

SOME ASPECTS OF THE GOD SHU*

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In the present short address I would draw your attention to some aspects of the god Shu, without extensive discussion of texts and iconography. What led me to resume studying the textual and visual material relating to this by no means unfamiliar god, was the invitation on the part of the editors of the *Lexikon der Aegyptologie* to compose the article about Shu. When one not only begins to collect the texts and the iconography relating to him, but also sees what has been written in this field in recent Egyptological publications, it soon becomes plain that all research concerning the god Shu should begin—and indeed has begun since 1947—with the excellent article on the place and significance of the god Shu in Egyptian theology by the late De Buck, which appeared in 1947¹). It affords striking evidence of the truly international collaboration of Egyptologists, that this study by De Buck, published in the Dutch language, was observed and studied by his colleagues and has so often been quoted in the continued research of the past 35 years. De Buck's article was and is still of the greatest importance. It was ahead of its time, since it was based chiefly upon the Coffin-texts published by De Buck, particularly Spells 75-80, which had then not yet been translated and worked upon.

De Buck showed that Shu is the god of air, light and life, and determined his place in Egyptian theology as son of the creator god Atum, yet not subordinate to the latter, being of equal age and therefore equally important. De Buck, both egyptologist and theologian, finally compared these attempts by Egyptian theologians of the end of the third millennium B.C. to formulate the relationship between Atum the father and Shu the son, to the work of the theologians of the Christian church in the first centuries of our era to determine in a dogma the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, in order thus to make plain the significance of Shu and his place in Egyptian theology.

In the past 35 years since De Buck's now famous article appeared, study has

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¹) A. de Buck, *Plaats en Betekenis van Sjoë in de Egyptische Theologie* (Med. Kon. Ned. Ac. v. Wet., afd. Letterkunde NR 10, no. 9; Amsterdam, 1947).

continued, also of Shu. Faulkner²⁾ and Zandee³⁾ have translated the Coffin-texts upon which De Buck's article was mainly based into English and German with commentaries, and confirmed De Buck's interpretation of them. It would take us too far to attempt a complete enumeration here of all the scattered notes and remarks about Shu in professional literature during the past 35 years.

Derchain⁴⁾ has made a very interesting and new contribution to the discussion. He sets forth that the best way of explaining Shu is to regard him as essentially the mediator ("intermédiaire") between heaven and earth. The representation of Shu supporting the sky is indeed very well known. He also sees Shu as mediator ("transmetteur") in other respects, for instance of light and sound. Derchain emphatically rejects the view of De Buck and many others both before and after him, from Brugsch to Hornung, that the name Shu is to be etymologically explained from the verb *šwj* meaning "to be empty", thus making Shu a personification of emptiness. De Buck, indeed, referring to Brugsch and Sethe, interpreted the meaning of the root *šwj* as "to be empty" and took the god placed between heaven and earth to be empty space. He added, however: one can form no image of empty space; it is filled with air, which is indeed invisible, but can be sensed in its moving form as breath or wind⁵⁾. Derchain remarks that in the oldest texts, the Pyramid texts, Shu hardly figures at all as god of the air, but often appears as bearing the sky. One of the words used there to indicate this activity of raising or bearing is a pun upon the name of Shu *ššw*. According to Derchain the name Shu means "who rises up" ("qui s'élève"), and he rejects the now still current view which reversely supposes *ššw* to be derived from the name Shu⁶⁾.

Derchain explicitly protests in his article against the idea of Shu being an abstraction of Emptiness ("le Vide"). As I remarked just now, De Buck himself at any rate never defended that. When one is acquainted, however, with the structuralistic method of Derchain as he has applied it in other publications, one also detects a different note in his article. Derchain wants to break with the operational method of describing Egyptian gods as if they are personifications of natural phenomena. He seeks "le signifié" of "le signifiant"⁷⁾. That is why he does not want to explain Shu as god of the air, but as mediator. I agree with this method of Derchain, but not yet with his explanation, at least not altogether.

²⁾ R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffintexts*, I-III (Warminster, 1973-1978); Idem, Some Notes on the God Shu, *JEOL* 18 (1965), 266-271.

³⁾ J. Zandee, *Sargtexte*, *ZÄS* 97 (1971), 155-162; 98 (1972), 149-155; 99 (1972), 48-63; 100 (1973), 60-72; 100 (1973), 141-149; 101 (1974), 62-80.

⁴⁾ Ph. Derchain, *Sur le nom de Chou et sa fonction*, *RdEg* 27 (1975), 100-106; cf. also *RdEg* 30 (1978), 57 and *CdEg* 49 (1975), 280.

⁵⁾ De Buck, *o.c.*, 10.

⁶⁾ J. Zandee, *ZÄS* 97 (1971), 161; K. Sethe, *Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den Altägyptischen Pyramidentexten*, I (Glückstadt, o.J.) 297.

⁷⁾ Ph. Derchain, *Hathor quadrifrons. Recherches sur la syntax d'un mythe égyptien* (Istanbul, 1972), and in several bookreviews in *CdEg* and *BiOr*.

De Buck called Shu not only god of the air or wind and god of light, but also god of life. This aspect of Shu, which is not mentioned at all in Derchain's article, must not be forgotten. Linking up with what Derchain wrote one might also call Shu "transmetteur de la vie", but Shu indeed is more than that: he is also origin of life. From the end of the third millennium B.C. until Roman times Egyptian theologians sometimes call him "Life", or "Life through which one lives"⁸). It might well be that "le signifié" of "le signifiant" is thus indicated, that the Egyptian theologians themselves whose depth of thought must not be underestimated, discovered or, in structuralistic terms, decoded the implicit meaning of the god of air and light who may also be depicted as supporting the heavens.

According to the earliest data, that is to say the Pyramid texts, Shu is one of the gods of the Ennead of Heliopolis. Apart from the data that are clearly influenced by the Heliopolitan theology, being the Pyramid texts and the Coffin-texts, Shu is not mentioned before and during the Old Kingdom, and hardly even before the New Kingdom⁹).

Shu is the son of Atum, who himself came forth from Nun. According to the Heliopolitan theology Nun, Atum and Shu have always been there, but one must clearly bear in mind that their existence in the world before Creation was a potential existence. Shu was still in Atum and Atum was still in Nun. Being was still undifferentiated. Thus they were not yet living gods, conscious of themselves and of the world. Atum was in Nun, that is to say he was in the primeval waters as it were like an unconscious drowning person. A characteristic point is that Atum had not yet a place to stand upon, or to apply a word we used before, where he could rise up.

Together with his sister Tefnut, who comes into being immediately after him, Shu then constitutes the first divine pair, differentiated into man and woman. The theme of the originating of this divine twin is very important for the explanation of the meaning and the place of Shu in Egyptian theology. It has been worked out in diverse variants and details. The variant with sexual details need not necessarily be evaluated as very primitive and coarsely sensual, but is an answer to the problem how two children could come forth from Atum. What is sometimes referred to as onanism in Egyptological literature indicates the self-impregnation of the yet undifferentiated bisexual creator god in the mouth. The vital seed from the phallus of Atum, however, does not remain enclosed in the mouth of Atum, but is spat out and ejected from the mouth or snuffed forth from his nose¹⁰).

⁸) CT II, 39-43; K. Sethe, *Amun und die Acht Urgötter von Hermopolis* (Abh. Preuss. Ak. d. W., Jhrg. 1929, Philos.-Hist. Kl., nr. 4; Berlin, 1929) par. 206 (Ombos); cf. De Buck, *o.c.*, 15.

⁹) Cf. B. L. Begelsbacher-Fischer, *Untersuchungen zur Götterwelt des Alten Reiches* (Freiburg, 1968) 268; J. Spiegel, *Die Götter von Abydos* (Wiesbaden, 1973) 102 f.

¹⁰) *Pyr. texts* 1652, 1871 and often.

To spit and to snuff are signs of life. When an unconscious person or someone drawn out of the water or a new-born child begins to snuff, to spit or to sneeze it means that he is regaining his breath, returning to consciousness or coming to life. The implicit meaning of this mythological tale is, I think, that Shu is the life principle. The theologians of the Coffin-texts have made this meaning explicit also in Atum's words to Nun: "It is my son, Life that lifts up my heart; he causes my heart to live"¹¹). Thus it is the son Shu who, paradoxical as it may sound, brings his father to life, or to that higher or further evolved degree of consciousness which is called life. For the sexual act of Atum by which the vitalizing seed was brought into being and thereupon extruded, was a still unconscious creative act on the part of Atum, an act however through which he became alive. Atum's becoming conscious or coming to life causes him to open his eyes. His eye the sun is sent forth by him to seek for Shu and Tefnut¹²). This search is the beginning of Atum's purposeful, conscious creative action and the appearance of light, the shining of the sun. Thus the originating of Shu means the originating of life, which manifests itself in air or breath or wind and light. Air and light are signs of life.

Undoubtedly the Egyptians distinguished between air and light. That is only natural. It is really quite superfluous to point out that they had many different words for these two different elements of nature. In a religious context though air and life are often very intimately connected. We may think, for instance, of the Amarna reliefs, where the living Aten spreads light with his arms and with an ankh-sign gives breath to the nose of Akhnaten, and where the life-wind of Amarna is also blowing, as we see from the waving ribbons on the clothing of Akhnaten and others who are present. In religious texts and representations air and light can be linked together, because both were regarded as signs of life.

Shu is god of air and light because he is god of life, or in other words, Shu is the god whose essence is life, who reveals himself in wind, air, breath and light. Also in later times Shu is not simply a sun-god, but the god of the functioning, "living" sun sending forth its rays. Since the Middle Kingdom we find the word *šw* or *p3 šw* determined with the hieroglyph sun or ray-emitting sun. This is usually translated as "sun", but I would rather be inclined to translate it as "light" or "sunlight". In the Coffin-texts sun-rays can be called Shu-forms of Re (*šww R'*)¹³). Obviously it follows from this that there is no need to distinguish between two Shu-gods as has sometimes been done, namely an older air-god Shu and a younger sun-god Shu¹⁴). The god Shu, who according to the Helio-

¹¹) CT II 34j-35a.

¹²) CT II 5b; CT IV 174f-i.

¹³) CT VII 231j, cf. B. Altenmüller, *Synkretismus in den Sargtexten* (Göttinger Orientforschungen IV, 7; Wiesbaden, 1975) 211.

¹⁴) See also the recent discussion of Shu and his iconography in B. van de Walle, *Survivances mythologiques dans les coiffures royales de l'époque atonienne*, *CdEg* 55, nos. 109-110 (1980) 23-36.

politan theology as seed of Atum was emitted from the nose or mouth of Atum and is the life that originated in the beginning, also reveals himself to mankind as light and air. That Shu is not restricted to simply a personification of light and air, but is the life that reveals itself in these, also appears from the fact that Shu can be regarded as bringing the floodwater that was life-giving in Egypt¹⁵), or that he can be connected with food¹⁶). As god of life Shu has the power of "opening the portals of the womb"¹⁷) as a kind of assistant at birth. Yet Shu not merely assists at the birth, he is also creator of life. "He can bring to life who is in the egg (in the womb)". At the end of the Amduat Shu is named as helper at the birth of the sun, who is "received" by Shu, and he is called "who separates the sky from the earth in the primeval darkness and whose arms are those that seal the Dat (anew)". The arms of Shu, which as we know from texts and pictures usually support the goddess Nut or the sky, are sun-rays of the god who reveals himself in light. The arms of the Aten also are sun-rays. Shu can also be regarded, though, as a "column of air". From the religious standpoint air is a supporting substance: birds are said to be able to fly because they are borne upon the breath from the mouth of their creator²⁰). The problem of Icarus, the hard fact that in spite of faith in air as a supporting substance man cannot fly and must fall to earth was never, as far as I know, posed in the Egyptian culture.

A sign of life is also the hearing of sound or language. When a certain oil is applied to the mummy, the *Ritual of Embalment* prescribes the following words to be said: "It gives you ears to hear what you will, as Shu hears what he will in Heliopolis"²¹). As mentioned before, Derchain also drew attention to this little-known aspect of Shu as it appears in other texts. Attentiveness in itself may be called a sign of life: the attentiveness of Shu is proverbial. The King is sometimes said to be "attentive as Shu" (*ip m Šw*)²²).

Although the etymological explanation of divine names can rarely if ever be proved, but usually only rendered probable, Derchain's explanation of Shu as "qui s'élève" seems more acceptable to me than the explanation sometimes given as "emptiness" or "dryness"²³).

¹⁵) *Pyr. texts* 1039.

¹⁶) A. M. Blackman, The King of Egypt's Grace before Meat, *JEA* 31 (1945), 57-73.

¹⁷) *Esna* nr. 366, 2.

¹⁸) *CT* II 33c.

¹⁹) E. Hornung, *Das Amduat*, II (Wiesbaden, 1963) 188.

²⁰) D. Kurth in: *L'A* III, 1101, Anm. 21 (s.v. "Luft"), with reference to Davies, *Hibis*, III, pl. 32, 19.

²¹) S. Sauneron, *Rituel de l'embaumement* (Le Caire, 1952) 14; cf. J. C. Goyon, *Rituels funéraires de l'ancienne Égypte* (Paris, 1972) 57.

²²) *Medinet Habu*, pl. 79, 8; 80, 7; cf. H. Grapow, *Die bildlichen Ausdrücke des Aegyptischen* (Leipzig, 1924) 182, 185.

²³) G. Fecht, Zur Theologie Amarnas, *ZÄS* 85 (1960) 91-118; W. Barta, *Untersuchungen zum*

I am inclined however to assign a less general meaning to Shu's name, and thus to come to a more defined assessment of the god's function: Shu is he who rises up not only as mediator, but as Life or the living god who arose from Atum while the latter was still in Nun. In a hymn to Shu in the *Magical Papyrus Harris* a pun is made upon the verb to begin (*šš'*) and the name Shu, which is of course not a real etymology but a pseudo-etymology: "Re began for himself when thou didst begin in this thy name of Shu"²⁴). I have already quoted the words of Atum to Nun: "It is my son Life who raises up my heart. He causes my heart to live". To rise up and to live are synonyms here. Kristensen, who taught De Buck, set forth in his famous work *Het Leven uit de Dood* that "arising and raising oneself from the recumbent position was for the Egyptians, as it is for us, the image of resurrection"²⁵). He quoted int.al. Pyramid-text 1699: "Rise up for thou art alive". Shu is the god who rises up because he is the god who began life and who maintains it by supporting the heavens. Therefore I think it plausible that his name really does mean "he who rises up".

Götterkreis der Neunheit (MÄS 28; Berlin, 1973) 85-89. Note however the interesting word-play in the Ritual of Embalmmment (5, 11): Expectoration (*ššt*) that has come from Shu (*šw*).

²⁴) H. O. Lange, *Der magische Papyrus Harris* (Kobenhavn, 1927) 21.

²⁵) W. B. Kristensen, *Het Leven uit de Dood* (Haarlem, 1926) 102.