



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Comparing images, bodies, and ontologies in ancient Egypt and in Egyptology

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## Abstract

Anthropological concepts of lateral and frontal comparison are used to examine how and why both ancient Egyptians and Egyptologists make comparisons when discussing ancient Egyptian religion, as well as what it is they compare. The case studies used in the article centre on relationships between images and bodies. These relationships are based in different ontologies and are structured by different discursive frameworks. Conceiving image and body as intensities rather than categories suggests ways in which Egyptology may engage more closely with anthropological frameworks and perhaps help to refine them.

**Keywords:** analogism, animism, comparison, ontology, religion

مقارنة الصور والأجساد والأنطولوجيات في مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات

الملخص

تُستخدم المفاهيم الأنثروبولوجية للمقارنة الجانبية والامامية لفحص كيف ولماذا يقوم كل من المصريين القدماء وعلماء المصريات بإجراء المقارنات عند عن الديانة المصرية القديمة، وكذلك مع التركيز على ما الذي يتم مقارنته. تعمل دراسات الحالة المستخدمة في المقال على التركيز على العلاقات بين الصور والأجساد. حيث تستند هذه العلاقات التي ينصب التركيز عليها إلى أنطولوجيات مختلفة إذ يتم تشكيلها وفقاً لإطارات منطقية متنوعة. إدراك الصورة والجسد على أنهما كثافات بدلاً من مجرد فئات، هو النهج الذي يُقترح كطريقة يمكن لعلم المصريات من خلالها التفاعل بصورة وثيقة مع الإطارات الأنثروبولوجية وربما يساعد في تحسينها.

الكلمات الدالة التشبيه، الروحانية، المقارنة، الأنطولوجيا، الدين

## 1 Introduction

Comparison is a method central to ancient Egyptian religious discourse and to Egyptologists' engagement with it, but in those two different contexts it is based on different principles and rooted in different discursive frameworks. By highlighting parallels and contrasts between Egyptological and ancient Egyptian practices of comparison, I consider how Egyptology may become aligned more closely with interdisciplinary approaches and thus introduce ancient Egyptian data more strongly into wider debates.

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Questions of ontology—what things exist and how they relate to one another, in various cultures around the world—have become major topics of research in anthropology and archaeology. They have also been addressed in Egyptological research over the past decade (e.g. [LUCARELLI](#), 2023; [MATIĆ](#), 2018; [NYORD](#), 2020b). They offer a good basis for exploring issues of comparative method. My point of departure in this article is the four-part scheme of ontologies developed by the anthropologist Philippe [DESCOLA](#) (2013a: see below). Ancient Egyptian and Egyptological treatments of bodies and images can be analysed productively through it, although Descola's parameters were not designed for ancient materials and do not capture the full range of ancient understandings.

First, I examine the roles played by frontal and lateral comparison in Egyptological studies of images and bodies. According to Matei Candea, frontal comparisons are those where the perspective of the scholar is 'one of the terms of the comparison'. In Egyptology, the terms foreign to the analyst are in the ancient sources. Lateral comparisons take two different foreign cases and place them side by side, framing them with the scholar's own perspective ([CANDEA](#), 2019: 349). I then consider how similar kinds of comparison were central to knowledge production in ancient Egyptian religion. Ancient Egyptian comparisons are represented in verbal expressions, visual configurations, and material practices. Examples include composite forms of divine beings, fusions of divine names, and practices surrounding statues and other sacred items. Examples may be characterised as 'image-bodies', a term that brings out gradations of subjectivity, a 'controlled equivocation' which holds the tension between emic and etic terms in view ([VIVEIROS DE CASTRO](#), 2004). A brief discussion of the Egyptian words *ḥꜣt* and *sšmw* in one religious text helps to illustrate the point. By focusing on that tension, I hope to highlight the different functions of comparison in Egyptian religion and Egyptological interpretations of it, as well as to outline the discursive frames in which these comparisons operate.

I limit my discussion to sources produced by and for restricted groups of literate elites. Non-elite contexts are harder to access; conventions probably differed at the interfaces of institutions and social groups ([BUSSMANN](#), 2016; [HARRIS & ROBB](#), 2012: 670). My examples cluster in the second millennium BCE, with some outliers from other periods. The selection reveals the range of approaches even among ancient elites ([MESKELL](#), 2004: 143–146), and consequently a potential for fine-tuning the anthropological models which underpinned frontal comparison of ancient and modern practices in the first place.

## 2 Terms of Egyptological comparisons

Through a synthesis of ethnographies spanning the Arctic to Australia, Descola proposed that every human society is structured around one of four modes for identifying and interrelating beings in the world: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. Modes are distinguished by features of interiority and physicality. Interiority designates immaterial aspects of consciousness, will, and spirit; physicality refers to the envelopes, from flesh to stone, each of which has specific sensory and material affordances, that encase interiority. For animists, similar interiorities are distributed across dissimilar physicalities; for totemists, similar interiorities connect with similar physicalities; naturalists claim that interiorities differ despite the physical similarity of all things; and analogists discern an innumerable range of interiorities from correspondingly diverse physicalities ([DESCOLA](#), 2013a: fig.1). I treat naturalism, analogism, and animism in this article, omitting totemism.

For the most part, Egyptological research into these topics is not overtly theorised. Organic flesh and tissue are at the heart of research into ancient Egyptian bodies and their cultural associations, from surveys of anatomical terms and studies of lineage and kinship (e.g. [WALKER](#), 1996) to histories of Egyptian mummification and its reception ([RIGGS](#), 2014; [STIENNE](#), 2022). Behind this focus lies a naturalist ontology that underpins Western intellectual history. Naturalism characterises humanity by its 'reflective consciousness, subjectivity, an ability to signify, and mastery over symbols and the language by means of which [humans] express those faculties'. Such interiorities are held to be absent from nonhuman elements of 'nature' such as animals, plants, rocks, and manufactured things, despite their shared atomic substance with humans. Naturalism's dichotomy between physical body and immaterial interiority 'objectivises physicality' and 'subjectivises

interiority’ (citations from **DESCOLA**, 2013a: 173–174, 188–189). Only humans can be subjects, because only they have mind or consciousness—a state of affairs that conditions how living humans relate to other elements in the world, from dead humans to animals, plants, and minerals. Subjects and objects were often conceptualised differently in ancient Egypt.

Growing numbers of theoretically-minded studies in Egyptology address such issues, outlining a broadly analogistic ontology for Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Graeco-Roman period and in many spheres of social and cultural life (**BRÉMONT**, 2018; **NYORD**, 2020b). Analogism ‘divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions and sometimes arranged on a graduated scale’ (**DESCOLA**, 2013a: 201). Analogistic ontologies are found worldwide and across time, for example in the ‘great chain of being’ of medieval and Renaissance European thought (**DESCOLA**, 2013a: 202–207).

To reconcile analogism with a focus on the ancient Egyptian body as the seat of subjectivity and nexus of social relations, Egyptologists have widened their net and identified as bodies things that are often classed in Western terms as images. Many are characterised in ancient sources as autonomous subjects with *bꜣ* (‘spirit’) and *ḥ* (‘power’) of their own (**FROOD**, 2019; **NYORD**, 2020b). Some shabti figurines deposited in graves alongside organic bodies were additional bodies through which the deceased could perform required labour in the afterlife (**NYORD**, 2017: 341–349). In this way, they are comparable with some larger statues, shown performing various actions, that were set up in places such as temple courtyards to enact lasting participation in religious activity; texts inscribed on them call them shabtis as well (**FROOD**, 2023: 164).

Frontal comparisons underpin such analyses in Egyptology, where Egyptian words and concepts are translated in various ways to bring out contextual nuances. Frontal comparisons are often supported through lateral comparisons with other cultures. For example, Egyptologists have noted parallels between Egyptian and Mesopotamian understandings of statues (e.g. **NYORD**, 2020b: 27–28), citing the work of the Near Eastern art historian Zainab Bahrani, who has herself drawn the comparison in the opposite direction (**BAHRANI**, 2014: 145–172). Lateral comparisons strengthen one another. Aggregating them fosters networks of relations through which finer translations may be made, ideally to triangulate a foreign concept’s ‘hidden centre, toward which all relevant statements point from their respective directions, and in which everything thus coheres’ (**BONNET**, 1999: 183).

This method assumes that frontal comparison occurs between commensurable discursive frames, and that the terms compared are stable. Neither criterion is necessarily valid. Valuable analyses that engage with anthropology and art history may miss the mark by treating images and bodies as partially overlapping but still bounded conceptual categories grounded in relations of representationalism, form, and substance (e.g. **MESKELL**, 2004; **MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003). In such a framework, images are divorced from, and usually subordinated to, the ‘real’ things they depict. Ancient Egyptian examples suggest otherwise. In the cosmographic treatise known as the *Amduat*, the sun-god announces his entry to the underworld, declaring, ‘I have come here to see my corpses (*ḥꜣwt*) and to inspect my *sšmw*-images which are in the underworld’ (*jy.nꜣj ꜣꜣ mꜣꜣ ḥꜣwtꜣj sꜣꜣꜣ sšmwꜣj jm(w) dwtꜣ*; Hornung 1987–1994 [i]: 332–333).<sup>1</sup> Both *ḥꜣwt* and *sšmw* may refer to pictures drawn on a manuscript or on a tomb wall that represent figures from an underworld realm (**HOFFMANN**, 1996). However, in another passage, the treatise states that ‘these reproductions are the equivalent of the great god himself’ (*nw n sntyw mjty ntr ꜣꜣ dsꜣf*; Hornung 1987–1994 [i]: 170–171). Just as the ritual actions of Egyptian kings identify them as more-than-human actors (**BAINES**, 2021; **HORNUNG**, 1967: 131), boundaries between image and body are partially dissolved in the *Amduat*. The drawings are *ḥꜣt* (‘corpses’) at the same time as they are man-made things. The relation also runs in the opposite direction: in the early second millennium, shabti figurines which extended the presence of a person through time and space (see above) were designated *sšmw* (**NYORD**, 2017: 342). The subjectivity of drawn and sculpted figures ‘is of the same nature as that of humans’, even if it has different physical locations and comes into existence through different processes

<sup>1</sup>Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

(DESCOLA, 2013a: 188).

One may speak of assorted beings as possessing agency comparable with, and perhaps more powerful than, that of humans. ‘Metaperson’, as introduced by the anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, is a useful designation of such beings because it acknowledges human sensory experience and social life as the essential yardstick for subjectivity (SAHLINS, 2022: 70–123). Within this framework, image and body are better understood as intensities. By intensities, I mean intrinsic potentials that are actualised to different extents depending on how particular things relate to other things: how much of a mountain is this specific mountain, and how does it compare with other rocky massifs around it? How divine is the king, and which properties of divinity result in his degree of godliness (CANDEA, 2018: 227)? As intensities, image and body may be approached in terms of function, setting, and visual and material features. Since the English word ‘image’ refers to many different things—a pencil sketch, a marble sculpture, an architectural blueprint, a group of pixels on a screen—any two of which may ultimately share no feature (CANDEA, 2018: 37–38), thinking in terms of intensities facilitates comparisons between ancient Egyptian terminology and the mostly Western vocabulary of Egyptologists. As I discuss below, a metaperson could be more image than body, or more body than image, and these weightings could shift.

### 3 Structures and bases of ancient Egyptian comparisons

I now build a frontal comparison between ancient Egyptian and Egyptological framings of the relationships between images and bodies in religious contexts. When thinking about the range and relations of metapersons in the world, ancient Egyptians made comparisons that are structurally homologous with anthropologists’ lateral and frontal comparisons. To avoid equating emic approaches with etic methods, I refrain from simply terming the Egyptian practices lateral or frontal comparisons. They do not involve perspectives outside Egyptian culture (brief discussion in section 4, below).

The comparisons work along axes of ‘image-ness’ and ‘body-ness’. Just as members of a kin group may be connected not by logical relations but by lived practice of kinship (DESCOLA, 2013a: 112–115; OLABARRIA, 2020: 76), the degree to which something is an image or a body is based on what it does. The examples discussed below indicate that neither image nor body is a ‘stable state’ of being (CANDEA, 2018: 236) The body of a given metaperson can be very much an image, but for another metaperson an intense image status may be associated with, but not necessarily be the reason for, a lack of body status. Useful entry points to these relationships are depictions of deities in composite figural form, the fusion of divine names, and materials or items considered to be manifestations of metapersons. These represent a shared “‘language” of religious meaning’ (BAINES, 1999: 205).

Descola cautions that his four-part scheme of ontologies is not intended to be prescriptive: people often make ‘different kinds of inference about the identities of beings in the world’ (DESCOLA, 2014: 277). Some modern Westerners trust in analogistic horoscopes, and most would not let naturalism overshadow enjoyment of fictional stories about anthropomorphised animals. In the ancient Egyptian case, evidence speaks to an ontology between analogism and animism. Animism involves attributing human-like interiority to nonhumans such as other animals and plants. However, ‘this humanization is not complete, since in animist systems these, as it were, humans in disguise (i.e. the plants and animals) are distinct from humans precisely by reason of their outward apparel of feathers, fur, scales, or bark—in other words, their physicality’ (DESCOLA, 2013a: 129). The affordances of different physicalities constrain interaction between types of metaperson. Animists consider many types of metapersons to have similar interiorities, but analogists accept that interiorities can be very different. I suggest that ancient Egyptian ontology has properties similar to perspectivism, a kind of animism identified in some Amerindian collectives (see below).



Fig. 1: Scene from a magical papyrus, depicting a pantheistic Bes and the solar god as a serpent with attached human limbs, possibly from Elephantine. 664–525 BCE. Brooklyn Museum 47.218.156a-d. Bequest of Theodora Wilbour from the collection of her father, Charles Edwin Wilbour. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum (Public Domain). <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/60794>.

### 3.1 Comparisons within analogism

Visual representations of ancient Egyptian comparisons include composite figures, which amalgamate two or more things or elements of things—often the body parts of humans and animals, but sometimes also inanimate objects—to create a single entity that combines the associations of its components (overview of global traditions: [DESCOLA](#), 2021: 303–331). The most common configurations combine animal head and human body or vice versa; others include zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures with added limbs or wings, as well as multi-headed forms often termed ‘pantheistic’ or ‘polymorphic’ (Figure 1; [FIRST](#), 2014).

The diversity of composite figures raises two interrelated issues: the stability and ranking of ancient Egyptian terms; and the dynamics of interiority and physicality in a context where image and body potentials are fluid. Do pantheistic figures have many ‘heads’, as they are typically understood, or do they rather possess a single, complex top usually rendered as a human or animal head and sometimes as an inanimate object? Support for the latter interpretation may come from an apotropaic text inscribed on the sarcophagus lid of the Dynasty 26 official Menekhibnekau at Abusir, which refers to the top part (*tp*) of a god as bearing numerous faces (*hrw*):

*tp pw nn n r ntt hr hr(w) 7*  
*j rmt ntr[w 3hw mwtw] hmwt-r jm=tn shm tp pw n r ntt hr hrw 7*

This is the top part of Re, which bears seven faces. O humans, god[s], [transfigured spirits and condemned dead], et cetera, may you not have power over this top part of Re which bears seven faces! ([LANDGRÁFOVÁ](#) et al., 2022: 11, translation mine, following their restoration of the lacuna).

Dynamics of interiority and physicality are similarly uncertain for a statue of Hathor(s), possibly of Ramessid date, which assembles figures of cow, lioness, seated woman with bovid ears, and human-headed cobra (see for example the statue of Hathor in four forms, from Deir el-Medina in the Musée du Louvre (E26023 [↗](#)); [VANDIER](#), 1969). Does Hathor, as the statue, have one complex body and one corresponding interiority? Does she have four interiorities that change between contexts, or which may coexist ([GOEBS & BAINES](#), 2018: 648)? Or does the statue bring together bodies for four Hathor-beings, each with their own distinct interiority? The last interpretation may be supported by mentions of the ‘seven Hathors’ who assign human destinies, depicted one by one and described in ritual and literary texts from the New Kingdom on-

wards (**SPIESER**, 2011: 75–77) (e.g. *Tale of the Doomed Prince*: P. D’Orbiney = British Museum EA 10183,9, 8–9 **GARDINER**, 1932), and more indirectly from the genre of ritual text termed the ‘divinisation of body parts’, where deities are incorporated as parts of humans or other gods (**NYORD**, 2009: 510–523; **TARASENKO**, 2020).

Other possibilities are illustrated by ancient verbal comparisons. These include the fusion of divine names such as Amun-Re or Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. Stephen Quirke’s use of ‘fusion’ relates specifically to names; the entities involved continue to exist separately (**QUIRKE**, 2015: 33–34). Egyptologists describe the phenomenon as ‘syncretism’, a specialised usage distinct from its more common reference to the mixing of religions (**CLACK**, 2011). Hans Bonnet understood fused names as marking the temporary and dissoluble indwelling or inhabiting (*Einwohnung*) of one god by another, similar to their indwelling of cult images (**BONNET**, 1999: 189; for indwelling, see, e.g. **ASSMANN**, 2003). His interpretation was echoed, though not much cited, in later studies of Egyptian religion (**BAINES**, 1999), not least through the work of Erik Hornung who explored its implications and elaborated a brief typology in his *Conceptions of god in ancient Egypt* (**HORNUNG**, 1982: 91–92).

The concept of indwelling claims that transcendent beings suffused inert representations. It was developed in an era of Egyptology which was heavily structured by Judaeo-Christian beliefs (**NYORD**, 2025), and its central claim fits that framework well. Although indwelling aptly characterises some late religious contexts, as when Graeco-Roman temple inscriptions describe how cult statues were brought out of dim crypts to ‘merge with the sun-disc’ on the roof (*hnm jtn*: **RICKERT**, 2019; **WAITKUS**, 1995), evidence from earlier periods is scant. The early second millennium *Instruction for Merikare* simply equates processional images with divine bodies:

*trꜣtw nꜣr hr wꜣtꜣfjr.w m ꜣt ms.w m hmt*

One should show respect to a god on his path, whether he is made of precious stone or fashioned from metal (**HELCK**, 1977: 77–78; **QUACK**, 1992: 74–76).

Fused names identify metapersons through comparison with others. Each deity possesses a set of qualities or relations. Since the same divine force could be encountered through many, often recurrent, forms, fused names represent not the merger of entities but the linking of associations, even though the resulting bundle is conceived as a discrete subject (**SILVERMAN**, 1991: 17–18; **ZIVIE-COCHE**, 2019: 32). When defining the scope of a god encountered in a particular context and involved in certain relations, ancient Egyptians compared the scope with existing conceptions. The name Re-Atum represents a bundle of qualities summing up and perhaps going beyond those defining Re and Atum individually that can also enter into further relations, as with more complex names such as Re-Horakhty-Atum. More elaborate representations of such relationships occur in the Roman-period temple at Esna, in which the names of the closely-linked pairs Neith and Tatenen or Khnum and Menhyt are sometimes written as anadromes, where the spelling of one deity’s name may be read in reverse as the name of the other (**KLOTZ**, 2023: 138–144). The gods were not impersonal abstractions; they were venerated as beings who exerted tangible effects on people’s lives. However, fusions of divine names, along with the creation of divine genealogies and family groups, helped to organise the gods’ properties and relations into workable units. In this way, ancient Egyptian practices run parallel to anthropological ones, where a concept, say mana or, for Egyptology, ‘Atum-ness’, is ‘sharpened to a conceptual point, without ever being “abstracted” into general comparative categories’ (**CANDEA**, 2018: 232)

Related visual practices include ‘analytic personifications’ in iconography. These are instances where an entity such as *jmntt* ‘west’ substitutes for a goddess who plays the role of ‘west’, usually Hathor or Isis. Thus, ‘syncretism involves grouping with a superior or parallel being, the second element in a syncretistic pair, and [analytic] personification with an inferior one whose claims to separate existence are slight’ (**BAINES**, 1985: 26–27). Bonnet prefigured this understanding of relations, noting that ‘absorption and syncretistic union lie along the same path of development. The distinction between them is one of degree and can become less marked’ (**BONNET**, 1999: 189). Name fusion occurs across horizontal relations—though not quite

equal ones, since the second term is usually but not always higher in status than the first—and analytic personification through vertical relations.

A prominent exception to fused name formulas connects with issues of interpretation exemplified by the Louvre statue of Hathor(s). The union of the sun-god and Osiris in the night extends the bodily metaphor of indwelling by likening the sun-god to the *bʿ* and Osiris to the corpse (HORNUNG, 1982: 96; HORNUNG, 1992: 107–110). The resultant being is not termed ‘Re-Osiris’, but *dbʿ-dmḏ*, which may be translated as ‘composite whole’ to capture its sense of total, albeit transitory, integration. Iconographic representations bring together attributes of its constituents (TARASENKO, 2006). In Descola’s terms, it seems that a single physicality encloses a double interiority, rather than two interiorities temporarily merging into a single metaperson. A variant form, *bʿ-dmḏ* ‘composite *bʿ*’, is addressed in the plural and occurs alongside deities with more common fused name formulas, such as Re-Horakhty, that are not described as having more than one *bʿ* (‘spirit’) (SMITH, 2017: 302–303, with n. 192). Whereas fused names and anadromes explicitly define entities in relation to others, (*d*)*bʿ-dmḏ* eschews reference to its constituents and thus offers an unusual level of abstraction.

Analogism underlies these comparisons, which exemplify an ancient Egyptian discursive framework for articulating image–body relations. As exemplified by the Louvre statue of Hathor(s) and the union of Re and Osiris, the body is a container for powers or qualities (NYORD, 2009: 487–488 and *passim*: references in religious texts). Those qualities were not worded abstractly, but brought out through use of parallel terms, which are the names of gods. Evident in all cases is a process of capturing ideas from tangles of relations and combining them to create entities that are primed for further interrelations (CANDEA, 2018: 229).

### 3.2 Comparisons approaching animism

Analogism is evident in ancient Egyptian approaches to materiality and sensorial experience, where features of an animist ontology are also frequently present. Ancient Egyptians who viewed and manipulated sacred items understood them to possess subjectivity similar to that of living humans. Comparisons between human and nonhuman interiorities have the character of frontal comparisons employed by anthropologists.

The potential of something to be a body could be glimpsed in shape and appearance, and it could be intensified or weakened through human handiwork or contact with powerful substances. Jasper pebbles and flint nodules were identified as manifestations of deities because they looked like sacred animals or embalmed bodies, while the fivefold symmetry of urchin shells resembles the star hieroglyph, which had divine associations (VON LIEVEN, 2013; 2016; on pareidolia more generally, see ROGNER, 2020). Comparable transformations could be effected by humans. Extracted and crafted into jewellery or figurines, metals and minerals could be suitable bodies for nonhuman metapersons, ‘icons more real in a sense than the more inscrutable, uninterpreted original [raw material]’ (DARNELL, 2020: 29–38, quote from p. 30). Image and body potentials work to produce interiorities. Dynamics of subjectivity varied between metapersons because of the affordances of different materials. The Classic Maya viewed cherts as solidified traces of the rain-god with his lightning-weapon, and they often knapped the mineral into his likeness (AGURCIA FASQUELLE et al., 2016), but in Egypt, fulgurites—friable formations of vitrified debris created when lightning strikes the ground—could not be worked similarly; they may have been identified as emanations of the power, but perhaps not bodies, of the god Min (OLETTE-PELLETIER, 2022: 41–46).

In other contexts, subjectivities changed or emerged not through metamorphosis of the base matter, but through their contact with external elements such as water and light. Examples include figurines of the solar creator-god in the form of water serpents, which are described in a religious treatise inscribed on the walls of the Dynasty 27 tomb of Iufaa at Abusir. The aquatic physicalities of these solar image-bodies may explain why temple staff kept them in flower-filled pools, placing offerings for them in the water (LANDGRÁFOVÁ et al., 2017: 615–617). Elsewhere, the ephemerality of some powerful elements implies transient or periodic metamorphosis. Just as denizens of the underworld ‘breathe’ when the radiant sun-god briefly passes through their dark abodes (DARNELL & MANASSA DARNELL, 2018: 6, and *passim*), so too may sculpted figures in

tombs and temples temporarily come to more vivid animacy when suffused with invigorating sunlight (PRICE, 2020: 147–148).

Animist tendencies are foregrounded in contexts where properties of image-bodies that are constructed through complex webs of analogy are central to their relationships with other metapersons. Lateral comparisons between Egyptian and non-Egyptian practices help to bring out implications of these relations between image and body intensities on the one hand, and the dynamics of interiority and physicality on the other hand. Discussing Ifá divination of Yoruba derivation in Afro-Cuban religion, Martin HOLBRAAD (2007: 208) describes how motile, unstructured powder is swept across on a board, creating shapes that embody divine beings. Turquoise provides a valuable Egyptian parallel. A Dynasty 12 inscription at Serabit el-Khadim in the Sinai commemorates the opening of a turquoise mine named ‘The seeing of the *nfrw* of Hathor’ (*ptrt-nfrw-ḥwt-ḥr*: GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 18, no. 56, line 1), *nfrw* meaning the perfect presence of the goddess (DONNAT, 2021; MORENZ, 2014: 48–54; NYORD, 2020b: 16–21). Part of Coffin Text spell 486 seems to identify the goddess with striations of turquoise in golden rock:

*sd ḏw psš jnr wbʒ qrrwt wn ʒht jʒbtt n(t) ḥwt-ḥr prʒs m mfkʒt nm(s).t(j) m nmsʒs*

Breaking the cliff, sundering the rock, revealing the caverns, opening the eastern horizon of Hathor, that she may emerge in/as turquoise, draped in her *nemes*-headcloth (CT VI, 631–64c, version of B2L).

The visibility of turquoise varied seasonally. Miners bemoaned excessive light and heat, which concealed the gemstone by dehydrating and bleaching it (VALBELLE & BONNET, 1996: 120):

*jw mfkʒt m ḏw r nhḥ jnm pw whʒ r tr pn jw pʒʒn sdm m mjtt bjʒw jj r tr pn jnm ms pw gʒʒ rʒs m tr pn qsn n šmw*

Turquoise is forever in the mountain. What is sought at this season is the colour! We have heard the like before. Mining work has been productive<sup>2</sup> at this season, but what is completely lacking in this difficult season of summer is the colour! (GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 26, no. 90, west face, lines 9–12).

By contrast, the correct environmental conditions could reveal mineral veins, such that discoveries were sometimes attributed to divine favour:

*ḏwʒ nswt mʒ ḥprwt nʒf ḏww ḥr ššmt ntt jm shḏʒsn jmnt jmtʒsn ḏww ḥʒswt ḥr ʒwtʒsn jtʒf gb ḥnkʒf st ḥr [...] tʒʒnn*

Adore the king! See what happened for him! The mountains were manifesting (*ššmtʒ*) what was there, illuminating (*shḏ*) what was hidden in them, the mountains and hillsides bearing their gift. His father Geb presents it on the [...] Tatenen (GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 17, no. 53, lines 10–12).

Just as the motility of powder in Ifá divination enables it to take on a range of divine properties and thus to embody assorted divine beings, visual metamorphoses could temporarily or permanently alter the extent to which Hathoric turquoise instantiates a Hathor-body (CANDEA, 2018: 227). Latent subjectivity is brought out or concealed through visual properties. The difference between the Ifá and Egyptian examples is the potential range of metapersons embodied by the material. For Ifá diviners, powder could be many gods, but in the Sinai mines, turquoise was almost always Hathor. Materiality was similarly significant for king Horemheb’s temple

<sup>2</sup>This phrase following KURTH (1996: 59).

restorations of the New Kingdom, in which ‘he begat *sšmw*-images in all *dt*-bodies, correct in every precious stone’ (*kmꜣf sšmw m dtw nb mty m ꜥt nb špst*; Museo Egizio, Turin 1379, **GARDINER**, 1953: pl. 2, line 23).

Throughout ancient Egyptian history, comparisons were made between the interiorities of humans and those of metapersons in other physicalities; such comparisons are homologous with frontal comparisons made by anthropologists. Hathor, as ‘lady of the good colour’ (*nbt jnm nfr*) in the Middle Kingdom mines (**DARNELL**, 2020: 33), is maximally manifested through substances whose properties enabled the finest, most vivid analogies. Narratives of royal conception and birth, such as that of Hatshepsut in the New Kingdom, describe how gods assume physicalities that enable human actions:

[*jr*].*nꜣf hprwꜣf* [*m*] *hm* [*n*] *h(y)ꜣs pn nswt-bjty ꜥ-hpr-kꜣ-rꜣ*  
 [*gm*].*nꜣsn n s(y) sndmꜣs m nfrw nw ꜥhꜣs*  
*rs.nꜣs hr st ntr sbtꜣꜣs> hft hmꜣf*  
*sw šmꜣf hrꜣs hrꜣ sw hꜣdꜣf rꜣs sw rd jbꜣf rꜣs sw rd mꜣꜣs sw* [*m*] *jrꜣf n ntr m-ht jwꜣf tp-jmꜣs*  
*hꜣ.tj m mꜣꜣ nfrwꜣf mr(w)tꜣf hpꜣs m hꜣwꜣs*  
 [*ꜥh bꜣh.w m st ntr hnmwꜣf*] *ꜣnbw m pwnt*

He (Amun) [had transformed into] the Person [of] her (the queen’s) husband, the dual king Aakheperkare (Thutmose I). They [found] her resting in the innermost chamber of her palace. She awoke at the scent of the god and smiled before his Person (*hmꜣf*). He came immediately to her, he became aroused at her, he put his heart toward her, he made her see him [as] the active form (*jrꜣ*) of a god, after he had come into her presence. She rejoiced in seeing his phallus as love of him suffused her limbs. [The palace was flooded with the scent of god;] all his [aromas] were of Punt (**NAVILLE**, 1896: pl. 47; restoration of lacuna after **GAYET**, 1894: pl. 63).

Metapersons blend into each other. The king and the god are addressed in the plural (*gm.nꜣsn*; compare the plural address to *bꜣ-dmd*, above), but the text also says that the god has transformed (*jr.nꜣf hprw*) into the physical form (*hm*) of the king, which is the means through which the god can act (*jrꜣ*). Yet the blended metaperson’s scent (*st*) betrays an interior divinity. Physicalities constituted of divine substances such as electrum and frankincense, which evoke sensuous aspects of human skin and semen (**MATIC**, 2018: 44–48), generate interiorities homologous with but not identical to human ones.

Following Sahlins, the comparisons which underpin analogism in these contexts serve an overarching animism. Gods, spirits, and humans share qualities to differing extents, and they are mainly sorted into hierarchies. Such hierarchies could temporarily dissolve ‘depending on the context in which the nonhuman persons figure: whether mythical, ritual, magical, technical, or shamanic; collective or individual; dreamed or experienced; and so forth’ (**SAHLINS**, 2014: 281–288, quote from p. 282). However, I would not go as far as Sahlins in suggesting that analogism is reducible to a variety of animism in all ancient Egyptian contexts. Rune Nyord discusses how blue faience hippopotami decorated with aquatic motifs may embody qualities of transformation and actualisation through comparison with the emergence of wet, camouflaged hippopotami from water. The figurines are not metapersons. Placing them next to an embalmed human body was a way for the deceased to incorporate the qualities they evoke (**NYORD**, 2020a: 29). Similarly, the *hnr*-troupe in Hathoric ritual wore beaded jewellery, some of which was blue and probably evoked Hathoric turquoise, and they performed acrobatic dances in which they raised their skirts and held mirrors to reflect sunlight—all elements that enabled them to channel Hathor’s regenerative powers for the benefit of others (**MORRIS**, 2011). Depending on the terms and relations involved, ancient Egyptian ontologies may be located between Descola’s archetypal analogism and Sahlins’s characterisation of analogy as a device for organising an animistic world.

### 3.3 The perspective of images

The strongest animistic statements assign human interiorities to nonhuman metapersons. In a description of solar knowledge attested from the mid-second to mid-first millennium, baboons who chatter at the rising sun are said to acclaim the sun, just like humans, but in their cries:

*jw NN rh(.w) mdw pw štꜣ dd bꜣw jꜣbtt ḥsꜣsn tjꜣ n rꜣ wbnꜣf ḥꜣf m ꜣḥt*

NN knows this mysterious speech, which the *bas* of the east speak when they sing cries to Re, as he rises and appears in the horizon (ASSMANN, 1970: 17).

A fragmentary relief of the reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (170–124 BCE) on the base register of a temple wall in Karnak may expand the scope of these comparisons to plants (Figure 2). It is an unusual composition where a horizontal text seems to caption a group of emblematic figures below. Transfigured spirits (*ꜣḥw*), humankind (perhaps *ḥnmmt*), subjects (*rhꜣyt*), trees, and aquatic plants praise Amun-Re with outstretched human arms:

*jmj jꜣwꜣn n pꜣ sr ḥꜣꜣ ntrw jmn-rꜣ [...] sdm nh(w)t sꜣnhꜣf n mj jrrꜣf(?)*

Give our praise to the ram,<sup>3</sup> ruler of the gods, Amun-Re [...] who hears prayers, that he may enliven us in accordance with what he does(?)<sup>4</sup> (AUFRÈRE, 1991: 307–309; BARGUET, 1962: 238, pl. 31b).

These examples approach, but do not quite fit, the character of perspectivism, which is a subtype of animism identified by the anthropologist Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO through ethnographies of Amazonian societies (1998; 2014). In these systems, different types of metapersons are constrained in their relations depending on their physicalities—that is, their skin or clothing. Since a physical form equips a being with particular sensory capacities, the world of a human person is different from that of a nonhuman animal person. This ‘multinaturalist’ framework contrasts with the ‘multiculturalism’ of modern Western societies, in which other animals and plants are not ‘people’ but inhabit a single objective world alongside humankind. The consequence of perspectivism is a radical relationalism: ‘animal or human appearance depends primarily on the eyes of the person who is looking’ (VILAÇA, 2005: 454). Jaguars see humans as peccaries—to a jaguar, human blood is beer—while peccaries may see humans as jaguars, or as allied or rival humans depending on context (LIMA, 1999: 121–122; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1998: 470–471).

Most ancient Egyptian descriptions of human metapersons in nonhuman physicalities stop short of this ‘somatic’ perspectivism which turns on perceptions of physicality: ‘nonhumans placed in the subject perspective do not merely “call” themselves “people”; they see themselves anatomically and culturally as humans’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1998: 477, 480, emphasis in original). Egyptian sources do not say whether stone statues and solar baboons perceived humans as statues or baboons. However, Elizabeth FROOD’s (2019) suggestion that ‘statue-ness’ should be conceived as a distinct status alongside humanity and divinity provides some evidence for such perceptions. The blending of analogistic and animistic features in ancient Egypt raises the possibility of developing a modified perspectival system that would complement body potential with image potential. Viveiros de Castro’s concept allows for degrees of intensity: certain nonhumans can actualise subjectivity more than others, even being ‘more human than humans’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2014: 57–58).

Statues inhale the aromas of offerings and complain about the stench of rotting food (RIZZO, 2004). They are made of stone, but inscriptions on Ramessid examples referring to their sides (*drww*), backs (*psꜣw*), and

<sup>3</sup>I follow Sydney Aufrère and Paul Bargaet’s reading ‘bélier’. Both authors transcribe the sign as a recumbent lion, but recurved horns are just visible in Bargaet’s published photograph.

<sup>4</sup>Aufrère and Bargaet suggest that the rectangular block next to the aquatic plants may represent stones or minerals that also venerate the god. However, it does not have attached arms and is smaller than the other adoring figures; it may simply depict a marshy pool.



Fig. 2: Temple base register composition depicting spirits, humans, and plants praising Amun-Re, from Karnak, Thebes. Reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, 170–124 BCE. Photograph by Jordan Miller.

noses (*fndw*) are written with signs classifying them as ‘flesh’ (FROOD, 2019: 4, 14). Their viewpoints are not different from those of humans but rather expanded. The choice of classifier signs emphasises that they are both stone and flesh: a ‘real alterity’ and a ‘virtual identity’ (LIMA, 1999: 120–121). An opposite play on classifiers occurs on a roughly contemporary wooden scribal palette, where the word *mrj* ‘beloved’ is written with a blank space where a classifier would go, drawing attention to the palette’s *mrj*-wood material (SEIDLMAYER, 1991: 320–324). Taking a similar idea further, Old Kingdom tomb statues which appear to emerge waist-up from the floor of their false doors elaborate on the door as a nexus of communication between differently-bodied metapersons (Ankh-haf, Dynasty 4: BOLSHAKOV, 1991: figs 1, 10; Idu, Dynasty 6: SIMPSON, 1976: pl. 29a–c). There is resonance here with Descola’s characterisation of West African wooden ancestor effigies as ‘neither completely dead nor fully alive, and endowed because of this with an agency of [their] own in spite of [their] apparent immobility’ (DESCOLA, 2013b: 45). The smiling countenances of the statue-bodies, facing the kneeling visitor, ‘must have produced a very deep and sympathetic impression’ (BOLSHAKOV, 1991: 13). As with Amun and the king in the account of Hatshepsut’s conception, Ankh-haf and Idu’s stone forms constitute interfaces for relations with visitors in organic, but otherwise similarly human, bodies. Roughly contemporary ritual texts express wishes for the deceased (Pyr. 221–224, 1300c, 2119): ‘may you be clothed with your body’ (*wnh.tj dt=k*) or ‘may your body be clothed’ (*wnh.t(w) dt=k*). Jan ASSMANN (2003: 10–11) suggests that these exhort the spirit to return and inhabit the statue, but the phraseology more closely parallels understandings of skins, clothing, and bodies in Amazonian perspectivism; it may reference the emergent subjectivity of the image-body rather than the spirit’s indwelling of an inert material.

Additional support for a modified perspectivism comes from relations of written graphs with human and divine metapersons. Graphs were often termed *tjt*, a word usually translated ‘sign, symbol, image’ (*Wb.* V, 239.1–240.11), but in some contexts a *tjt* could be a ‘god’ (*ntr*): an inscription in the tomb of the Dynasty 4 official Nefermaat claims that ‘he is one who made his gods in writing/drawing that cannot be erased’ (*swt jrr ntrw=f m sh n sjn=f*; STAUDER-PORCHET, 2010: 155; further examples: BAINES, 1985: 30–36). The logic of analogism meant that carved or painted signs could benefit or threaten deceased people, whose bodies were eviscerated and reconstituted with pigments, resins, and masks. As suggested by Dimitri MEEKS (1991: 7), *Coffin Text* Spell 578 seems to implore the deceased to relax their organic face and let the mask, their godly countenance, glimpse the divine:

*sh hr hr hw nnw hr=k pn št.w(y) dgg=k jw hnmnm=f (...) sh.tw r pn m-hnw hr n sst3 m sst3 n hry-hbt smsw*

**Writing on the face (i.e. mask):** ‘O, may this face of yours be inert! How mysterious is what you see, as it (i.e. the mask) glances here and there! (...)’ **This utterance is to be written inside the face of the mystery (i.e. the deceased in Osirian form), as a mystery of the Elder Lector** (CT VI, 194b–h).

In its designated context on the insides of masks, inscription of the spell would have confronted the face of the deceased. The spell belongs in the broader Old to Middle Kingdom practice of inscribing religious texts in coffins and burial chambers, which surround and sometimes progress toward bodies of the deceased. To protect the deceased, copyists often omitted or truncated signs depicting dangerous or impure beings (ALVAREZ, 2022: 125–127, 134–136). Later, in the New Kingdom, Tutankhamun’s restoration stela at Karnak describes how the king fashioned a statue-body for the god Amun, which is called a *tjt*:

*wnn.hr hm=f hr w3w3 sh hnc jb=f hr d=r sp nb mnh hr hhj 3hwt n jt(=f) jmn hr mst tjt=f špst m dmw m3*

His Person was then taking counsel with his heart, searching for every effective deed, seeking what was beneficial for his father Amun, fashioning his noble *tjt* in true electrum (Cairo CG 34183, lines 11–12 BENNETT, 1939: 8; GRALLERT, 2001: 308–309).

Comparison with Classic Maya treatments shows how these relations can run both ways, illustrating the value of comparing a perspectival system outside Egyptology. The stairway on the east side of the

palace's East Court at Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico, 'become increasingly steeper as one descends. (...) If these stairs were used as the entrance to the East Court, dignitaries trying to keep a towering headdress balanced while descending the stairs, much steeper than normal, would have had a difficult time'. This uneasy experience, which ran the risk of flouting courtly etiquette if visitors missed their footing, would have mirrored the inconsistent proportions of painted reliefs depicting prisoners, which lined the court's east and west walls (ROBERTSON, 1985: 61–69, figs 285–315). Carved on tilted, sloping blocks of possibly imported stone, the images offered distorted views of prisoners' bodies and underlined their non-local identities and less-than-human status (EARLEY, 2023: 255–257; MILLER & MARTIN, 2004: 203–204). Assimilated with three-dimensional, captioned imagery, visitors were subordinated to the local lords who observed their discomfort (SPENCER, 2015). By contrast, lordly regalia cast royal bodies as microcosms (BAUDEZ, 2000); as with the physical presences of gods, those of Maya rulers were both maximally image and maximally body. Possible parallels include Old Kingdom Egyptian pyramid complexes, where near-lifesize, three-dimensional prisoner statues were positioned in relation to reliefs of the king smiting enemies (PRAKASH, 2022).

The aim of this rapid survey of ancient and modern comparative practices through the concepts of image and body has been to highlight alternative ways of relating those concepts within anthropological frameworks. Such an approach offers possible avenues for refining Descola's conception of interiority and physicality, which derives from Western dualism and representationalism in spite of his claims to its universality. Engaging directly with theoretical issues underlines Egyptology's potential for advancing interdisciplinary approaches that it also adopts.

#### 4 Conclusions: aligning practices of comparison

In ancient Egypt and in Egyptology, comparison is used to create concepts, sharpen them, and then to cut them down to size for heuristic purposes. The bases of these comparisons, however, are not equivalent (VILVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 17). Egyptological statements about composite figures, fused names, and powerful materials involve a level of abstraction that is rare in ancient Egyptian sources but is the mainstay of Western discourse on such topics (BAINES, 1984: 30–31; 2007: 309–310). Challenges of translating between these discourses arise from differences in knowledge systems that have been developed out of corresponding ontologies.

In the ancient contexts I have considered, discourse is implicit in negotiations of bodies, beings, and images for a range of metapersons, within the context of mortuary and commemorative practices (see also BAINES, 1984: 30–32). Image-bodies do not always constitute metapersons wholly or definitively (FROOD, 2019: 15; VILAÇA, 2005: 460). They enable metapersons to interact in ways that would otherwise be impossible, transcending spans of space and time or inserting them into other 'matter-realities', in which substances are experienced differently through alternate bodies and logics (MATIĆ, 2018: 48). Moreover, not all image-bodies were equal. Visual and material properties affected the range of metapersons that a given image could embody, and the degree to which it could do so. Stones and organic flesh could embody gods and humans alike, but mountains and lightning could manifest only gods. According to Sahlins's universalist definition of metapersons, Egyptian kings, the transfigured or condemned dead, and so-called 'demons' would occupy intermediate points on this continuum, their powers often being delegated from greater gods (SAHLINS, 2022: 131).

Attempting to place Egyptological and ancient Egyptian treatments side by side, albeit from an Egyptological and therefore nonobjective position of my own, brings out a difference between the naturalist and the partly analogist, partly animist ontologies operating within the originating institutions, that is the modern academy and ancient groups of religious initiates. The naturalist presumes that inorganic stone lacks interiority, whereas the analogist-animist contemplates how a stone image-body possesses a transformed interiority. The issue at hand is a disconnect between ways of organising terms: the divisory, taxonomic bent of much Western-style discourse structuring Egyptological frameworks; as opposed to the tendency of Egyptian dis-

course to work with intensities. The desire to categorise, to define unities and their parts, is characteristically Western, born out of elements including a history of Christian theology, Classical logic, and the eventual dominance of the scientific method (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 671). Establishing categories was not the end-goal of knowledge in Egyptian religion. Categories represented by divine names, forms, and materialities helped temporarily to stabilise the world and make sense of it (CANDEA, 2018: 229). Frontal comparison depends on whether terms can be mapped onto one another. It is more difficult when terms on either side of the comparison are unstable to begin with.

However, this does not mean that ancient Egyptian and Egyptological discourses are incommensurable. Whether ancient Egyptians made lateral comparisons in Candea's anthropological sense is difficult to discern from the sources, but there is evidence for ancient frontal comparisons. Examples include the co-option of non-Egyptian deities into Egyptian cults (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2018; detailed case studies, referencing earlier literature: MOURAD, 2021: 113–218), as well as the fusion of separately developed Egyptian religious ideas. In the so-called Memphite theology inscribed on a basalt slab in Dynasty 25, a conception centred on Ptah subsumes rather than refutes parallel ideas surrounding Atum (OCKINGA, 2010: 102):

*hpr m h3ty hpr m ns m tjt tm*  
*jw wr 3 pth [swd ntrw nb] k3w3sn sk m ns pn h3ty pn*  
 (...)
 *hpr[n.js] psdt tm m mtwt3f m dbw3f*  
*psdt hm pw jbh3w spt m r pn m3t rn n ht nbt pr.n 3w tfnt jm3f*

That (it) came into being in the heart and on the tongue was as the *tjt*-image of Atum. August and great is Ptah, who delegated to all the gods and their kas thus with this tongue and this heart.

(...)

So it happened that the Ennead of Atum came into being through his semen and fingers; but the Ennead are the teeth and lips in this mouth, which proclaimed the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth (British Museum EA 498: BREASTED, 1901: cols 53–55; SETHE, 1928: 50–59).

Such examples highlight shared features of ancient Egyptian and Egyptological knowledge production. Ancient Egyptian approaches dovetail with Marilyn Strathern's frontal comparison of Melanesian social life and anthropological discourses, in that there is:

the solid knowledge that present formulations are only fleeting concepts and present exercises but partial studies. (...) we produce infinite complexity out of complexity. We become aware of creating more and more gaps. Hence our activities forever magnify a background of potential significance against which—whatever the scale—we try to actualise subtle re-imaginings, and build models that will take everything important into account (STRATHERN, 2004: 119).

A lateral comparison can be made with Egyptological scholarship. In an article titled 'Bricoler avec les dieux'—adopting the 'bricolage' of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who mentored the 'neostructuralist' Descola (KAPFERER, 2014)—the Egyptologist Christiane Zivie-Coche characterises ancient Egyptian approaches to religion by:

[un] choix délibéré de ne rien abandonner en route, de ne rien oublier, car ce n'est que par le biais de cette pluralité que les Égyptiens ont pensé et espéré être susceptibles d'approcher incomplètement, mais au mieux, le monde des dieux qui leur échappait et dont ils étaient tributaires. Ainsi ils n'ont cessé d'adapter, d'ajuster, de bricoler pour bâtir des systèmes divins qui se superposaient les uns aux autres, toujours avec un léger décalage pour que chacun garde sa spécificité (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2019: 36).



These final comparisons reinforce the value of an anthropologically-engaged Egyptology. As mentioned above in the discussion on alternative perspectivism, such an Egyptology could help to develop a conceptual vocabulary that will connect categorical and intensive approaches to the natures of beings, the better to situate itself among studies of other cultures and to advance the theory they employ. It may not be possible to look ancient Egyptians in the eye, but similarities between practices of comparison show how Egyptologists may be looking in the same direction as them, through different sets of eyes (CANDEA, 2018: 216, 328).

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
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