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## "WHO KNOWS THE COLOR OF GOD?"<sup>1</sup>

Edmund S. Meltzer, IHAC

This question, asked in a modern Christmas song, points to a major area of humankind's experience and articulation of the numinous, one which has received surprisingly little focused attention from Egyptologists. In the work under review, Terence DuQuesne has taken an important step toward remedying this deficiency. As in other recent studies (one in Volume 10 of this Journal),<sup>2</sup> Dr. DuQuesne uses the psychopompic figure of Anubis to "open the path" into a significant problem of ancient Egyptian religion and its comparative exploration. In the pursuit of this investigation, he brings to bear an erudition which is truly impressive, not only in Egyptology but in the texts, languages and scholarship of many religious traditions, ancient and modern, as well as in philosophy and poetry. His intellectual stance is one of respect for all religions and of keen cross-cultural sensitivity; his writing style is forthright, vivid and literate. His presentation is informed by his deep engagement with the material he discusses and by his conviction that such studies are not a detached

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<sup>1</sup> This is a review article on Terence DuQuesne, *Black and Gold God. Colour symbolism of the god Anubis with observations on the phenomenology of colour in Egyptian and comparative religion*. With Annexes by A. El Goresy & S. Schiegl, and A. Niwiński. *Oxfordshire Communications in Egyptology* V. London: Da'th Scholarly Services/Darengo Publications, 1995. ISBN 1-871266-22-X. Pp. 108. £35. The complete stanza from which the title quotation is taken is: "Who knows the color of God? Black or white or yellow or red, All or any or none of the above, Who knows the color of God knows the color of love." I apologize deeply for the inclusion of this and other quotations and statements the sources and/or precise bibliographical details of which are currently inaccessible to me in the land of *y'r*, that is, *galut*, in which I am. I have done so only when they are intrinsic to the discussion. I wish to thank Dr. DuQuesne for lively and collegial correspondence on a number of points relating to the work under review and kindred subjects.

<sup>2</sup> "Openers of the Paths: canid psychopomps in ancient Egypt and India," *JAC* 10 (1995): 41-53.

scholarly exercise but an urgent priority in the quest for ethical life and for mutual and self-understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. DuQuesne begins with a brief introductory note explaining the scope of his study, referring to the few previous major studies, and acknowledging the help of many colleagues in providing materials and feedback. The first chapter is an important background section devoted to "Philosophical, Physical & Psychological Aspects of Colour," much of which will be new and thought-provoking to most Egyptologists. This is followed by a chapter on color in ancient Egypt, devoting special attention to black. The longest chapter, which discusses the "colour associations of Anubis," is in turn followed by another on "Colour Symbols and Canids in Comparative Religion"; and the author's discussion concludes with a brief, avowedly preliminary interpretive chapter which is to a large extent a set of caveats and desiderata for future research. The body of the text is followed by two "Annexes." The first, on the chemical analysis of "Ancient Egyptian Pigments and Faiences" by A. El Goresy and S. Schiegl, reaches some surprising results, notably the restriction of true orpiment to royal use (cf. Old China's "imperial yellow") and the absence of a green pigment before the 18th Dynasty (surviving greens before that period have suffered chemical change). In the second, entitled "Colours of XXIst Dynasty Coffins," A. Niwiński remarks briefly on earlier and later periods as well. A very extensive bibliography and indices conclude the book, which is provided with copious footnotes throughout; the division of the text into numbered paragraphs to which the index and bibliography entries are keyed greatly facilitates ease of reference.

The author is highly sensitive to the disparities as well as commonalities between color categories cross-culturally and cross-linguistically, the unsatisfactory nature of translation-equivalents in the domain of color terminology, the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of color reference, and the ambivalences that often exist among the associations of a given color within a single culture. He is also extremely modest about the preliminary and suggestive nature of his study as a prolegomenon, *inter alia* characterizing his first chapter as "merely an impressionistic sketch designed to summarize some of the general issues, the most important of which are still outstanding, regarding colour

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<sup>3</sup> For a concise statement for Dr. DuQuesne's approach, see his article "The Raw and the Half-Baked: approaches to Egyptian religion," *DE* 30 (1994): 29-35.

perception" (§9). That chapter conveys the tensions which have existed between philosophical and strictly physical/mechanistic approaches to color and its perception (though the former have in some cases foreshadowed the latter, cf. §87), as well as the potential for a rapprochement at the frontiers of research, giving the example of synaesthesia.<sup>4</sup> In his consideration of the Egyptian material, the author includes a zoological description of the colors of jackals and related canids (§§62-67), as well as the color characteristics and divine associations of the canids which can be found in Egyptian religious texts and representations, including the as-yet-unidentified animal of the *Imywt*-emblem. In the process, he discusses many lexicographical points, regarding terms for canids as well as color terminology. The overall pattern of color associations uncovered by Dr. DuQuesne is one characterized by multiple color attributes of each divinity and animal discussed, shared color associations pointing to identifications and resonances among deities, and ambivalent associations or polarities which in the Egyptian and other traditional perspectives are not contradictory but complementary (devouring/reintegration-rebirth, threatening/protective, chthonic/solar, etc.). Altogether, there is ample justification for his conclusion "that the phenomenology of colour and its place in religious life are far more complicated than many believe" (§98), and plentiful evidence for the sophistication and refinement of the ancient Egyptian and other traditions described. As the domain of the god Anubis includes the Kushite cultures of Napata and Meroe and the Classical world, the relevant materials are discussed in detail and brought to bear on the interpretation of the "Egyptian" material as more narrowly defined, in a manner which seems sensitive and methodologically appropriate. (It is refreshing to see Plotinus referred to as "an Egyptian" (§6)!) In the present discussion, I shall not attempt to recapitulate the extensive ground covered and, as it were, excavated by Dr. DuQuesne, but shall merely provide additional references and comments about some of the material as well as occasional reflections prompted by aspects raised in his presentation, a type of conversation which is, I think, in the spirit of his own work.


With regard to the association of Re with gold (§§13f), it is interesting that the word referring to the brightness and color of daylight is *hd*, which is etymologically related not to gold but to silver, and which

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Emily Dickinson: "Let not sunlight's yellow noise/ Interrupt this ground."

covers the field normally translated "light/bright/white" (analogous to Greek *leukos*) -- a term which is also found in epithets of Anubis (§§28f). The association of Set with gold (§43) calls to mind the name of his cult-center Ombos (*Nbwt*) and his epithet "the Ombite," written with the gold-sign as principal character and probably reflecting the historical-geographical connection with the gold-mining region of the eastern desert. Dr. DuQuesne does not discuss the so-called "Golden Horus" title of the king, in which it has long been debated whether the gold-sign refers to Horus or Set.<sup>5</sup> The late Greek translation "Superior to (his) foes," corresponding to Demotic *nty hr p3y.f ddy* "One who is over his enemy,"<sup>6</sup> is normally understood as a reference to Horus defeating Set, "the Ombite." It is possible, however, that it is at least primarily a translation resulting from a reading of the title as a Ptolemaic rebus *hr(y) nb*, "The one who is over sin (or, over the sinful one)."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, if indeed the "Horus of Gold(?)" title reflects a historical victory of "Horus" over "the Ombite," the allusion would likely be to the predynastic expansion of the Hieraconpolis kingdom and its swallowing-up of the Nakada kingdom,<sup>8</sup> in which case it is surprising that "Horus of Gold(?)" is one of the latest of the titles in the royal titulary to be standardized, rather than one of the first. If the reference is to the end of the 2nd Dynasty/transition to the Old Kingdom, that appears in the name and iconography of Khasekhemwy-Nebwyhotpimef not as a victory but as a reconciliation.

Turning to the realm of blackness, a central aspect of Dr. DuQuesne's discussion, several additional points can be ventured. Set takes the form of a black *š3(y)*, a word which sometimes means "pig"<sup>9</sup> but

<sup>5</sup> For a brief overview, see Gardiner, *EG3*, Excursus A. Many studies have been devoted to this title; a bibliography is compiled in the MA thesis of Li Xiaodong, "The Pharaoh's Title , " (IHAC, Northeast Normal University, 1995), pp. 29-31.

<sup>6</sup> S. Quirke & C.A.R. Andrews, *The Rosetta Stone* (New York, 1989), pp. 14, 16 and facsimile.

<sup>7</sup> An oral suggestion of the present reviewer, see Li Xiaodong, *op. cit.*, pp. 11f. It is of course possible that this too could be taken as a reference to Set.

<sup>8</sup> The most compendious discussion yet presented of the emergence of the Egyptian state, with voluminous bibliography, is A. Pérez Largacha, *El Nacimiento del Estado en Egipto (Aegyptiaca Complutensia II)*, Alcala de Herares, 1993. Of available discussions in English, I highly recommend that in B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, London, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., *CDME* 260.

also has major canine associations and is related to ꜥ3y "fate."<sup>10</sup> The chapter title referring to Anubis, "A Darker Shade of Black," points to further associations between black(ness) and darkness (Egyptian *kkw*). The male-female pair of entities designated "Darkness" is of course included in the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, and Atum has associations with both sunlight and darkness (and bridges both domains as the setting sun). It has often been noted that, with the exception of open-court solar sanctuaries, the interiors of Egyptian temples get increasingly dark as one approaches the naos, which is at the darkest point. J.K. Hoffmeier has discussed the possible symbolic significance of black basalt in mortuary temples of Old Kingdom pyramid complexes<sup>11</sup>: he weighs the possibility that the black stone signifies "primeval darkness" but concludes that it most likely is to be identified with the black earth and the earth-god Geb, whose connections with Osiris and Anubis and the color black are noted by Dr. DuQuesne (§§26, 47). The consideration of black(ness) in ancient Egypt of necessity draws Dr. DuQuesne into the ideologically volatile discussion of the skin color and ethnic identification of the ancient Egyptians (§§16, 109), whom he considers "racially heterogeneous" while affirming "that Egypt sits firmly in Africa." His warning about the political pitfalls and excesses surrounding this issue is well taken, though perhaps he could have more strongly emphasized the nature of many "racial" groups as social constructs; to his own comments and citations, one can add recent publications by F. Yurco,<sup>12</sup> B.G. Trigger,<sup>13</sup> A. Macy Roth,<sup>14</sup> and R.A. Fazzini.<sup>15</sup> While it has often been held that the name "Nubia" originates from the Egyptian *Nbw*, meaning "Gold-Land" (§58),

<sup>10</sup> Cf. T. DuQuesne, review of U. Luft, ed., *The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt. Studies presented to László Kákósy* (Budapest, 1992), *DE* 24 (1994): 137, 139f, referring to the papers by P. Hubai, J. Quaegebeur, and H. te Velde.

<sup>11</sup> "The Use of Basalt in Floors of Old Kingdom Pyramid Temples," *JARCE* 30 (1993): 117-123.

<sup>12</sup> "Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?," *BAR* 15/5 (Sept./Oct. 1989): 24-29, 58.

<sup>13</sup> "Nubian, Negro, Black, Nilotic?," in *Africa in Antiquity I. The Essays* (Brooklyn, 1978), pp. 26-35.

<sup>14</sup> "Building Bridges to Afrocentrism: A Letter to My Egyptological Colleagues," Part 1, *ARCE Newsletter* #167 (Sept. 1995): 1, 14-17; Part 2, *ARCE Newsletter* #168 (Dec. 1995): 1, 12-15.

<sup>15</sup> *Tutankhamun and the African Heritage: A View of Society at the Time of the Boy-King*, a pamphlet published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to coincide with the Tutankhamun exhibition.

is it not possible to derive it from native ethnonyms such as "Noba," Latin "Nobadae"? The mention of black in Coptic texts and iconography (§61) should include St. "Black John" (Iōhannēs pkamē).

The comparative chapter is only a sampling, as Dr. DuQuesne himself notes -- "a whistle stop tour of colour symbolism in a variety of societies" (§110, cf. §68) -- but it seems to this reviewer to be on the whole a representative one which emphasizes important aspects. Some cultures and geographic areas are sampled more heavily than others, perhaps in some cases on the basis of apparent relationships with Egyptian material (cf. §72); some, such as China, seen underrepresented by comparison (§82). Many of the items included present obvious points of resemblance with the Egyptian material, and these are discussed by the author. We can only touch on a very few items here. With regard to the Hebrew Bible and related material, it is not clear to the reviewer that YHWH should be characterized "as a solar deity" (§74) -- cosmic, chthonic and storm associations, for example, seem very strong.<sup>16</sup> The consideration of the role of darkness can be augmented with reference to Abraham Joshua Heschel's characteristically eloquent discussion of darkness as the locus of divine revelation, in which he compiles a number of striking passages from the Hebrew Bible illustrating that theme. The negative light and black light referred to in Hebrew mysticism (§75) call to mind a very worthwhile point about the paradoxical relationship<sup>17</sup> between light and darkness made by Sax Rohmer, in a work far removed from scholarly discussion<sup>18</sup>: light so bright as to be blinding has the effect of plunging one into impenetrable darkness. One stray observation which might be mentioned in connection with the section on European folklore (§§95-97) is the association of a dog with the moon, as in Shakespeare,

<sup>16</sup> R. Givon considered the solar nature of Akhenaten's religion an argument against its proposed relationship with early Hebrew or Israelite religion, as he argued in his paper "Western Asian Aspects of the Amarna Period: The Monotheism-Problem," in *L'égyptologie en 1979. Axes prioritaires de recherches* (Paris, 1982), the proceedings of the Second International Congress of Egyptologists at Grenoble.

<sup>17</sup> On such paradoxes, see §106 of the work under review.

<sup>18</sup> His novel *The Bat Flies Low*. Despite his blatant jingoism and stereotyping, I must admit (somewhat apologetically) to finding enjoyment in some of the works of that author, especially his stories of *Bimbashi Baruk of Egypt* and, for the sometimes irresistible "guilty pleasure" of an Egyptomaniac shudder, *Brood of the Witch Queen*. Cf. H.M. Jackson, "Κόρη Κόσμου: Isis, Pupil of the Eye of the World," *CdE* 61 (1986): 133.

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, which seems to belong to the same orbit as the lunar associations of Anubis (§§28, 32).

In his concluding section, Dr. DuQuesne calls for the rejection of ethnocentrism and observes that, despite "important differences and ambiguities, there does appear to be a substrate of symbolic *Gestalten* which transcends cultures" (§110).<sup>19</sup> He suspects that the Egyptians' "elaborate religious colour-codes" are part of a system of religious color symbolism analogous to those in the Hindu-Buddhist and Kabbalistic traditions (§111), and he calls for further study, not only to increase scholarly knowledge, but to "help to revalorize [Egypt's] profound religious tradition" as something which deserves respect without condescension and continues to enrich the present-day world.

This reviewer hopes that, along with ongoing work on Anubis and other jackal-deities, Dr. DuQuesne will turn his erudition and penetrating vision to other psychopompic figures in ancient Egyptian religion. As he notes, Hathor is often gold but sometimes black, is "associated with Libya," and has "many connexions with Anubis" (§13 with n. 64). Hathor is the female figure in Egyptian art who most typically shows a darker "male" complexion, and she is identified with the "Beautiful West," the (primarily) female pole of the psychopompic persona in ancient Egypt. In the royal tomb of Horemheb, for instance, the goddess with the *imnt*-sign on her head is accompanied by a text beginning *Dd-mdw in Hwt-hr*.<sup>20</sup>

As a closing reflection, the juxtaposition of black and gold, light and darkness, has another paradoxical aspect, one which seems to infuse Dr. DuQuesne's presentation. While it is true that in light we see light,<sup>21</sup> it is also undeniable that light shows up against the background of darkness and thus complements it, as we are reminded by the ubiquitous representation of the starry night sky in Egyptian art and architecture. In his investigation discussed here, Dr. DuQuesne has led us on at least the first steps into a dark and shadowy realm and has helped us to adjust our eyes so that we can see more clearly the brightness within. That the expanse ahead is infinite does not make these steps any less important.

<sup>19</sup> For a statement of the author's openness to a Jungian approach without following it dogmatically, see *DE* 30 (1994): 31.

<sup>20</sup> E. Hornung, *Tal der Könige* (Zurich-Munich, 1982), p. 99, pl. 68: the goddess' complexion is lighter than the king's.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jackson, *CdE* 61 (1986): 134f.