

Development, Ancient Egypt, and National Liberation: An Examination of Economic Growth, Nationalism, and Governmental Ethics

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Abstract

This paper examines the 20th century transition from the European colonial civilizing mission to an internationally sanctioned development agenda, premised on perpetual economic growth. It asks whether a single nation can extricate itself from this international system and asserts, along with many Egyptologists, that ancient Egypt was the first nation in history and the earliest attempt to combine an ethical existence (*Maat*) with economic stability in an international milieu. It shows further that this morally grounded government also had to be effective; it had to keep the standard of living as consistently high as possible. However, the strength of this ethical system, which was ultimately codified during the Middle Kingdom, was tested by foreign invasion. Despite their retention of the Egyptian bureaucratic scribal tradition that was essential to successful governance, the alien Hyksos rulers did not embrace *Maat*, which, consequently, engendered a national liberation movement. Finally, this analysis of ancient Egypt demonstrates that religious ideals-ethics, when combined with practical governmental policies, are compatible with development, if development is not conceptualized simply as a commitment to economic expansion.

Keywords: Development, Ancient Egypt, Nationalism, *Maat*, Hyksos

1. The Internationalization of Development

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Western Europe as the global economic leader. Though the process was begun by its industrialization a century earlier, Europe's global dominance was not fully instrumental until the end of WWI.² With the Treaty of Versailles, the newly formed League of Nations created Mandates out the former German colonies in Africa and Ottoman controlled territories in the Middle East. In so doing, Europe not only continued the colonial civilizing mission that had been so clearly articulated in the nineteenth century, but also laid the foundation for the twentieth century-- the century that would become "the century of development." In the wake of WWI, any debate about the wisdom of colonization was superfluous in the eyes of the West; colonization was still perceived not as a matter of choice but as a matter of duty, as an existing necessity and moral responsibility that should not, and indeed, could not, be undone.³ However, now, this colonial intervention and condescending paternalism, was sanctioned internationally.

The League of Nations was the first permanent international political institution, with Articles 22 and 23 of its covenant establishing the Mandate System. However, Article 22 of the Covenant, in addition to reiterating the "sacred trust" conferred upon the West by its superior civilization, also introduced stage of development into the literature of international organization.⁴

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² See Andre Gundar Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) for a discussion of China's global economic dominance prior to the Industrial Revolution.

³ Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London:Zed Books, 2002), 47-56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-61.

For example, a distinction was clearly made between Class A Mandates, “[C]ertain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish empire” that had “reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized” and Class B Mandates, “[O]ther peoples, especially those of Central Africa,” that are “at such a stage that the Mandatory must be responsible for the administration of the territory.”⁵ Clearly, colonization and the Mandate System occupied the same temporal, geographic, and ideological space. But now, beyond the colonial campaigns to occupy non-white territories, lurked an internationalism that was ostensibly premised on humanitarian universalism. This slight alteration of the original civilizing mission now condoned exploitation, and in the case of Africa, directs annexation, in the name of the common heritage of mankind: if the colonies/mandates were rich with natural resources that could be useful to everyone, why leave them where no one took advantage of them? Internationalization, via the League of Nations, made it more appropriate than ever to destroy societies “for their own good,” while it simultaneously made it appear as though the League was merely articulating a global consensus.⁶

By the end of WWII, the League had been replaced by a US dominated United Nations and in Truman’s inaugural address in January of 1949, the United States proclaimed that it would continue to: 1) back the UN; 2) assist European recovery via the Marshal Plan; and 3) create a joint defense organization (NATO) to meet the Soviet threat. However, according to Rist, it was Truman’s “Point Four” that inaugurated the development age:

...we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of *underdeveloped areas* (italics mine)...And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development...This should be a cooperative enterprise in which all nations work together through the United Nations...The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans. What we envision is a program of development based on concepts of democratic fair-dealing...Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace.⁷

It is important to note that no promises were made in this address. Truman’s Point Four limits itself to hope of what might be done and simply states that the US is prepared to oversee the endeavor in cooperation with the UN. Moreover, the introduction of underdevelopment in Point Four altered the meaning of development itself. Development, had, up until this point, been presented as something that simply happens. However, now, it was no longer just a question of change; now it was possible for others to develop a region. In short, development took on a transitive meaning, while underdevelopment was presented as naturally occurring and causeless. Furthermore, developed/underdeveloped began to replace the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Instead of the subordination of colony to mother country, the UN, with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights and global system of states, promulgated the notion that each state was theoretically equal in law, if not yet in fact. As long as all nations adhered to the model that assumed economic growth was the ideal, a nation might lag behind, but it could always hope to catch up. And, though a nation could be assisted in this evolutionary process, *the economic growth model blamed the internal dynamic of the assisted state for its underdevelopment*. In this way, the underdeveloped society became the embryonic form of a fully mature western society. The historical conditions that explained contemporary relations—the history of the structure of this international system--was lost in the process of advocating that the industrialization that happened in Europe must inevitably be reproduced everywhere.⁸

It took scholars like Walter Rodney to explain the reasons why the industrial superiority of the West could not be divorced from the exploitation of non-west.⁹ Rodney showed how underdevelopment was also a transitive verb; he showed how Europe underdeveloped Africa and radically altered the context in which its contemporary candidates for industrialization were forced to operate.

⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁶ Ibid., 66-68.

⁷ Ibid., 71-72.

⁸ Ibid., 72-74.

⁹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-l’Ouverture Publications, 1972).

Nevertheless, even this recognition of the relationship between development and underdevelopment did not, in most instances, substantially alter national goals in many newly independent African nations; nor did it arrest the intervention by international agencies into the internal affairs of these nations, fixated as they were on the expansion of international trade and the utilization of scientific knowledge to increase the growth of national productivity. This fixation on national productivity still made intervention--growth via "aid"--the only viable course of action in an unending quest to raise the GNP. Even Nyerere's Ujamaa Socialism, which downplayed industrialization and rejected western individualism for the social ethic characteristic of the traditional African family—his doctrine of self-reliance and focus on economic redistribution—found it difficult to modernize agricultural production, despite the use of improved crop strains, fertilizers, and pesticides. Among other reasons, this attempt to modernize agricultural production was hindered primarily because, though self-reliance is ultimately aimed at reducing trade related inequalities, it cannot change the fact that some countries have resources that don't exist elsewhere. Consequently, *self-reliance demands both national and global redistribution*. Realizing this, the Ujamaa villagization program, limited and controlled foreign investment, but could not advocate complete economic isolation. And, by Nyerere's own calculations, ten years after the initial Arusha Declaration of 1977, self-reliance acquiesced to "domination through giving" with 60% of Tanzania's African Socialist program being financed via international aid.¹⁰

With the failed experiment of African socialism, we are left with the question of whether it is really possible for a single country to extricate itself from the international system. Interrogating the twentieth century paradigm of development, predicated upon unlimited growth, should be the starting point in answering this question. Challenging the dominant Eurocentric notion of a single path to the "good society", gauged by economic development, must be replaced by a more multi-faceted conceptualization--one that can see beyond the GNP. And, in the spirit of African Socialism, there is no better place to look for this replacement than ancient Egypt, a society which, as we shall see below, flourished from 3100 BCE for over 1400 years before experiencing foreign rule, with this alien rule lasting only about a century before another 500 years of independence.¹¹ Hence, ancient Egypt was the earliest attempt to combine an ethical existence with economic sustenance on a national scale, in an international milieu. But Eurocentrism is pernicious and the internationalization of an evolutionary conceptualization of development is not the only problem that we face when attempting to counter it. No less problematic is the concept of the nation itself.

Many scholars have offered definitions of the nation and nationalism; most are modernists, members of a school of thought that sees the nation resulting from some combination of the spread of capitalism, literacy, and notions of citizenship derived from the ideology of the French Revolution.¹² Essentially, their argument is that after the French Revolution, democratic nationalism equated the sovereign citizen/people with the state, which in relation to the rest of the human race, constituted a nation. In this view, nationalism is a by-product of the decline of religious authority after the Enlightenment and the industrialization that began in the late eighteenth century. Most theorists in this school emphasize one or both of these factors to varying degrees. However, all of their analyses see the nation and nationalism as European in origin.¹³ Yet, Egyptologists have consistently characterized ancient Egypt as a nation.¹⁴ There are several reasons for this, which shall become evident in discussion below.

¹⁰ Rist, *History of Development*, 133-34.

¹¹ There is considerable debate regarding ancient Egyptian chronology. The chronology used in this paper is adapted from Donald B. Redford, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), the generally accepted compromise.

¹² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since the 1780's: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹³ Even though postmodernists claim to critique modernism, they ultimately see the nation as only possible within the discourse of nationalism; this discourse is also conceived as an essentially modern, European, phenomenon. See Hommi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Omut Ozkirmili, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁴ For examples spanning the last seventy five years see James Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1934); John Van Seters, *The Hyksos: A New Investigation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); John A. Wilson, "Egypt" in H. and H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore: Penquin, 1971); Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* (New York: 2013). Following scholars such as these, I use the term nation to express the coincidence of government and ethnicity in a clearly demarcated territory. However, elsewhere, students of nationalism, have advocated a broader conceptualization of the nation, applying it to

However, for now let it suffice us to say that this paper accepts the view of the majority of Egyptologists, in contradistinction to the scholars who specialize in nationalism: that ancient Egypt was, in fact, the first nation in history. In so doing, it also offers a conceptualization of national development that is predicated on an ethical order, *Maat*, which regulated the life of the citizens of the realm. Despite its obvious association with religion, we will see that *Maat* was a practical and eclectic morality that was also civil and secular in its application.¹⁵ National Liberation, then, in this context, necessitated not only the expulsion of the Hyksos, the first non-Africans to rule Egypt, but also the restoration of *Maat*, an ancient ideal of development that included, but did not privilege economics over ethics.

2. Egypt and the National Ideal

Egyptian civilization developed in the Sahara. It was possible only because of the Nile, which crosses the desert from south to north, carrying the waters of Lake Nyanza more than three thousand miles to the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁶ Egypt was just the last seven hundred miles of the northern portion of the Nile, beginning at the rapids known as the First Cataract. In early Egyptological discourse it was regularly suggested that, despite evidence of Predynastic cultures, the agriculturally based state that emerged in northeastern Africa appeared suddenly and must therefore have been introduced by an invading foreign race. However, while there is certainly evidence of foreign contact in the fourth millennium BC, the southern Egyptian roots of this civilization have not been seriously disputed since the 1970s.¹⁷ Indeed, the Naqada Period, which is divided into three cultural phases, dating from 4000-3000 BCE, and which was crucial in establishing Egypt's Predynastic ideological orientation, has been conclusively shown to have emanated from Upper (southern) Egypt, ultimately diffusing from there to the delta.¹⁸ It is also important to note that long distance trade developed in this period. In fact, a major motivating factor for the expansion of Naqada culture into Lower (northern) Egypt was probably the desire to gain direct control over the lucrative trade with other regions of the eastern Mediterranean, which had developed earlier in the fourth millennium BCE.¹⁹ Although Egypt was largely self-sufficient, with a wide diversity raw materials and wildlife, there were, nevertheless, many prized materials that were not obtainable in the Nile Valley: turquoise, had to be obtained from Sinai; silver from Anatolia, copper and gold from Nubia, cedar from western Asia, and lapis lazuli from as far east as modern Afghanistan. Consequently, from this early period, trade, whether inter-regional or international, was an integral part of the expansion of this first agrarian based state in Africa.²⁰ Furthermore, the source from which the Egyptians derived their knowledge of agriculture was also to the south and west rather than the northeast.²¹

A firm connection between the ruler of a community and the fertility of the soil through the agency of the Nile was endemic to ancient Egypt, a bequest of Africa south of the Nile Valley.²² The concept of the "god-king" derived from the functions of African rainmaker chiefs who assured fertility to the earth, animals, and human beings. The king retained these functions, but, as we shall see, in Dynastic Egypt, his primary role was to symbolize the unity of the state.²³ In the Naqada Period, two separate and independent kingdoms eventually developed: the northern kingdom of Lower Egypt, whose ruler wore the red crown, and the southern kingdom of Upper Egypt, whose ruler wore the white crown.²⁴ The Dynastic Period was begun by a southern king, Narmer, around 3100 B.C.E. Egyptologists' opinions differ as to whether Narmer was an historical figure or a consolidation of a series of rulers into a symbol of unification.

any group, no matter how ethnically diverse, that claims the right to independent statehood or territorial autonomy, where "right" refers to the power or privilege to which one is justly entitled. See Lamont DeHaven King, "Defining the Nation in the Social Sciences: A Utilitarian Approach," *National Social Science Association Journal*, 42 (1) (2009).

¹⁵ See Theophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharonic Period: 2780-330 BC* (Popenquine: Per Ankh, 2004), 203.

¹⁶ Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

¹⁷ Kathryn A. Bard, "The Emergence of the Egyptian State (c.3200-2686 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65.

¹⁸ Beatrix Midant-Reynes, "The Naqada Period (c.4000-3200 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47, 53.

¹⁹ Bard, "Emergence," 61-62.

²⁰ Ian Shaw, "Egypt and the Outside World," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 320, 327, 329.

²¹ Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1987), 150-1.

²⁴ Rosalie David, *The Ancient Egyptians: Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1998) 14-15.

This debate aside, the victorious southern armies marched to the edge of the Delta where they founded Memphis, the White Walled-City, which eventually became the northern military citadel, as well as one of the more important religious and intellectual centers.²⁵ Narmer, whose totem was the falcon or hawk, combined this with the delta symbol of the cobra, and to the white crown he wore he added the red crown of the delta, forming the double crown, which thereafter symbolized the unity of the state.²⁶ Clearly, this unified Egyptian state did not develop from smaller units of political and social order like the city-states of Mesopotamia. The Egyptian state was a new political form, which, as noted above, was, according to many Egyptologists, the first nation-state in the world. Nowhere else in the ancient world was kingship so important and essential to control of the early state. By Dynasty I (3100-2850), the royal cemetery at Abydos symbolized a political order on a new scale, with a state religion that legitimized it.²⁷ And, throughout their subsequent history, the Egyptians, though relatively secluded by natural barriers, recognized that protection from invaders demanded this national unity. Consequently, in later dynasties, the question was not whether union was desirable, but whether kings from the north or south would rule the kingdom.²⁸

That states existed in Upper and Lower Egypt prior to unification by Narmer, whether he is a conflation of numerous prehistoric kings or not, explains the fact that there is no myth of the birth of the Egyptian state. Even the myth of Horus and Seth is not the transition to the state but to political unity.²⁹ Moreover, unification meant not only political unity, but it also included a shared commitment to Maat—a complex system of political, social, moral, and religious ideas that was “able to capture the imagination of the masses” and “press them into service.”³⁰ Thus, Maatian ethics evolved in a period of consolidation, peace, and security, which laid the basis for the establishment of Dynasty I. This ethical system matured with the development of two key institutions: divine kingship, and a bureaucracy that stressed merit and moral leadership.³¹

The king, regarded as the earthly embodiment of the hawk deity, bore the title of Horus in his lifetime and passed it on to his royal successor at his death.³² Once in this role, the king did Maat and brought order to the world.³³ He served as a moral example to be emulated by both the elites and the masses. Consequently, Maat was essential to both the royal government and the society at large, with many of its fundamental aspects already apparent in the earliest dynasties. By the Old Kingdom (2687-2190), Maat, was revered as daughter of the sun God Re’, and represented cosmic order and justice. The ethical system had already become formalized toward the end of Dynasty V (2513-2374), when the spells collectively known as *The Pyramid Texts* were first inscribed on the interior walls of the kings’ tombs.³⁴ Unas (2404-2374), the last king of Dynasty V, was the first to place these spells in his pyramid at Saqqara. In these texts, replacing evil (*isfet*) with good (*maat*) is a fundamental royal responsibility: “Unas has come forth from the Island of Fire. Unas has set Maat in place of isfet.”³⁵ A fundamental source of Maatian ethics is also derived from private funerary practices and discourse--autobiographical statements in tombs or on stelae known as the *Declarations of Virtues*, which described an illustrious career and praiseworthy moral personality. The earliest of these autobiographies appear in Dynasty III (2687-2649).³⁶

²⁵ In 641 A. D. Cairo was founded near Memphis’ ruins.

²⁶ Drake, *Black Folk*, 177.

²⁷ See Bard, “Emergence,” 67-70.

²⁸ Drake, *Black Folk*, 176.

²⁹ See Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 40-41.

The essential text is an excerpt from the *Memphite Theology*, a large basalt slab from Dynasty XXV (c.760-656 B.C.E.), which reproduces a papyrus original that, however, probably has its roots in the Old Kingdom. According to Assmann, this myth of Horus can be interpreted as a depiction of the triumph of Horus’ law over Seth’s force. See also Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Vol 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 51-7

³⁰ Assmann, *Mind*, 76.

³¹ Maulana Karenga, *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 30.

³² David, *Ancient Egyptians*, 17-18.

³³ Karenga, *Maat*, 31.

³⁴ Modified versions of the texts were inscribed on the coffins of the nobility (thus known as the “Coffin Texts”). The purpose of these texts was to ensure the safety of the deceased in the passage from this world to the next. Eventually, in the New Kingdom (1569-1081), they became even more widely available as the basis for the Theban *Book of the Dead*.

³⁵ Pyramid Text 235, quoted in Karenga, *Maat*, 42.

³⁶ Moreover, as early as Dynasty IV (2649-2513), kings began to take royal names which expressed a commitment to Maat. For example, Sferu of the Fourth Dynasty is called “Possessor of Maat.” See Karenga, 42-44.

Stressing service to the state, they provide standards of moral excellence for self and society. There are two main interrelated themes in these autobiographies, social service and personal morality:

I have come from my town...
 I have done justice for its lord,
 I have satisfied him with what he loves.
 I spoke truly, I did right,
 I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly,
 I seized the right moment,
 So as to stand with the people.
 I judged between two as to content them,
 I rescued the weak from one stronger than he...
 I gave bread to the hungry, clothes (to the naked),
 I brought the boatless to land.
 I buried him who had no son,
 I made a boat for him whom lacked one.
 I respected my father, I pleased my mother,
 I raised their children...³⁷

Maat is achieved by service to the king and to the people, for there is no distinction between state and society.³⁸ Indeed, Lichtheim notes, that in the Old Kingdom, this ideal was so pervasive that “a man could present his moral self–portrait without mentioning (the word) Maat, the underlying moral principle.”³⁹ Maat “became in the minds of the Old Kingdom thinkers a term expressing a sense of the national order, the moral order of the nation... the spirit and method of national guidance and control of human affairs, a control in which orderly administration is suffused with moral conviction.”⁴⁰

3. Maat and Effective Administration

From the royal residence at Memphis, the king and his family established the political structure and elaborate centralized bureaucracy that would administer commercial relations with other countries and the collection and distribution of the revenue of the Two Lands.

The fluctuations in the height of the Nile, when it overflowed, made it almost impossible to forecast agricultural yield. This unpredictability prompted the establishment of large central granaries to store surplus that the state redistributed as necessary. Though initially a rudimentary system existed to link the capital city with the provinces, Egypt ultimately became a centralized supply economy in which, not surprisingly, the office of Overseer of the Granaries ranked very high in the hierarchy.⁴¹ The bureaucratic departments were housed at Memphis and were grouped together into one complex that was also the living quarters of the royal family. This complex was known as the “Great House,” in Egyptian “Per aa,” and this term--Pharaoh--was eventually applied to the king himself.⁴² The most important position after that of the king was the vizier, who usually had close family ties with the king. The vizier was often head of the judiciary, chief royal architect, and keeper of state archives. The scribes that were under him had the extended meaning of both civil servants and intellectuals. Learning to write was synonymous with training for an administrative post. However, for the scribe, unlike the vizier, low birth was not a deterrent to ambition. Hence, both kingship and this scribal bureaucracy, chosen on merit, were critical to the formulation and evolution of Maatian ethics.⁴³

³⁷ Inscription of Nefer-Seshem-Re Called Sheshi, Dynasty VI. Quoted in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 17.

³⁸ Karenga, *Maat*, 45.

³⁹ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 14, quoted in Karenga, *Maat*, 52.

⁴⁰ Breasted, *Dawn*, 143-145, quoted in Karenga, *Maat*, 49-50. Breasted also notes that this morality contributed significantly to the Jewish-Christian-Islamic-tradition.

⁴¹ Assmann, *Mind*, 74-75.

⁴² See Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall*, 211.

⁴³ Assmann., *Mind*, 48, 55. For example, Imhotep, the vizier of king Djoser of Dynasty III (2687-2649), was not only the architect of the first stone Pyramid at Saqqara, but was also deified later as a great healer, and was worshipped by the Greeks as the god of medicine (Aschelapios). For Civil Service, see also Karenga, *Maat*, 34-37.

For example, it was the civil service that conscripted the huge free labor force necessary for state projects and handled the administration of law and justice to the extent that some officers bore, among their titles, priest of Maat. Scribal teaching and tradition made Maat ultimately become the collective ethic of the entire Egyptian people. However, in the final analysis, ancient Egyptian morality required proof in practice. Maat was not only righteous, but right—not only morally good but effective, advantageous and beneficial; it worked and yielded benefits.⁴⁴ This emphasis on good as right and effective greased the wheels of the ancient Egyptian state apparatus.

Bureaucratization eventually led to the division of the nation into forty two nomes that were not a continuation of Predynastic territorial divisions. This reorganization was undertaken probably as late as the reign of king Djoser (2687-2667).⁴⁵ It is important to note that central administration focused on agriculture; *taxation, though important, was not as important as the storage of grain for the people.* The prime administrative concern was to ensure against the unpredictability of Nile floods to keep the standard of living as consistently as high as possible. The nomes were dependent on this centralized supply system. If the system failed, it could result in famine throughout the land.

Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, powerful provincial families began to emerge that gradually transformed themselves from representatives of the central government into hereditary regional lords who were able to compete with the central government. As these nomarchs took fewer directives from the royal residence, or increasingly began to make their own decisions, the “Great House” lost touch with the periphery. In a supply economy such as Egypt’s, a breakdown in central authority quickly led to a breakdown in distribution. Consequently, by the end of Dynasty VI (2374-2190), after a series of low Niles, various members of this upper stratum of society that had developed in the nomes, claimed defacto independence, and, as the power of the monarchy waned, were poised for internal conflict.⁴⁶ Famine was a typical subject of the inscriptions of this so-called First Intermediate Period (2190-2061). And provision for one’s nome in times of hardship was the prime source of legitimacy for these local rulers.⁴⁷

During the early part of this First Intermediate Period, the local lords of Herakleopolis (modern *Ibnasya el-Medina*) established their rule in Middle Egypt and introduced a period of comparative peace.⁴⁸

However, their dynasty was not even acknowledged by everyone in the immediate vicinity of Herakleopolis. Publically, Thebes also feigned loyalty to Herakleopolis, as it simultaneously strengthened its position in Upper Egypt. Ultimately, Herakleopolis ostensibly controlled Middle and Lower Egypt, while Thebes dominated the eight southernmost nomes. The subsequent civil war dragged on for over a century (2134-2040) until Thebes, under the Dynasty XI (2134-1991), defeated the Herakleopolitan regime. Having portrayed this regime as an affront to established order, the subsequent rulers of Dynasty XII (1991-1786) were determined to show that they were just and pious kings. Consequently, they embarked on a program that was designed to rehabilitate the ideology of divine kingship. However, there was no attempt by the pharaohs of Dynasty XII to actually rule from the south—their native Thebes. A new capital, *Itj-tawy*, and necropolis was established south of Memphis and Egypt was once again a nation ruled by a god-king.⁴⁹ As they ushered in the Middle Kingdom (2061-1664), the kings of Dynasty XII asserted that only the pharaoh could restore order and balance to a world that was torn asunder by civil strife.⁵⁰ The political temper of Dynasty XII is best exemplified by an excerpt from a Middle Kingdom text known as the *Prophecies of Neferti*:

...The land has been quite destroyed without a remnant, not even the dirt under one’s fingernails has remained of that which Re’ has ordained....

I show you the land in severe illness.

I show you the son as adversary, the brother as enemy, a man who kills his father...

⁴⁴ Karenga, *Maat*, 40.

⁴⁵ See H.G. Fischer, *Denderah in the Third Millennium B.C.* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1968).

⁴⁶ David, *Ancient Egyptians*, 88-90. The seeds of destruction came to fruition in the reign of Pepi II and at the end of his exceptionally long reign (94 yrs. – 2300-2206 B.C.E.) many potential royal successors were waiting in the wings.

⁴⁷ Assmann, *Mind*, 101.

⁴⁸ David, *Ancient Egyptians*, 93-94.

⁴⁹ Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 109-118

⁵⁰ Assmann, *Mind*, 106-7.

However, a king is prophesied, who shall come from the south, Ameni by name, the son of a woman from Ta-Seti, a child of Upper Egypt....

Then Ma'at will return to her place, while Isfet is banished.⁵¹

Thus, the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom were restorers of order, rescuers in times of need, and their assumption of power was equated with salvation.⁵² Knowledge of how to behave, much of which had formerly been communicated orally, now began to be written down. These Instructions, which invariably feature a father teaching his son, claim a general validity; they refer not to specific skills but to the totality of social existence. The emergence of this kind of *Wisdom Literature*, as this entire genre is often called by Egyptologists, began to codify and disseminate the social norms that had been axiomatic in the Old Kingdom. Wisdom Literature was, consequently, an integral part of the reorganization of the Egyptian state undertaken in Dynasty XII. Though the Old Kingdom certainly lived by Maat, its full meaning was only developed discursively in the literature of the Middle Kingdom.⁵³

By the Middle Kingdom, Maat, as justice, linked human action to human destiny and welded individuals into a self-conscious community; it linked consequences to deeds and individuals to each other. For example, in Coffin Text 1130, “the Creator, Ra, establishes the principle of equality through his making ‘every person like his or her fellow’ and creating wind water and earth ‘so that the humble might benefit from (them) like the great.’”⁵⁴ The discourse on virtue was also expanded: the ability to perform the works of Maat was now seen as grounded in character.⁵⁵ Consequently, in the *Instruction for King Merikare* we read “[D]o not prefer the wellborn to the commoner, Choose a man on account of his skills, Then all crafts are done.”⁵⁶ Judges in the Middle Kingdom also emphasized “that they have made no distinction between rich and poor, strong and weak, those they know and those they do not know.”⁵⁷ In the Middle Kingdom, *though inequality is not abolished, it is offset by a state that protects the weak.*

The primary literary work that expresses this view is *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* who demanded justice as a moral right from high officials. In the narrative, the peasant not only receives justice, but also delivers a treatise on the obligations of leadership. The obvious lesson here is that justice is due to the common man. This ethical narrative, used as a text in Egyptian scribal schools, is important for several reasons. First, leadership is critiqued by a simple peasant, which implies recognition of the right—whether formal or customary—to engage in such a critique. Second, its popularity and use in schools also implies an active tradition of critique and redress of grievances. Third, the fact that the peasant triumphs over the leadership reinforces the concept and practice of justice without class bias. And finally, it also shows that the state was proud of its just society, with honest officials, committed to Maat, and its process for the equitable redress of grievances for all of its citizens.⁵⁸ Clearly, by the Middle Kingdom, the ancient Egyptians had developed an image of humanity that saw the aim of the individual not in self-fulfillment but in the development of social connections. *In ancient Egypt, human development was impossible without this sense of public spirit—without the virtues and attitudes implicit in Maat.*⁵⁹

4. Slavery, Immigration, and Foreign Rule

The Middle Kingdom had produced a state that was immensely rich, powerful, and efficient—able to work its will both inside the country, and beyond its borders.

⁵¹ Quoted in Assmann, *Ibid.*, 107-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 110. See also David, *Ancient Egyptians*, 108-9, who notes that by the Middle Kingdom, Osiris had replaced the pharaoh as the symbol of eternity and offered a chance of immortality to all, regardless of wealth or status. Consequently, Abydos, where Osiris was rumored to have been buried, became a center of religious pilgrimage in Egypt.

⁵³ Assmann, *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁴ Karenga, *Maat*, 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁶ Lichtheim, *Literature*, 101.

⁵⁷ Assmann, *Mind*, 154.

⁵⁸ Karenga, *Maat*, 70-71.

⁵⁹ Assmann, *Mind*, 133, 156. Italics mine. Although the text focuses on the hereafter, see also the *Dispute of a Man with His Ba* to understand how the ideology of Maat was underpinned by a faith in the immortality of the soul and the prospect of future judgment.

In Dynasty XII, Egypt became more actively involved in the international politics of the eastern Mediterranean, a full three hundred and fifty years before it established a formal empire there.⁶⁰ The human cargo brought back from foreign adventures included thousands of slaves.

For example, there is clear evidence from Dynasty XII of a campaign by sea that resulted in a list of booty comprising 1,554 Asiatics.⁶¹ This forcible resettlement of Asiatics in the Nile Valley to work on crown lands and take part in state building projects altered the ethnic composition of Egypt's population in the Delta.⁶² Egypt also maintained close ties with Asiatic neighbors in the Sinai, where the local rulers provided logistical support for its state sponsored mining expeditions.

With friendly relations established, the peaceful immigration of Asiatics into the northeastern delta, replaced the earlier importation of slaves.⁶³ By the end of Dynasty XII, immigration had been augmented by the creation of an open trading zone in the region.⁶⁴ Consequently, references to Asiatics are numerous in the Middle Kingdom; they worked in a variety of occupations, sometimes adopting Egyptian names. This alien community began to grow significantly at Avaris, a small border settlement that was utilized for frontier defense. There, the Asiatics built houses in their tradition and maintained their own way of life. Avaris was inhabited by soldiers, shipbuilders, craftsmen, and trading agents from Syria–Palestine and became a specialized settlement for organizing mining expeditions and trade with the Levant, Cyprus, and the Aegean. As these Asiatic immigrants rose in social standing, some even secured government positions, with these “Overseers of *Retenu*” (Lebanon/Palestine) having palatial residences and limestone statues portraying them in their native dress.⁶⁵ Though many Asiatics were already highly Egyptianized, others were Bedouin tribesmen. Thus, Avaris was a multi-cultural town, unlike any other in Egypt, and, as noted above, opportunities for foreign advancement there were great. It is not surprising, then, that Avaris, with its distinctive hybrid culture, and prosperity from the Mediterranean trade, became increasingly inclined to flex its political muscle.⁶⁶

However, it was not an Asiatic, but the high official Nehesi, probably an Egyptian or Nubian, who first declared himself king of an independent delta state, with its capital at Avaris, in a direct challenge to the government at Itj-tawy. Avaris's secession cut Itj-tawy's eastern trade links, starving it of vital goods and income, and within a few decades, both Avaris and Itj-tawy were also devastated by famine and plague. Weakened by disease, the whole of Lower Egypt became easy prey to an eastern aggressor that was armed with the latest military technology—the horse drawn chariot. These invaders took Avaris and swept southward to conquer the ancient capital of Memphis. For more than a century (2134-2040), the Hyksos, a Semetic-speaking elite from modern-day Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon, ruled northern Egypt and were recognized as overlords in the rest of the country. Hyksos is a Greek version of *bequa-kehsaut*, “chiefs of foreign lands.”⁶⁷ The term first appears in sources from the Middle Kingdom and was used to designate the foreign *rulers* from the east. Asiatics were traditionally labeled *Aamu* in ancient Egypt. Hence, Hyksos, in and of itself, was not an ethnic designation.⁶⁸

The Hyksos period clearly stands out as a unique phenomenon, previously unparalleled in Egyptian history; it was the first time that foreigners ruled Egypt.⁶⁹ While the early Hyksos kings were content to describe themselves as rulers of foreign lands, they became determined to be recognized as true Egyptian sovereigns by adopting full royal titles.

⁶⁰ Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 153. According to Oren, p. xxiv, the Middle Bronze Age was the first period of internationalism in the true sense of the word; there was intense interaction in various fields—religion, art, commerce and technology.

⁶¹ Janine Bourriau, “The First Intermediate Period (c.1650-1550 BC),” in Shaw, ed., *Oxford History*, 187.

⁶² Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 153.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 160

⁶⁴ Redford, *Encyclopedia*, 141

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁶ Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 163-164.

⁶⁷ Redford, *Encyclopedia*, 1992, 111.

⁶⁸ Van Seters, *Hyksos*, 181-190; Eliezer E. Oren, “The Hyksos Enigma—Introductory Overview,” in E. Oren, ed., *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1997), xxi.

⁶⁹ Oren, “Hyksos Enigma,” xix.

After taking pharonic titles, they used the Egyptian scribal administration, which they, however, adapted to their own traditions.⁷⁰ However, this was not enough to cement their legacy. Though the Hyksos had succeeded in conquering the northern two thirds of the country, the southern third remained under the control of Thebes. The loss of the ancient capital of Memphis, which was a symbol of national unity, forced the royal court at Itj-tawy to retreat to the south, the traditional heartland of Egyptian independence, and for many the Thebans were still the only legitimate Lords of the Two Lands. But Thebes, was severed from the east by the Hyksos and cut off from the lands further south by the loss of the southern forts to Kush, the center of power in Nubia. The Hyksos rulers also consciously reduced trade with Upper Egypt in favor of dealings with Palestine and Cyprus, even as they continued to by-pass Thebes and secure gold from Kush via the desert oasis routes. Consequently, Thebes was now weak and vulnerable, with famine and extreme flooding exacerbating the situation.⁷¹

As the Hyksos flourished, they established new fortified settlements in the eastern delta and Avaris became a great city, the capital of an empire that encompassed Egypt, southern Palestine, and the Lebanese coast. At Avaris, the Egyptian god Seth was still the ostensible patron, however, the Hyksos actually worshipped Baal, a foreign God, who had assimilated many of Seth's attributes. The Hyksos also did not follow Egyptian burial practices. Moreover, though they presented themselves as traditional kings, and tolerated local cults, as was part and parcel of Egyptian religious practice, the Hyksos were equally as proud of being rulers of foreign land as they were of being kings entrusted with the responsibility of Maat.⁷² Under this foreign rule, the flame of self-determination was never extinguished in Egypt and the nationalists in Thebes did not remain idle. For them, "foreign occupation of any part of the beloved land was anathema."⁷³ Consequently, Upper Egypt, near then ancient site of Naqada, became the campaign headquarters for the Theban assault against the Hyksos at Avaris. After an initial surprise attack, the city was not taken by the Thebans, though a large amount of booty was seized.⁷⁴ Ultimately, however, Ahmose (1569-1545) took Memphis, bypassed Avaris, and then captured the frontier fortress of Sile, severing Avaris's connection with Palestine. It was only after this maneuver that Avaris was finally conquered and used as a new launching point for continued campaigns against the Hyksos, who had retreated to southern Palestine.

After a siege of three years, Ahmose captured Shuharen in southern Palestine, ending the Hyksos threat.⁷⁵ The alien power had been expelled and Egypt was now unified under an indigenous king for the first time in over a hundred years. The nation had been liberated, Maat had been restored, and the New Kingdom (1569-1081), the most glorious period in Egypt's history, had begun. After, Shuharen, Egypt commenced further imperial conquests in West Asia under Dynasty XVIII (1569-1315) of the New Kingdom.

Despite the Hyksos' retention of the Egyptian scribal tradition that was indispensable for controlling the complex bureaucracy needed to govern in the Egyptian mode, and the attempt to include Seth in their religious pantheon, the Asiatic rulers of Avaris had not been perceived as purveyors of Maat by the Egyptian people. To further illustrate this point, we need but recall an inscription by New Kingdom Queen, Hatshepsut (1502-1482), near Cusae, the formal southern border of Hyksos rule, that records the restoration and rededication of temples in the area: "I have raised up what was dismembered from the first time when the Asiatics were in Avaris in the North Land (with) roving hordes in the midst of them overthrowing what had been made...The temple of the Lady of Cusae...was fallen into dissolution, the earth had swallowed up this noble sanctuary, and children danced upon its roof."⁷⁶ This royal decree shows Hatshepsut as the restorer of Maat after the chaos of foreign rule. Written more than eighty years after the Hyksos-Theban war, the war of national liberation, it is important to stress that the pharaohs of a liberated Egypt were still boasting about the expulsion of the Hyksos.

⁷⁰ Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, Israel*, 139-140. The sciences and literature were also continued, and several important papyri were kept at Avaris: the Rhind mathematical papyrus and the Westcar literary papyrus being the most important.

⁷¹ Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 168-172. It is even possible that the Hyksos ruled Thebes directly for a brief period.

⁷² David O'Connor, "The Hyksos Period in Egypt," in E. Oren, ed., *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1997), 63.

⁷³ Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, 184.

⁷⁴ See B. Gunn and A. Gardiner, "New Renderings of Egyptian Texts:II. The Expulsion of the Hyksos," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 5(1) (1918).

⁷⁵ Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, Israel*, 140-141.

⁷⁶ Bourriau, "First Intermediate," 201.

Clearly, alien rule had disrupted Maat. However, as Hatshepsut proclaimed, she had “[B]anished the abomination of the gods, and the earth has removed their footprints.”⁷⁷

5. Conclusion: Autonomy and Alternatives

For the ancient Egyptians, national liberation was the first step on the path to continued development, which was not conceived simply as an economic process, but more as an endogenously derived, ethically informed, conceptualization of “the good life.” This conceptualization of development, which began in the Predynastic Period, assumed its national character after the unification of The Two Lands by Narmer. Legitimized by a state religion and disseminated by a scribal bureaucracy, Maat, an ethic of service to the king and to the people, was clearly articulated in the *Declarations of Virtues* and *The Pyramid Texts* by the end of Dynasty V. Furthermore, this ethic of social service and personal morality manifested itself not only as doing what was right, but also as doing what was effective. Maat provided pragmatic as well as moral standards.

The Civil War that erupted during the First Intermediate Period witnessed the codification of these Maatian ethics in *Wisdom Literature* that stressed salvation in times of hardship, the return of order, and the cultivation of individual character. In addition to restoring the standard of living, the state emphasized what it meant to be a right thinking Egyptian—to have a public spirit that both king and commoner were compelled to acknowledge. During the subsequent two centuries of rule by Dynasty XII, which hailed from the southern city of Thebes, Asiatics began to enter the Nile delta in significant numbers, first as slaves, then as peaceful immigrants, and finally as conquerors. Chaos had returned to the Two Lands. It was only with the expulsion of these foreign Hyksos rulers, that Maat was restored under Dynasty XVIII, ushering in the New Kingdom that would last five hundred years before Egypt would again experience foreign rule.

That said, this analysis of Maat, as a basis for development in ancient Egypt, was not meant to advocate the creation of theocratic states in the twenty-first century. Clearly, however, it has shown that religious *ideals* are not incompatible with development, if development is not conceptualized as a universal commitment to economic growth. Moreover, this essay does not allege that in ancient Egypt declaration and deed always coincided; it simply asserts that Maatian ethics served as a moral standard for Egyptian society, as a yardstick by which the national leadership was measured and could measure itself.⁷⁸ In this regard, the ethical considerations, so often closely associated with religion, are essential, if we are to find viable alternatives to the dominant Eurocentric paradigm of development.

In closing, it would be disingenuous not to note that this post WWII conceptualization of development has, itself, been equated with religion. Indeed, Rist informs us that western religiosity has not disappeared; rather, it has migrated to the secular. Development has become a system of shared beliefs, expressed in the form of positions widely held to be true; it has assumed a religious aura that relies on prophets – economic experts – whose authority depends not upon the positive results that they produce, but more upon the complexity involved in discharging their duties. These pollsters and pundits scrutinize “broad indicators” and “pregnant trends.” And, though one may doubt a particular prophet, when the prophecy fails, one does not, as a rule, question development in general. For example, however many doubts one may have about the credibility of assertions such as “technological progress will allow today’s problems to be solved,” or “economic recovery will solve the problem of unemployment,” it is necessary to act as if these statements were, if not demonstrable, at least plausible. Disappointments, then, become more easily attributable to methodological failures than to the sacred cow of development.⁷⁹ Hence, Rist’s fundamental conclusion is that the primacy of economics must be challenged. Respect for cultural diversity, must permit that there are numerous ways to define “the good life” and that each society should be free to identify its own ultimate goals.⁸⁰

Interestingly enough, it is because development, premised upon this religion of unlimited economic growth, has not worked, that Maatian ethics can be particularly instructive. For, as noted throughout this essay, despite its religious association with the goddess that represented the cosmic balance, Maat required that which is right to also be effective. Keeping this in mind, we must, like Nyerere in the 1970s, begin by seeking practical alternatives that move away from the present internationally sanctioned development agenda.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁸ Karenga, *Maat*, 33.

⁷⁹ Rist, *Development*, 21-23.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 241

We must take the crucial step of identifying an over-zealous commitment to economic growth as the basic problem. Now, however, unlike in the 1970s, we must countenance a multiplicity of new practices that have yet to be discovered. To this end, state policies implemented by autonomous nations will obviously remain important, but now, we must also more seriously consider the programs of grass-roots community organizations that have been stifled in their attempt to control the local environments in which they live. These organizations must not be muted by the globally oriented development agendas of their respective nations –agendas that, in most instances, have completely substituted economics for ethics.