Divine Triads of Ancient Egypt

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Abstract:

The scheme of divine triads (associations of three deities, originally from the same city, later also from different geographic locations) is the most frequent group of deities of ancient Egypt.

The formation of a triad resulted directly from the intention and interest of the priesthood(s) in establishing a link between the various cults of a particular locality or between services of different regions.

The functions of the members of these groups depended entirely on the mythical or ritual context in which they were invoked and in which they justify their associations that, in all cases, was an attempt for 'unity in diversity'.

Keywords: Triads, Religious thought, Unity, Plurality.

Resumo

O esquema das tríades divinas (associações de três divindades, inicialmente de uma mesma cidade, depois também em locais geográficos diferentes) é o agrupamento de divindades egípcias mais frequente do antigo Egipto.

A constituição de uma tríade respondia directamente à intenção e ao interesse do(s) sacerdócio(s) em estabelecer uma ligação entre os vários cultos de uma determinada localidade ou entre os cultos de regiões distintas.

As funções dos membros desses agrupamentos dependiam inteiramente do contexto mítico ou ritual em que eram invocadas e em que justificavam as suas associações, em que, em todos os casos, se procurava «a unidade na diversidade».

Palavras-chave: Tríades, Pensamento religioso, Unidade, Pluralidade.

«Il est impossible de *definir* ce qu'est un dieu. Quel que soit notre commentaire à son propos, il n'en exclut pas une quantité d'autres.»

Erik Hornung, *Les dieux de l'Egypte - Le Un et le Multiple*, Monaco, Éditions du Rocher, 1986, p. 238.

The divine triads are a very common type of group within the organization of the pantheon of ancient Egyptian religion, often regarded as constituting a unit, combining the concepts and the symbolism of 'three' and 'one', and sometimes seen as transforming polytheism in tritheism and in monotheism or as having influenced the very Christian formulation of the Trinity's doctrine[1].

Although the triad formations are a relatively late phenomenon in Egyptian history[2] and the word 'triad' rarely appears in Egyptian texts, the triads were in fact very common in Egypt: Osiris, Isis and Horus (Abydos); Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertum (Memphis); Amun, Mut and Khonsu (Karnak); Khnum, Satis and Anukis (Elephantine); Khepri-Re-Atum (Heliópolis); Ptah-Sokaris-Osiris (Memphis); Hathor, Horus and Ihy (Dendera); Horus, Hathor and Harsomtus (Edfu) are some of the more well known cases.

The child god can be introduced into the divine family through two processes: later, in a case "2 + 1", or at the same time associating the mother goddess to the divine couple (in a process "1 + 2"). Due to the inaccuracy of the sources, we ignore, in many cases, what the process of

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[1] Cf. Derchain, P., «La religion égyptienne» in *Histoire des Religions I*, 132 - 133; Te Velde, H., ″Some remarks on the structure of Egyptian divine triads″ in *JEA 57* (1971) : 80; Griffiths, J. G., «Triune Conceptions of Divinity in Ancient Egypt» in *ZÄS 100* (1973): 28; Morenz, S., *La religion égyptienne. Essai d'interprétation*, 191-198; Kákosy, L., ″A Memphite triad″ in *JEA 66* (1980): 48; Sales, J. C., *As divindades egípcias. Uma chave para a compreensão do Egipto antigo*, 34.

[2] Cf. Traunecker, Cl., *Les dieux de l'Égypte*, 66 - 67.

adding within the scope of a triad is[3]. It seems clear, however, that the formation of a triad corresponds directly to the intention and interest(s) of the priesthood(s) to establish a link between the various cults of a particular locality, although this aspect cannot be understood and interpreted in a systematic way for all cases.

In fact, only the major religious centers resorted to this process of divine constitution of families, capable of being integrated into a higher mythological, cosmogonical and theological context. In other cases, the features of the members of these "pseudo-families" depended entirely on the mythical or ritual context in which they were invoked and with what they justified its "family association", and where the meaning sought was "the unity in and under the diversity".

In the religious Egyptian thought, as recognized by many authors, the triad is generally used as an accurate way of solving the problem of divine plurality *versus* divine unity: "The triad restricts plurality and differentiates unity, as every plural number does"[4]; "«Trois» semble être en même temps une façon de désigner le pluriel"[5]; "«Trois» est la manière la plus simple et donc la plus appréciée d'exprimer «plusieurs» ou le pluriel"[6]; "The number three was an important one signifying plurality – or unity expressed in plurality – for the Egyptians."[7].

This dynamic concept is structurally within the Egyptian religion, with clear impact on development of worship and devotion, however, is not limited, as we shall see, to this aspect. When approaching the subject on the Egyptian divine triad as a formative agent of the Egyptian mythology, there are a number of nuances and operational distinctions that need to be considered in order to achieve a proper definition of the term when applied to ancient Egypt.

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[3] Cf. Hornung, E., *Les dieux de l'Egypte - Le Un et le Multiple*, 199 – 200 ; Wilkinson, R., *The complete gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt*, 75.

[4] Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 80.

[5] Morenz, S., *Op. Cit*, 191.

[6] Hornung, E., *Op. Cit*, 200.

[7] Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit*, 76. See also Wilkinson, R., *Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art,* 131.

So at once, it's the most defining of the notion distinctions that distinguishes two types according to their structure or concept. On one hand, we have the "tritheistic structure"[8], in other words, a family group based on the criteria of fertility, abundance or royal legitimacy/hereditary succession, usually by a god-father, a mother-goddess and a god-son, regardless of when/historical time, regardless of traditions and local divisions, regardless motives, meanings and political and religious implications of the adding of the "third element" (the child-god) to a particular divine couple. The relationship (in many cases, "previous") of the divine couple expresses the binary opposition male/female contained in the triad, made fertile by the inclusion of a child-god. In this constellation of gods are thus present both genders.

On the other hand, the deities are considered grouped according to "modalistic conception", defined by Kákosy as: "a sort of triune conception of deities where the god appears under three aspects or modes without becoming, in fact, three gods. The members reflect three aspect of one reality"[9]. Without a "compulsory" family relationship, the three deities together reflect aspects/ modes of a same reality and are a group based on purely symbolic reasons.

Significantly, in the same theological speculation, an Egyptian deity, due to enrichment of their nature, or assimilation or syncretism, could be integrated into any category of the triad, and perform many roles and attributes at the same time. We can, therefore, find the same divinity fulfilling various functions without disrupting the «message» inherent to the Egyptian triad as a form of organizing the pantheon.

Within the tritheistic structure, the "normal" Egyptian triad (Group I) represents, therefore, three deities family-associated, being the god-father the principal deity, and the god-son (male) the minor, and the other available place being occupied by the mother-goddess[10]. There are several certificated cases within the Egyptian mythology:

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[8] The term is used, among others, by Kákosy. Cf. Kákosy, L., *Op. Cit.*, 48. Te Velde, in turn, uses the term "triadic structure". Cf. Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 80.

[9] Kákosy, L., *Op. Cit.*, 48.

[10] Cf. Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit.*, 2003, 74.

MEMBER CULTIC PLACES	GOD-FATHER	MOTHER-GODDESS	GOD-SON
ABYDOS	Osiris	Isis	Horus
MEMPHIS	Ptah	Sekhmet	Nefertum
KARNAK	Amun	Mut	Khonsu
EDFU	Horus	Hathor	Harsomtus
HERMONTHIS	Montu	Tjenenet	Harpre
BUBASTIS	Atum	Bastet	Horhekenu
MENDES	Banebdjedet	Hatmehyit	Harpakhered
ALEXANDRIA	Sarapis	Isis	Harpakhered
NAG EL-MADAMUD	Montu	Rettawy	Harpakhered
KOM OMBO	Hor Wer	Tasenetnofret	Panebtawy
KOM OMBO	Sobek	Hathor	Khonsu-Hor
-----------	Geb	Renenutet	Neheb-Kau
SAFT EL-HINNA	Sah	Sopdet	Sopedu
NAQA	Apedamak	Isis	Horus
FAYUM	Sobek	Renenutet	Horus
MEMPHIS	Ptah	Hathor	Imhotep

In the vast majority of cases, the main god is male and the third element of the divine family is a god-son. This preference for "male off-spring" may be related to the several mythical stories that emphasize the inheritance and the succession from father to son.

This scheme (pluralistic triads: the family) accepts, however, some variations: at Dendera, in Sais and in Behbeit el-Haggar and Philae, where the main deity is a goddess, although maintaining the presence of a male god-son (Dendera: Hathor-Horus-Ihy; Sais: Neit-Set-Sobek; Behbeit el-Hagar and Philae: Isis-Osiris-Horus). At Elephantine and Esna, the child-god is exceptionally of feminine gender (Elephantine: Khnum-Satis-Anukis; Esna: Khnum-Neit-Satis). Often, as confirmed by several literary and iconographic examples, it is the pharaoh himself who is associated to the divine pair as their «son», forming a triad with a family base which strengthened the religious position of both human and divine members, as well as the «heritages», that only in this way were transmitted and captured[11].

Likewise, the multicultural "triad of sexuality" Qadesh-Reshep-Min (Deir el-Medina), from the Ramesside Period, constituted by a goddess and two male companions (adult males duplication), and the triad of Karnak, Montu-Iunet-Tjenenet or Montu-Tjenenet-Rettawy, a god and two goddesses (adult females duplication), are classified as triads of a tritheistic structure, expressing all the pluralistic totality of the divine.

Within this sub-group of triads of a male god with a pair of goddesses, we can also mention Osiris-Isis-Nephthys, Horus-Isis-Nephthys and Atum-Iussas-Nebethetepet. It is possible, therefore, as Te Velde advocated, in this first category of triads, to distinguish those that combine two gods and a goddess (any triad of Group I) or a god and two goddesses two (for example, the triad of Elephantine or the triads of Karnak mentioned above).

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[11] A paradigmatic example is that of Ramses II: he considered himself the son of Amun and Mut, of Ptah-tatenen and Hathor, of Ptah and Sekhmet, of Ré-Harakhty and Iussas, of Horus of Miam and Isis, of Nefertum and Satis, of Khnum and Anukis. Cf. Sales, J. C., "Recuperação do património arquitectónico: o caso de Abu Simbel" in *Discursos. Língua, Cultura e Sociedade*, 54; Sales, J. C., *Estudos de Egiptologia. Temáticas e Problemáticas*, 177, 204.

The triads of Menkaure (Pharaoh between two deities of the pantheon) can also be included in this sub-group[12].

Aten, the god of Amarna, does not join with other divine figures in the triad, however, sometimes, some authors revealed a certain "obsession" in "producing" a "family" for Aten and thus associated him with Akhenaten and Nefertiti, as a divine special triad (one god plus two humans): the king and the queen praised Aton and the people praised the triad[13]. Others seek to build a triad with Re-Harakhti, Akhenaten and Aten, although without a clear defining of its "family relationships". It is, understandably, an "effort" to match the religion of Amarna with the other major theological Egyptians centers, as Thebes and Heliopolis, where the divine is expressed through these settings in triad[14]. Strictly speaking, based on the Amarnian liturgy and hymnology, we could at most refer to a "diad", due to the profound relationship between Aten and Akhenaten. Even in this case we're talking about a god and a human who masquerades himself as "son of god", and not really about two gods.

To sum up, as stated Wilkinson, the "divine family models clearly did not intimate mere plurality in their three-part structure, but each seems to have symbolized what might be called a unified system, or numerically, a unified plurality"[15].

The triads of the modalistic conception (trinities or tri-units), apart from reflecting aspects of a same reality and constituting a pluralistic completeness consist of three gods or three goddesses, with the absence, in this case, of any sexual differentiation within the divine group. Integrating

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[12] In four statues of schist (greywacke), discovered in 1908, by George Reisner, in the valley temple of the smallest of the three great pyramids of Giza (three of them in the Cairo Museum - JE 40678, JE 40670 and JE 46499 - and the other, representing Hathor in the center, in the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston – 09.200), the pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty emerges as a central figure between the goddess Hathor and other female deity personifying the *nomoi* of ancient Egypt. This grouping of three deified beings, placed at the service of royal ideology, based on the design of support /divine support as ensuring the exercise of power, developed in according with the same symbolism of number three (the unit expressed by plurality).

[13] Cf. Silverman, D., "Divinity and deities in ancient Egypt" in Schafer, B. (ed.) *Religion in ancient Egypt: Gods, myths, and personal practice*, 85; Assmann, J., *The search for God in ancient Egypt*, 107.

[14] Cf. Zabkar, L. V., "The theocracy of Amarna and the doctrine of the ba" in *JNES 13* (1954): 90 - 91.

[15] Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit.*,1994, 133.

this category, for example, are the *bau* of Pe (Buto) and Nekhen (Hierakonpolis)[16], the solar forms Khepri-Re-Atum (Heliopolis)[17], Ptah-Sokar-Osiris (Memphis)[18], Amun-Re, Re-Harakhti and Ptah (Abu Simbel) [19], the Three Khonsu of Thebes (Khonsu Neferhotep-Khonsu Wennekhu-Khonsu Pairsekhet)[20] or Horus of Miam-Horus of Baki-Horus of Buhen (Abu Simbel)[21].

We are always in the presence of a sub-category of three male deities[22]. The goddesses Qadesh-Astarte-Anat (Deir el-Medina), three of the most

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[16] The *bau* of Pe (capital of the Delta kingdom) are represented as three falcon-headed gods and the *bau* of Nekhen (ancient capital of Upper Egypt) with three jackal-headed Gods. In both cases, they are male deities who symbolized the predynastic rulers of the two regions and were regarded as powerful spirits or deities who served the deceased kings and who also assisted the living kings. Cf. Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit.*, 2003, 89 - 90.

[17] The solar triad of Heliopolis represents the modes or aspects of the sun during the day: Khepri (beetle or hybrid figure with the head of a beetle) representing the morning sun; Re, the solar disk, the physical presence of the Sun of noon; Atum (as an elder or as a hybrid figure with a ram's head) representing the sun of late afternoon. The three moments of the existence of star-king (the tri-unity of the sun gods) expresses theologically the unity of the sun itself. Cf. Assmann, J., *Op. Cit.*, 107.

[18] The composed form of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris brought together three deities who watched over the welfare and safety of the deceased in the afterlife, and therefore can be regarded as a funerary deity that ensured the regeneration/renaissance/recreating the dead. The triad represents the three facets of existence itself: creation (Ptah), the death (Sokar) and the resurrection (Osiris). Cf. Morenz, S., *Op. Cit.*, 191; Traunecker, Cl., *Op. Cit.*, 67 - 68; Sales, J. C., *Op. Cit.*, 1999, 347.

[19] The three gods sculpturally represented in the sanctuary of Grand Temple of Abu Simbel (a triad of major male gods) are a unity, as representing the essential action of the different and various gods of the Egyptian empire at the time of Ramses II. Cf. Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 81; Peters-Destéract, M., *Abou Simbel. À la gloire de Ramsès*, 227. As said in the Hymn to Amun of Leiden in a significant theological formulation: *"Three are all gods: Amun, Re and Ptah. There is no one comparable with them. He who conceals his name is Amun (…); he is Re in countenance; his body is Ptah"* (Hymn to Amun of Leiden, Chapter 300 – Cf. Barucq, A., Daumas, F., *Hymnes et Prières de l'Égypte Ancienne*, 224). It cannot be a coincidence that this verse of the Hymn to Amun, which explores the great importance of the number 3, has the number «300». The entire pantheon is restricted to the triad, as if it were a single god. Morenz, after Gardiner, draws attention to the tension/dialectic between the singular and the plural, "the trinity as a unity". The exact expression of Gardiner was "Amon, Re and Ptah, the three principal Gods of the Ramesside time, are represented as a trinity in a unity". Gardiner, A. H., "Hymns to Amon from a Leiden Papyrus" in *ZÄS 42* (1905): 36; Morenz, S., *Op. Cit.*, 193.

[20] Cf. Hart, G., *A dictionary of Egyptian gods and goddesses*, 113.

[21] The three forms of Horus represented the three major regions of Nubia or if we prefer three local forms or aspects of one god (Horus). At the time of Horemheb, this triad will join a fourth figure: the Horus of Meha, then forming the tetrad of Nubia. Cf. Desroches-Noblecourt, C., *Le secret des temples de la Nubie*, 59, 165.

[22] To this group we could still add up the triads Amun-Re-Montu, Amun-Re-Harakhty, Amun-Re-Atum, Re-Harakhty-Osiris and Re-Harakhty-Atum-Osíris. Cf. Griffiths, J. G., *Op. Cit.*, 29.

important goddesses of western Asia, integrate the sub-group of three fe-
male deities[23].

The divine groups of trinities or tri-units are thus subject to the same
idea of plurality or unity associated with the number three, and may also
consist of three deities with heads of sheep, lion, man, crocodile and wild
dog. God Anupu/Anubis, for instance, can be represented three times just
to emphasize the idea of plurality.

In Egyptian mythology, the symbolism of the number three can also
assume the role of a sign of tension, opposition, challenge or permanent
crisis. The most significant and well known example is the game of an-
tithesis and conflict dynamics subjacent to deities like Isis, Set and Horus,
under the myth of Osiris[24]. Isis plays the role of the divine and protective
mother of the defenseless child-god Horus from the constant attacks of
the brutal monster Set. This divine triangle, besides giving coherence to
the whole mythic narrative, allows it to evolve to an overcoming and unifi-
cation closure. The three deities work as a whole representation of the plu-
rality of motivations, pathways, and destinies.

The same, as a matter of fact, can be stipulated to the «special» trinity
consisted by Osiris and his two sisters Isis (also his wife) and Nephthys
(also his lover), to which we referred earlier. This tripartite unit acts in the
myths in favor of a larger future unit, either in the physical-earthly-
historical (production of a successor son, Horus, the incarnation of all the
ruling pharaohs) and in a metaphysical level/ of the underworld/ of the
metahistoric (production of a son generator of life beyond the grave,
Anupu/Anubis, who will allow to his father to enter and dominate in a
different space-time dimension). The "proximity" of the sisters will make
them a double entity omnipresent in literature and iconography as always,
having as always their male partner Osiris as a "referring aggregator".

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[23] This triad, later integrated the Egyptian pantheon (XVIII Dynasty) and whose deities originated in the region
of Syria-Phoenicia-Palestine, had never been associated in triad, symbolizes aspects (eroticism, sexual pleasure
and fertility) of a same phenomenon: sexuality. See also Edwards, I.E.S., "A Relief of Qudshu-Astarte-Anath in
the Winchester College Collection" in *JNES 14* (1955): 51.
[24] Cf. Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit.*, 1994, 133.

The same goddesses, acting inseparably, since the magical conception to the sustaining of life, for the sake of the "political legacy" of the god-son Horus constitute with him a "triad family", intended to reaffirm the genealogical line of fertility, order, legitimacy and succession.

While the categories of the tritheistic structure represent the divine unity through diversity (plural differentiation of unity), the three divinities of the modalistic conception are three ways of being and manifest the same divine power and thereby reduce the plurality of unit (restriction of plurality). The triad is, therefore, a theological formulation that allows the changing of the unit to the plurality and vice versa: "By way of the triad, plurality moves to unity here, and vice versa"[25].

Perhaps the most striking example of this mechanism is constituted by the triad Atum-Shu-Tefnut that includes the sun, the air and the moisture, and the life forces that exist in the "vacant space" of the universe before creation[26]. In the first mythical world, the "one" ("I was in the Primeval Waters, he who had no companion when my name came into existence"[27]; "I am he who created for the One God before the twin affairs appeared in the world (…) while he was still alone (…)"[28]; "All things were mine when I was alone"[29]) quickly become the "three":

> "[Shu says:] I am life, the Lord of years, living for ever, Lord
> of eternity, the eldest one that Atum made in his "glory", in
> giving birth to Shu and Tefnut in Heliopolis, when he was one
> and became three"[30];

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[25] Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 81.

[26] The Chapter 115 of the *Book of the Dead*, naturally in a funerary context, calls the triad of Heliopolis "the *bau* of Heliopolis": *"I know the bau of Heliopolis, is Re, Shu and Tefnut"*. In this text, Re takes the place of Atum. *Bau* is the plural form of *ba*, commonly translated as "soul" of the deceased. However, here the term should be understood as "forces". Cf. Bickel, S., Gabolde, M., Tallet, P., "Des annales héliopolitaines de la Troisième Période Inter-médiaire" in *BIFAO 98* (1998) : 43, footnote 27.

[27] *CT* 714.

[28] *CT* IV, 261.

[29] *BD* 17.

[30] *CT* 80.

> "Atum is one who came into being as masturbator in Heliopolis. He put his phallus in his grasp, he made an orgasm in it (and) the two siblings were born, Shu and Tefnut"[31].

"When he was one and became three" - *m wn.f wˁ m ḫpr.f m ḥmt* - it's a direct reference to the problem of gearing down the divine unity. The unity of self-created being (Atum/ Re) evolves quickly to "original duality" – Atum on one side, and the first divine couple on the other. The numerical classification of base 2 (the divine couple) is viewed as a sexual-arithmetic gearing down and a progressive differentiation of the vibrant and dynamic original unit focused on the lonely demiurge[32]. It has moved from a unitary scheme "1 + 0" for a triad "1 + 2".

The "peculiar triad"[33], according with the fact that is made like no other Egyptian triad, being exceptionally composed by a god-father and "two children" (*ṯ3tí*), one masculine and one female[34]. It is the only case in which a triad contains more than a divine child. Rightful heirs of their father, the two children meet the principle of cyclic regeneration, theoretically reserved to the god-son in the triads, and so manifest the active power of the god-father Atum (the god who came to create all existence). There isn't, however, a deity who plays the role of binary opposition to sexual demiurge[35]. As cosmic gods symbolizing air/moisture, they equally meet the role and functions sustainers of life and providers of food that traditional child-gods assume in Egyptian mythology.

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[31] *PT* 1248.

[32] Cf. Sales, J. C., *Op. Cit.*, 2007,171.

[33] Siegfried Morenz calls to the triad Atum-Shu-Tefnut "une trinité du devenir" ("eine Trinität des Werdens") or "trinité par emanation". Cf. Morenz, S., *Op. Cit.*, 195 - 197. Te Velde sees it as a 'special case' within the Egyptian triads. Cf. Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 83. And Englund "a creative unit". Cf. Englund, G., "God as a frame of reference. On thinking and concepts of thought in Ancient Egypt" in Englund, G. (ed.), *The religion of ancient Egyptians – cognitive structures and popular expressions*, 11.

[34] Sometimes, Shu and Tefnut appear in identical iconography and in the Graeco-Egyptian sculpture she is the "sister" of the god-child, Shu. Cf. Budde, D., "Child Deities" in Dieleman J., Wendrich, W. (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 2.

[35] This binary opposition male-female only come in Heliopolis with the deification of "hand masturbator 'as Iusaas. Cf. Clark, R. T. R., *Myth and symbol in ancient Egypt*, 53; Sales, J. C., *Op. Cit.*, 1999, 96.

In the theological conception of Heliopolis, the solitary divinity of the pre-cosmos, Atum, gathered the masculine and feminine qualities, which then expanded to create the first cosmic-divine couple. The dual nature of the original demiurge (bisexual) is implicit in the passage of CT I, 161, that puts the following words into the mouth of Atum:

> "I am Atum, the creator of the Eldest Gods, I am he who gave birth to Shu, I am that Great He-She".

Shu and Tefnut had the same characters of the father Atum (male and female), and in that sense, were developments of the original and unique Atum, from the beginning of times; were the manifestation of the existing duality in unity, through the separation of sexual gender[36]. The monologue of the creator is emphatic and persuasive:

> "Atum said: this is my daughter, the living female one, Tefnut, who shall be with her brother Shu. Life is his name; Order (Maat) is her name."[37]

The trinitarian dimension of the demiurge means that the "one" and "only" came to have a family (Shu and Tefnut are consubstantial) being accompanied, but not affecting this multiplicity, however, the fundamental unity and the sexual and energetic superiority of the creator: he alone could create the first divine couple; the twin-brothers born directly from the father needed one another to demonstrate their potential as creators.

It will never be possible to return to the primordial unity. The primordial monotheism or henotheism evolved into a tri-theism, the preceding stage to the polytheism[38]. Through the process hierogamy, one Great En-

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[36] Cf. Clark, R. T. R., *Op. Cit.*, 80; Servajean, F., «À propos du temps (*neheh*) dans quelques textes du Moyen Empire» in *ENIM 1* (2008) : 3; Bickel, S., *La Cosmogonie Égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, 168; Meeks, D., Favard-Meeks, C., *La vie quotidienne des dieux en Egypte*, 148 - 149.

[37] *TS* 80. Cf. Bickel, S., *Op. Cit.*, 1994, 44.

[38] Cf. Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 80.

nead (**Ps*ḏ*t-wrt**) developed in Heliopolis, from the triad Atum-Shu-Tefnut.[39]

Also at Memphis, Shu and Tefnut are associated to Ptah, as their *bau*, forming a triad that, in Kákosy's opinion, "displays traits of both the modalistic and triheistic triads and (…) represent an intermediary form of the two."[40] The triad Ptah-Shu-Tefnut, with the gods of the second generation of the Heliopolitan Ennead associated in Memphis as aspects (or consorts) of Ptah, "illustrate also the amalgamation of two theological concepts."[41]

Final remarks

The Egyptian gods (*netjeru*) do not reveal themselves, so, to grasp their nature, attributes, experiences and historical performance, it is necessary to understand the human theoretical constructions developed around them (the so called «langage d'abstraction») and in this sense it is undisputed that the "plural becomes a unit" associated to a triad as a method of ordering the pantheon, was a process used to correlate deities and to convey and emphasize their functions. In this sense, the divine triad addresses the issue of tension between the empirical multiplicity and unity of the divine pantheon.[42]

The analysis of the structural arrangements of Egyptian religious thought, regarding the establishment of various types of groups of three gods of the Egyptian pantheon ("tritheistic structure" and "modalistic con-

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[39] In the case of the Ennead of Heliopolis, the «ennead» had nine gods (though with some variations as to its members), but not always a "ennead" consisted of nine gods. In Abydos, including seven Gods; at Karnak, fifteen. The important thing is not the set number of gods, but their indefinite plurality. The *pesedjet* is the final expression of plurality. Cf. Te Velde, H., *Op. Cit.*, 82; Bilolo, M., *Les cosmo-theologiues philosophiques d'Heliopolis et d'Hermopolis. Essai de thématisation et de systématisation*, 48; Troy, L., « The Ennead: the collective as goddess. A commentary on textual personification" in Englund, G. (ed.), *The religion of the ancient Egyptians – cognitive structures and popular expressions*, 59; Traunecker, Cl. *Op. Cit.*, 68; Wilkinson, R., *Op. Cit.,* 2003, 78 - 79; Sales, J. C., *Op. Cit.,* 2007, 183, 206.

[40] Kákosy, L., *Op. Cit.*, 53.

[41] *Ibidem*.

[42] Cf. Morenz, S., *Op. Cit.*, 191.

conception") throughout the several historical epochs shows that underpinning these ordinations is strongly dialectical polytheists and the intention is to express the essence of the divine. We could say more: the triad is no doubt the more effective social and cultural way of stating this notion.

Sometimes, as a mythological concept, the triad is a "symbol", namely, "the manifestation of a human attempt to make an element of the divine world conceivable in human terms, that is, in terms of logic and sensuous perception, although these do not necessarily conform with the laws of nature"[43]. Even for the modern scholar, who is more comfortable speaking of "God" than the "gods", "apparent contradictions and inconsistencies" arise in the internal workings of the Egyptian triads, and one must understand that the "diversity of approaches and explanations", including symbolic, are a fundamental psychological principle of the Egyptian religious thought.[44]

Defining the nature of the Egyptian gods and penetrating the core of beliefs and rituals of the ancient Egyptians is, therefore, a delicate and kaleidoscopic matter. But, from the standpoint of religious thought, that is precisely the essential point which justifies the formulation - and study – of the Egyptian divine triads.

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[43] Anthes, R., "Mythology in Ancient Egypt" in *Mythologies of Ancient World*, 23.

[44] Cf. Derchain, P., « La religion égyptienne» in *Histoire des Religions*, I, 75. As the same author writes, "Dans une civilisation évoluée comme la civilisation égyptienne, la notion du divin peut avoir pris des caractères propres, proches d'autres conceptions évoluées, sans pourtant s'identifier nécessairement avec elles." *Ibidem*, 78.

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