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Female egyptian deities with male characteristic : researching the reasons

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INTRODUCTION

This poster is about three female Egyptian deities that can be represented with male characteristics: Neith, Mut, Sekhmet. Since it is believed that it is not possible to apply modern categories to ancient times, the reasons for these characterisations should be searched in Ancient Egyptian culture itself where, in certain circumstances, gender fluidity was possible. All of these deities portray belligerent or dangerous/aggressive aspects; there is also evidence of Mut and Neith role as creator goddesses. In the Amduat funerary text Neith is referred to as *Njt-t3jt* and in Esna she is said to be both male and female. In the temple of Hibis there is a relief with an ithyphallic Mut, while in Karnak there is a female lion-headed ithyphallic goddess. Given the fact that representations of an ithyphallic Sekhmet also exist, such as the ones kept in the LACMA, the goddess on this relief could be either Mut or Sekhmet. Again in Khonsu's Temple there are some mentions of Mut as the "Mother who gave birth to her Father".

AIM

The aim of this research is to find an explanation to why there are female deities with male features in the Egyptian pantheon and what could possibly be their role in Egyptian religion.

Moreover, it is important to understand how these deities fit in the cultural panorama of ancient Egypt.

METHODOLOGY

- ◆ researching for epigraphical or artistical instances of female deities with male characteristics;
- ◆ differentiating between creator deities and aggressive ones;
- ◆ looking for similarities and differences in art depiction and epigraphy



COONEY, 2008, pag. 71



RAMBOYA, 1954, tab. 95



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DISCUSSION

In the Egyptian religion the existence of deities that present duplex characteristic is well attested, especially in gods of creation, such as Atum. For male deities, however, it is not possible to represent these aspects in a figurative way: in the cosmogonic myth of the Eliopolitan religion, Atum swallows his semen after masturbating and then he spits the first couple of gods. It is important to notice that it is the hand of the god that has the female function during the creation, becoming then a goddess herself called Iusaas. For female deities, that are able to give birth themselves, there is no need for the intervention of another part of their bodies. Sekhmet and Mut, instead, are goddesses that can present themselves in different ways: an aggressive way that has to be pacified and a nurturing way. The duplicity in aspect and behavior is a fundamental characteristic for them.

CONCLUSIONS

In Ancient Egyptian culture, belligerent and aggressive aspects are usually associated with masculinity and kingship

In my opinion, the figurative representation of ithyphallic Mut and Sekhmet are meant to highlight the aggressive part of their nature, while the textual reference for Mut and Neith show the androgyny typical of creator gods, that is easier to represent in a figurative way for female deities than for male ones.

It is important to challenge the binary concept that we have for gender in ancient society. Many consider Ancient Egyptian society to be divided in polar opposites; opposites in which also the dichotomy male-female is fundamental. I came to the hypothesis that, regarding Ancient Egypt, this kind of analysis is, for now, applicable only to divine beings to whom the binds in which humanity is constricted, don't apply.