Come! The procession is in the place of inebriation [...].⁹⁷

Contemporary with the Nubian inscriptions at Philae, a tomb near Rome contains a relief in which this type of celebration is depicted,

a dance in which the dancers and spectators are undoubtedly Africans, that is, Egyptians and Negroes [...], three central participants, rather steatopygic Negro women, dressed in long transparent tunics, whose violent dance involves bending the knees and tossing back the head.⁹⁸

Nubian women, then, were featured participants as dancers and musicians and perhaps even as personifications of the goddess Hathor⁹⁹ in Egyptian rites beginning in the Middle Kingdom, down through the Roman period in Egypt, and in rites celebrated as far away as Rome. Perhaps depictions of Nubian women as Hathoric dancers through millennia of Egyptian art caused those black women to be perceived as essential participants in the rites performed for Hathor and bestowed an air of legitimacy and antiquity on the performance of those rites. Jean Leclant describes the spread of Egyptian religious practices celebrated for Isis (to whom Hathor had become assimilated) throughout the Greco-Roman world. He emphasized the pivotal role played by African celebrants in those rites:

When the cult of the Isiac gods spread through the Greek world, it was often established by authentic Egyptian priests, as was the case at Delos, for instance. Their part in the installation and propagation of the cult guaranteed the genuineness of the Egyptian rites. The use of black personnel in the Isiac temples in Italy during the Roman period probably sprang from this same concern for authenticity, but even more, it seems, from a heightened taste for the exotic. Blacks as priests, musicians, and dancers lent an African flavor to the ceremonies, just as the ancient statues and sculptures brought from Egypt to decorate the temples of Isis gave them an Egyptian cast, which was meant to plunge the initiated in a very special atmosphere, thus captivating both their senses and their

97 Translation by DARNELL, "Hathor Returns to Medamud," 50.

98 SNOWDEN, *Blacks in Antiquity*, p. 191.

99 AUSTIN & GOBEL, "Embodying the Divine." While Austin does not suggest that the tattooed mummy was Nubian, she does make the powerful suggestion that priestesses of Hathor embodied the goddess during the performance of religious rites. This belief is central to many African religious traditions, where the priest and, in fact, any worshipper can be "ridden" by the deity and, thereby, come to embody the god.

minds [...]. Dances by blacks could therefore be performed as part of Isiac feasts like that of the November Isia, in which the death and resurrection of Osiris were acted out [...]. One may also admit the presence of blacks in the sacred Isiac dramas. According to Suetonius, for the night after Caligula was murdered a spectacle was being prepared in which “scenes from the underworld” were to be played by Egyptians and “Ethiopians.”¹⁰⁰

I would like to suggest that a similar taste for authenticity and for the exotic motivated Middle Kingdom Egyptians to incorporate C-Group dancers and musicians into their ritual practices celebrated in the cult of Hathor.

It is not certain that the C-Group women perceived their role in the Hathoric rites in the same manner as the Egyptians did. The reader will recall that the traditional “neck dance” was performed at a variety of celebrations: child namings, weddings, “welcome dances,” and funerals. The “wildness” of the dance was not specifically meant to portray sexuality, although sexuality was very much inherent in the dance.

Although tattooed Black females are often represented as sex symbols on Egyptian toilette objects, one cannot assume that the tattoo had similar erotic connotations in Nubian society. No such objects have heretofore been discovered in any Nubian context. Whether or not tattoo had the same erotic overtones for the Nubian peoples as it apparently did for the Egyptians is open to discussion.¹⁰¹

Celebration of the fecundity of women and their ability to produce family lineages was central to the Nubian interpretation of a woman’s role in society. Traditional women’s dances would have celebrated that power which included sexuality, but was not solely limited to an erotic performance. Rather the dances captured the power of woman to continue the family lineage, the central organizing principle of Nubian society. The mother’s central role is demonstrated in Meroitic-language funerary inscriptions found in Nubia. In those texts, the name of the mother consistently preceded that of the father and kinship lineages may have been traced through the maternal line. Hathor’s apotropaic protection of women in childbirth as well as her role as ecstatic celebrant of sexuality and spiritual drunkenness resonates nicely with the vital role of women in the continuation of the kinship lineages in Nubian society.

100 LECLANT, “Egypt,” pp. 282–286.

101 BIANCHI, “Tattoo in Ancient Egypt,” p. 24.

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