



# Ancient Africa Education: Egypt and Nubia

*Julia Troche*

## INTRODUCTION, CHALLENGES, AND LIMITATIONS

There is currently no comprehensive study of education production and transmission in ancient, pre-Hellenistic (c. 3200–300 BCE), Egypt and Nubia.<sup>1</sup> There are many variables that have contributed to this—notable among them, the fact that there is simply a dearth of evidence. Formal education institutions, for example schools, are difficult to locate in the ancient archaeological record. Textually, the earliest extant phrase translated as “school” (*at sbA*), or “room of teaching” is known from a First Intermediate Period (c. 2050 BCE) Asyut tomb (Grajetzki 2009, 211). The ancient Egyptian verb “to teach” (*sbA*) and the verb “to know” (*rx*) give evidence that education was, indeed, an emic ancient Egyptian and Nubian concept. While we may not know much about schools, libraries are attested, though still poorly understood. The Egyptian phrases “House of Life” (*pr anx*) and “House of Scrolls” (*pr mDAṯ*) are often translated as “library” and were likely associated with temples (see Gardiner 1938; Haikal 2008). It is possible that schools, or other formal institutions of education, could also have been part of temples (or temple libraries more specifically), which may obscure their identification. Alternatively, schools may have been located within royal palaces, but the same obfuscation remains intact (Grajetzki 2009, 211). Thus, there is no “place” for historians to focus their inquiry or for archaeologists to excavate. Instead, evidence from various contexts (funerary, domestic, temple, etc.) of various types (textual, visual, material) must be considered in

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J. Troche (✉)  
Missouri State University, Springfield, MO, USA  
e-mail: [JuliaTroche@missouristate.edu](mailto:JuliaTroche@missouristate.edu)

concert in order to arrive at some form of understanding of what education may have looked like in ancient Egypt and Nubia.

The notable exception to this dearth of evidence is the Egyptian scribal school. From ancient Egypt, there is relatively good evidence for scribal practice and scribal education (less so for ancient Nubia). To this end, it is possible to examine a variety of artifacts that speak to scribal training: notably, literary texts and scribal exercises recorded on papyrus, wooden writing boards, and ostraca (ceramic or limestone sherds). Thus, studies of ancient Egyptian education have largely focused on scribal training and, relatedly, literacy (see Williams 1972; Baines 1983, 2007). Additional studies have focused on vocational training, scientific and medical knowledge, and knowledge production, more generally, within communities of practice (see Nunn 2002; Allen 2005; Wendrich 2012). Problematically, though understandably, many of these studies look at only a very small segment of ancient Egyptian or Nubian society—typically literate and/or elite workmen. For example, John Baines has estimated that only about 1 percent of ancient Egyptians were literate (2007, 67). Instead of focusing on literate education, this chapter will focus much of its analysis on attempting to reconstruct, with the help of archaeological and sociological theory, what education for the vast majority of people in ancient Egypt and Nubia—the literate and illiterate, children, men, women, servants, and others—may have looked like.

This chapter will begin with a brief presentation of the histories of Egypt and Nubia and a short discussion of the challenges and limitations facing this study before outlining (and somewhat complicating) the most current scholarship on literate education in ancient Egypt and Nubia, including scribal education, and specialized education, which required vocational literacy, for example, in craft specific training, such as ceramic or metallurgy; and medical, numerical, and scientific, such as astronomical or engineering education. The majority of this chapter, however, will focus on a novel presentation of Nubian and Egyptian informal educational systems, including moral and social-behavioral education. While there is not space here to fully realize all these investigations, this chapter aims to push the boundaries of what is considered in studies of education and, by bringing together all these traditionally disparate avenues of research, aims to provide a more holistic understanding of education, broadly defined, in ancient Egypt and Nubia.

### *Historical Overview*

Civilizations emerged in the areas of Egypt and Nubia around 3200 BCE, with evidence for complex societies along the Nile dating much earlier (Wengrow 2006). Around 3200 BCE, Egypt was politically unified under the rulership of a single King (Köhler 2010). Egyptian history would then fall into a series of periods of centralization and decentralization. In the periods of centralization, typically referred to as kingdoms, a single king would rule all of Egypt (and often parts Nubia) as a semi-divine, absolute monarch.

During periods of decentralization, typically referred to as intermediate periods, local nomarchs (regional governors), high priests, and sometimes foreigners ruled a fragmented Egypt. During these intermediate periods, power in Egypt was often split between the north (aka Lower Egypt) and the south (aka Upper Egypt). In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great arrived in Egypt and brought with him Hellenistic culture. His general Ptolemy would start a new dynasty upon Alexander's death, marking major shifts in Egyptian administration, politics, social life, and education. Notably, Greek became the official language of Egyptian administration and Hellenistic culture invariably brought Hellenistic notions of education. Thus, this is a natural stopping/beginning point for historical inquiry. The relative preponderance of texts from this Ptolemaic period, and the following period of Roman occupation, also make it comparatively well studied (see Criore 2001).

While the histories of Nubia and Egypt were often entangled, an Egypto-centric perspective characterizes much of the scholarship on Nubian history. This is in part a reflex of (1) the fact that many early Nubiologists were, first and foremost, Egyptologists, (2) the reality of modern racism, and (3) in part due to the ancient Egyptians' own ethnocentrism, which colored early studies (and some unfortunately not so early studies, not to be mentioned here) of ancient Nubia (see Breasted 1909; Reisner 1919). In general, however, more recent research tends to move away from these problematic approaches (see Smith 1995; Török 2008). The term "Nubia" is a Roman term that is used in modern scholarship to refer to the region of the Central Nile Valley, from Khartoum in the south, where the Blue and White Nile merge into a single inundating river, to the first cataract at Aswan in the north. This equates roughly to modern-day Sudan, though the ancient Nubians would have lived mostly along the Nile and in the eastern desert between the River Nile and the Red Sea. We do not know what the indigenous people called this region, but the ancient Egyptians often used the term Kush. Nubia quickly became a cultural and economic center, with goods often sought after by its neighbors: ivory, large gold reserves, ebony, and incense. Lower Nubia (that is northern Nubia) shared a border with Upper Egypt and so here we see a "Third Space" emerge—a zone of cross-cultural interaction and entanglement (Bhabha 1996). A number of powerful kingdoms ruled out of different capitals in Middle and Lower Nubia. Notable among these is the Kingdom of Kerma—preeminent during the second millennium BCE during Egypt's Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period. During the Egyptian New Kingdom (c. 1500–1050 BCE), much of Nubia fell under Egyptian control, as Egypt stretched its borders of influence south into Nubia and north into the Levant. Following the reign of Ramesses III, Egypt began to lose these territories as a powerful group emerged in Upper Nubia: the first millennium BCE Kingdom of Kush. The Kushite Kingdom had capital cities at Napata (c. 850–590 BCE) and Meroë (c. 590 BCE–350 CE). It was during this period of Kushite primacy, under the reign of King Piye, that the Nubians conquered Egypt and ruled Egypt as Pharaohs of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty.

Writing is first attested in Egypt around 3100 BCE, in Tomb U-j (Baines 2004). From this point on, writing is known from all periods of Egyptian history. The ancient Egyptians wrote in a pictographic system known as hieroglyphs, as well as a more mundane cursive script, hieratic. Later stages of the language introduced new scripts, such as demotic and Coptic (see Allen 2014 for an introduction to these various stages and scripts). Writing did not develop in Nubia along a similar pattern. Notably, there is no indigenous writing known in Nubia before approximately the fourth century BCE. From various periods of Nubian history, for example the Napatan cemetery site of el-Kurru (c. eighth–seventh century BCE), Egyptian writing is employed by scribes familiar with it (Török 2008, 307). The site of el-Kurru is still undergoing excavations, currently by the International Kurru Archaeological Project, and much more is to be learned; however, it seems as if Egyptian writing was used in Kush, predominantly in royal, funerary contexts (Emberling et al. 2015). There is no clear evidence, then, that the Nubians of Kush were using Egyptian writing for administration, or day-to-day record keeping. From about the fourth century BCE, there is evidence for distinct Meroitic writing. Unfortunately, however, Meroitic remains mostly undeciphered. Griffith was first to identify some elements of Meroitic and others built upon his work, identifying consonants and general rules of the language, but without full comprehension (see Griffith 1911).

This lack of access to an indigenous, Nubian writing system fundamentally hampers investigations into ancient Nubian education. What it does tell us, however, is that Nubian education was not focused on literacy, as opposed to what is evinced by the Egyptian evidence. Instead, the production and transmission of knowledge in Nubia were largely part of oral culture. Certainly, though, the same could be suggested, and indeed I do suggest as much, for Egypt. Even though there are tens of thousands of documents ascribed to ancient Egyptian scribes, literacy in ancient Egypt remained limited. Furthermore, while still important to investigate, exclusively studying texts and literate education limits our inquiry to the most elite sector of ancient society.

## LITERATE EDUCATION

By default, when we speak of education and literacy in ancient Egypt and Nubia, we are mostly speaking about the literacy of ancient men. Furthermore, due to the lack of writing for much of Nubia's history, we are also mostly talking about ancient Egyptians. While some women certainly were literate and educated (see below), the vast majority of our evidence speaks exclusively of male literacy. John Baines wrote extensively on this topic and it is of no service to re-hash his arguments and statistics here. Instead, those interested should seek out his 2007 compilation entitled *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt*. In summation, he suggests literacy in ancient Egypt was around 1 percent (Baines 2007, 67). Though by no means

universally agreed upon, the point reflected by this statistic is the incredibly low rate of literacy among ancient Egyptians. Notably, in his analysis Baines does not include evidence for semi-literacy, which certainly was a reality for many.

While we do not have physical evidence for schools, a number of scribal practice texts are extant with instructor notations, which speak to the practice of schooling. Presumably, a student would copy a text, and a teacher would correct his pupil's work. The British Museum's Rhind Mathematical Papyrus (EA 10058) and Mathematical Leather Roll (EA 10250.1 and EA 10250.2) provide evidence for the types of mathematical training afforded to scribes, for example, algebra (division, multiplication, fractions); "word problems" (workers worked different amounts during the week, so based on these ratios how do you divvy up the rations?); and geometry (volume, area). More commonly, school exercise texts, such as the Brooklyn Museum's wood exercise board (16.119), record popular stories, such as the "Satire of the Trades" or the "Instructions of King Amenemhat" (see Simpson 2003 for translations). These boards (Fig. 2.1) are typically in hieratic and evince that ancient Egyptian scribes likely would have learned hieratic before hieroglyphs (the opposite of how modern students learn ancient Egyptian).

Being members of the royal family, most Kings were presumably literate; however, they probably had to do very little reading and writing themselves (Baines and Eyre 2007, 78–83). Some may have had tutors that taught them a wide variety of topics and skills. Senenmut, for example, a high official in



**Fig. 2.1** Writing board from the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York (28.9.4) shows a student's writing in black ink, with a tutor's corrections in red ink (*Source* <https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/eg/web-large/DP234742.jpg>)

Hatshepsut's reign (c. 1450 BCE) was the tutor of her daughter, Neferure (Dorman 1988). This practice was likely typical for royal and elite children. Some women in ancient Egypt (and presumably in Nubia, but for this we have less evidence) were certainly literate and, more than that, were formally trained in scribal schools.<sup>2</sup> The word for “female scribe” (*sXAt*) is known from at least the Middle Kingdom onwards (Fischer 1976). Women who held important offices in Egypt, such as the God's Wife of Amun or Divine Adoratrice positions, were certainly literate, as it was fundamental to the performance of their duties. Baines suggested that “there is no iconographic or textual context in which women would normally have been presented as writing (reading being a rare motif in any case), but this gap simply shows that female writing was not part of the official, public life represented by monuments and documents” (Baines 2007, 84). Challenging this claim, I highlight a scene from the Saqqara tomb of Horemheb (a general who would become Pharaoh at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty), which shows, I suggest, female scribes recording prisoners of war, in what would have been a very official and arguably public tableau (Martin 1989).<sup>3</sup>

Both men and women were also invoked in Letters to the Dead—letters written by the living, petitioning the dead for aid or protection (Donnat Beauquier 2014; Troche 2018). This does not, however, necessarily mean that these dead were literate during life. The special status received by the transfigured dead—those who became an *akh* (meaning “effective one”) in the afterlife—presumably also provided the dead with literacy. It is unlikely that every tomb owner whose tomb was inscribed, or whose tomb included textual artifacts, was literate during life. Instead, it seems more likely that the transfigured state of the dead enabled them to “read” the texts in their tomb. Thus, mortuary evidence cannot, by itself, confirm real-life literacy.

### SPECIALIZED EDUCATION

Most vocations in ancient Egypt and Nubia would have required specialized knowledge—a sort of professional literacy. While the materials and technologies of ancient crafts have long been the focus of scholarship (e.g. Nicholson and Shaw 2000), the modes by which this knowledge was produced and transmitted have not been studied as much. In part, this is due to the fact that this sort of knowledge transfer leaves ephemeral traces in the archaeological and textual records, making it challenging to reconstruct. Notable among recent scholarship on this topic is Willeke Wendrich's 2012 edited volume entitled *Archaeology and Apprenticeship*, which takes a multicultural approach informed by archaeological and sociological theory. In particular, the concept of *communities of practice* is mobilized as a framework for investigation (as first articulated by Wegner 1998). Wegner suggests that “a social theory of learning must therefore integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and of knowing” (Wegner 1998, 4–5). Wegner, and the authors in Wendrich's volume, emphasizes the social

aspect of learning. This chapter takes an approach inspired in part by *communities of practice* below in the discussion of informal education. In terms of specialized education, it is within communities of practice that trainees learned their craft. In these apprenticeships, students would become literate in their craft's terminology and skills, learning practical knowledge and how to implement this knowledge. Additionally, it "focused on gaining body knowledge, a physical memory embedded in muscle and the central nervous system, so that in many phases of the work the body simply seems to 'know' what to do" (Wendrich 2012, 4). With this framework in mind, we can speak about specialized education as multifaceted, involving intellectual, physical, and social aspects that work in concert.

There is not enough room here to discuss in detail what we know about all types of vocational training, craft specialization, and scientific knowledge in ancient Egypt and Nubia. Instead, some of the primary sources are highlighted that we rely on to give readers a sense of the scope and types of evidence available to historians. In general, primary sources recorded what the ancient Egyptians (and here we know significantly more for Egypt than for Nubia) knew about various topics, but they do not record much about the processes of knowledge production.

Tomb decorations regularly depict scenes of daily life, which often include scenes of craft production. The west wall of the storeroom in the Mastaba of Ti, for example, illustrates what is perhaps the earliest extant depiction of a potter's wheel in use in Egypt (Epron et al. 1966). The Tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100) shows numerous scenes of manufacture including the production of beads and leather, carpentry, and metallurgy (Hodel-Hoernes 2000). In the New Kingdom, stellar observations in the form of star clocks (aka star tables) are known in a handful of tombs, notably the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Senemut and the Nineteenth Dynasty royal cenotaph of King Sety I. These depictions, found in tombs and coffins, along with the so-called Book of Nut, preserve astronomical knowledge from ancient Egypt that was likely also accessible to Nubians (Kelley and Milone 2005). Many of these star clocks were recorded and compiled into three volumes published by Neugebauer and Parker in 1960 and 1969. These charts reflect an intimate knowledge of the movements of celestial bodies. Some anomalies have been identified as "mistakes," although more recent studies on these texts and illustrations have tried to show how these "mistakes" actually reflect astronomical realities (Depuydt 2010).

Medical knowledge evidently was primarily recorded on papyrus, with knowledge being transmitted in the form of medical encyclopedias that provided natural and ritual remedies for various ailments. Notable papyri include the Kahun Papyri, Edwin Smith Papyrus, Ebers Papyrus, and Chester Beatty Medical Papyrus. A catalogue of medicine-related artifacts published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an instructive introduction to medicine in ancient Egypt (Allen 2005).



We have less access to processes of Nubian, specialized knowledge transmission. Their monuments, however, speak to their ingenuity and mastery of engineering, for example, the Deffufa and massive tumuli of Kerma, and the pyramids of el-Kurru, Nufi, and Meroë. Locally produced artifacts in ceramic, stone, and metal, such as those excavated and displayed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, speak to the Nubians' training with various materials and technologies. A focused study on Nubian material culture and communities of practice could shed incredible light on this under researched and understood aspect of Nubian education and training.

### INFORMAL EDUCATION

So far, we have focused on what we know about formal institutions and systems of education in ancient Egypt and Nubia. Informal education, however, was the means by which most ancient Egyptians and Nubians learned about their world and expected social behaviors. Informal education would occur in the home, within local communities—including, those of the living and the dead—and be performed publicly through festival and ritual enactments. In these contexts, performances, texts, and visual culture were mobilized as tools of instruction. As with formalized education, we can better access informal systems of learning from ancient Egypt than we can from ancient Nubia, due to the relative dearth of evidence coming out of Nubia. However, since our analysis of informal education is based in part on applications of sociological theory, we can surmise more about informal systems of education in Nubia than we can about formal education. After a brief discussion of orality in ancient Egypt and Nubia, this section will consider moral education, including specifically the role of the dead as moral guides, and performative education, as manifest in two foodways-focused case studies.

#### *Orality*

In both Egypt and Nubia, informal education was a largely oral affair, with written texts and visual culture, I argue, operating as teaching tools rather than as textbooks—that is, compendiums of knowledge. Indeed, this chapter is far from the first to emphasize the fact that the transmission of ideas in the ancient world was founded on an entanglement between oral, performative culture, and literacy (see Thomas 1992; Small 1997; Baines 2007). Orality in this context refers not simply to the spoken word but, following a definition provided by John Baines (2007), specifically to the “conduct of significant social institutions, especially those which convey information in a targeted manner, through spoken language” (148). Where this discussion notably differs from Baines on this point, is that it does not limit orality to be the product of “significant social institutions,” but includes all forms of verbal communication that are “targeted” and are intentionally mobilized as a means of education. Speaking about ancient Egypt specifically, but perhaps



more broadly applicable, Baines (2007) has pointed out that “material culture and oral culture in language are indispensable to human existence; the same is not true of writing” (146). He further asserts that “it was normal for significant texts to be memorized to some extent and for their written form to be an aide-mémoire as something to be read out directly” (Baines 2007, 152–153). He further draws attention to the fact that “inscriptional texts and belles lettres exhibit marked verbal patterning,” thus confirming the oral, performative aspect of many written texts from ancient Egypt (Baines 2007, 158). Texts and material culture, then, can be points of departure for discussion of oral traditions and vice versa. For example, if we find a didactic text in a single tomb, its archaeological context suggests a limited (if not singular) audience. However, we may be able to extrapolate a larger audience based on what we know about orality in ancient Egypt and Nubia. This didactic text, which acts as a moral guide for the tomb owner, may be used to speak more generally of conceptions of morality based on the assumption that such a text would be spoken aloud and perhaps memorized by numbers impossible to determine. In this example, the audience need not be literate, then, to have experienced and learned from this text.

### *Moral Education I: Didactic Texts*

An entire corpus of ancient Egyptian texts falls into the category of didactic literature—texts meant to provide moral and social instruction, typically framed as a father imparting wisdom to his son (Perdue 2008, 17).<sup>4</sup> A unique corpus of didactic texts is not known from ancient Nubia, but the modes and processes through which moral education was instilled could have been similar. The characters in these instructional texts are usually elite men, such as kings and viziers, who were the kings’ second-in-command. So, it would be easy to argue that these didactic texts were geared uniquely toward an elite, male audience, or even the singular son identified in the text’s framing. This would be shortsighted, however, for three main reasons: those implicitly addressed in the instructions, the framed characters, and the omnipresence of orality in Egyptian and Nubian society.

Firstly, the texts in themselves give away that their audience is not a singular person, but society at large. The “Instruction of Ptahhotep,” for example, is framed as a lesson from a vizier to his son who will take over his position, but within the text, he addresses men from varied status and rank: “if you are a leader” (line 6, 3–4), “if you are one who sits at the table of one greater than you” (line 6, 11), “if you plough” (line 7, 5), “if you are of humble-rank and a follower of a man of excellence” (line 7, 7) “if you are a man of excellence” (line 7, 10).<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, some of the men, or characters (their historicity is not always known), called upon in the framing of these texts, such as Kagemni, were deified as gods, while others, such as Hordjedef, were celebrated within popular memory for millennia as great sages of the past (see P. Chester Beatty

IV, EA 10684; Gardiner 1935). Their fame would indicate that their teachings were not restricted to a closed faction of society. The fact that the didactic texts were sometimes written hundreds of years after their death and pseudo-epigraphically attributed to them because of their popularity further suggests that these texts were intentionally framed with larger audiences in mind. This aspect is explored further below, as the role of the dead as moral guides is considered.

Thirdly, if we remember the oral nature of ancient Egyptian society, as discussed above, in which texts were meant to be memorized and vocalized, the audience of these texts need not be an elite, literate few, but is more likely intended for audiences of varied ages, genders, professions, social status, etc. Thus, if we assume many stories, for which we have preserved textual artifacts, were more widely known, memorized, and possibly spoken aloud for varied literate and illiterate audiences, then we can begin to speak of learning and education among the non-elite. The non-elite, here, could logically include children, servants, and men and women of varied status. While some forms of education would require occupational literacy (a sculptor would need to have a basic understanding of the density and composition of different rocks), oral, moral education requires only that one is hearing able and can comprehend the words being spoken.

If we accept, then, the assertion that texts which fall into the category of “didactic literature” were accessible to varied audiences, we can begin to speak of moral education in ancient Egypt (and possibly Nubia), broadly defined. What moral lessons and ideals do these texts impart? The “Teaching of Ptahhotep,” in which an elderly Old Kingdom vizier shares his wisdom with his son, is composed of approximately forty-five verses, each with specific nuggets of wisdom and moral guidance. Clear themes emerge in this text: every man has his appropriate place in society and should act accordingly; one should be consistent in work and fair and honest to those above and below your rank; one should listen to guidance and speak only when necessary; one should be beware of women for they are both frivolous and powerful.<sup>6</sup> Ptahhotep instructs his son, and arguably Egyptian society more generally, to not be arrogant, selfish, nor think too highly of yourself: “know your neighbors (lit. ‘those at your side’) and your things will endure” (line 15, 3), “be cheerful,” literally “be bright of face” (line 14, 12). He emphasizes respect and obedience: “bow to your superior” (line 13, 9), “the one who listens is beloved of the god” (line 16, 6–7). The “Instruction of Kagemni,” which is really an instruction to Kagemni, similarly emphasizes the importance of silence or careful speech and proper social behavior. For example, gluttony is described as “despicable” and Kagemni is encouraged to not hold grudges: “do not fight about meat in the presence of a greedy man; take what he gives you; do not deny it. Then matters will be good” (lines 1, 9–10).<sup>7</sup> The “Instruction of Hordjedef,” outlines the ideal family: “Establish a household, and find (lit. *jrr* “make” or “achieve”) for yourself a reliable wife (lit. “a wife

who is master of the heart”), and you will beget a male child.”<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on building a household, meaning a literal house but also a family, extends into the Hereafter. Indeed, Hordjedef instructs his son to equip his house in the necropolis and to “make excellent your place in the West.”

These didactic texts, thus, outline expected social behavior, for example, following orders, building a family, but they also articulate ancient Egyptian morality and expose gluttony, ignorance, and hotheadedness as key vices. The ability to be calm, generous, and educated is celebrated as a virtue. Education, as a virtue, does not refer to being literate, but speaks to awareness—a lack of ignorance. The insistence on listening and the power of heeding counsel illustrates this virtue. But these virtues and vices, the morality espoused in these texts, are ideological and idealized. They do not necessarily reflect individual belief or practice. Neither do they reflect historical social norms or real performed behaviors. Morality, generally speaking, is fundamentally ideological and idealized (Gert and Gert 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Moral education, then, is meant to express ideal social convention. Tobin suggests that “although [the Instruction of Ptahhotep] was not intended to be a complete compendium of Old Kingdom thought and morality, it does nevertheless present a very good picture of the general attitude and outlook of that period” (in Simpson 2003, 129). Indeed, Ptahhotep’s opening verses frame the story: he asks the king to allow his son to succeed in his position of vizier, and in imparting wisdom to his son also characterizes the goal of his lesson to “instruct the ignorant man regarding knowledge and regarding appropriate speech” (line 5, 7). This notion of “appropriateness” is known emically in ancient Egypt as the concept and goddess *ma’at*. Besides these didactic texts, one of the most common places to find texts espousing the concept of *ma’at* and proper social behavior were Egyptian tombs.

### *Moral Education II: The Dead as Moral Guides*

The dead in ancient Egypt retained (imagined) agency within the realm of the living. Despite the death of their bodies, the dead could influence the living as long as they could attain *akh* status. This transformation was achieved through special “akhification” rites and the passing of the judgment before Osiris, as visualized in the Book of the Dead Spell 125 (Kees 1977; Otto 1942; Pirenne 1959). This transformation would result in the dead becoming *akh*, literally “an effective one” that could protect and aid the living or cause harm (Friedman 1984; Janák 2013). These effective dead were inherently social and, in the ancient Egyptian mind, possessed real efficacy. They were petitioned for aid and protection; written examples of this act include the corpus known as Letters to the Dead (Donnat Beauquier 2014; Troche 2018). In return, the living would sustain the *akh* with real and symbolic (often voiced) offerings of food and beer (Harrington 2014).

The dead, then, were “alive” and could function as harbingers of wisdom and knowledge. The *akh* were often described in funerary texts as being

*apr* or “equipped.” The effective dead were expected to have the necessary equipment in the afterlife but were also expected to be equipped with the appropriate spells and knowledge. Following the term *akh apr*, “equipped, effective spirit” we often see references to this special knowledge possessed by the dead: “I know every excellent thing,”<sup>10</sup> “I know all the secret magic,”<sup>11</sup> and “a lector priest who knows his spells.”<sup>12</sup> The dead were, thus, possessors of special knowledge and because of their communication with the living, should be understood as supernatural educators. Specifically, the dead were moral guides and their writings, preserved upon the facades of their tombs, petitioned the living: referred to as “Appeals to the Living.” They also called upon the living to give offerings because the dead lived their lives in accordance with *ma’at*. In this way, the dead were moral role models.

The earliest extant example of such an Appeal to the Living dates to the Fifth Dynasty, of the Old Kingdom (c. 2450 BCE), and thereafter becomes a typical feature of tombs, but are also found inscribed on stelae (Shubert 2007, 16). The appeals are typically written upon the facade of the tomb, to face outwards toward the living who are expected to walk by the tomb, as part of the larger biography of the tomb owner. Though possibly, if not probably, written while the tomb owner was still alive, the voice of these inscriptions was the dead, as *akh*. These biographies are known from tombs and stelae from all over Egypt, including the southern Egyptian sites of Aswan and Elephantine, which were within the zone of persistent Egyptian-Nubian cultural interaction. It is possible, then, that these moral teachings were accessible to the Nubians who certainly encountered these tombs on occasion; however, the ideological, Egyptian superiority rhetoric that is sometimes found in these biographies suggest that the Nubians may not have been their primary intended audience.

Harkhuf’s biography is an oft-cited example of such a biographic inscription. Based on the preeminence of this tomb, the titles he lists, and the activities he describes in his biography, Harkhuf was likely a well-respected official of the Sixth Dynasty (near the end of the Old Kingdom, c. 2200 BCE) who was native of the island of Elephantine, along the traditional Egyptian-Nubian border. He was a role model during life, and this seems to have continued into death. Through his inscription, he educates all those who pass by his tomb, as to how to live a life in accordance with *ma’at*, as expected, ideal social behavior. Harkhuf, and other authors of these Appeals, explicitly call upon their intended audience: “Oh, all the living who are upon the earth, and who shall pass by this tomb...” (line 1, 5).<sup>13</sup> Harkhuf models proper moral behavior: “I gave bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked; I brought to shore the one who had no boat... I am the one who speaks well and repeats that which is desired. Never would I say anything bad to a powerful man against any men...” (lines 1, 5–7).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, an Old Kingdom nomarch (a sort of regional governor) named Qar also takes credit for giving bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked, but Qar also “gave milk jugs full of milk” and repaid the debts of those who lived in his district, buried all

the men of his district who did not have a son to do this for them, and protected the poor man from the powerful man (line 5).<sup>15</sup> Qar was also “loved by his father, praised by his mother, and loved by his brothers” (line 7).<sup>16</sup>

These behaviors, modeled by the dead via their funerary inscriptions, mirror well what is dictated as proper social convention in the didactic texts discussed above. Proper, moral, social behavior, thus, consisted of protecting the needy, being selfless and generous, and being a beloved member of the family. The didactic texts and the Appeals to the Living speak to the same conceptions of expected social convention, but were employed in different contexts.

### *Performative Education: Theoretical Considerations*

While performative education is being discussed under the heading of “informal” education, performative education could, nevertheless, be highly regulated, even at the level of the state. I consider it “informal” because it was not singular, mandated, nor was there an established curriculum. Similar to moral education, performative education sought to teach a wide range of social conventions and values to literate and illiterate populations from varying social ranks and with diverse identities, for example, children, women, men, servants, elite, alike. Notably, performative education was experiential. Public, social performances could, according to Judith Butler (1988) “[render] social laws explicit” (526). While Butler is speaking specifically about gender identity construction and transformation, what she describes is basically a process of learning and educating through social dramatization. Feminist theory, as argued by Butler (1988), has “sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context” (522). In essence, this chapter seeks to do the same thing here, but instead suggests that certain performances (‘individual acts and practices’) can be understood as pedagogical acts through which “systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted” through ritualization, as defined by Catherine Bell (1992).

Ritual, as a term and concept, is often used to talk about an active, physical manifestation of religious belief. This supposed dichotomy between belief and practice, thought and action, was first properly articulated within the academy by Émile Durkheim (1965, 51) and was the standard until Bell’s landmark study, *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice* (1992). Bell (1992) recognizes this dichotomy but argues that ritual can in fact be a “mechanism” by which the two dichotomies of thought (belief) and action (practice/behavior) are entangled rather than opposed (19–20). Within a community, then, ritual (specifically what Bell would refer to as “ritualization”) could be a way to create, express, and maintain a collective set of beliefs and practices.<sup>17</sup> Ritual, Bell argues, is a way to create a bridge between tradition and inescapable, constant social change. Inherent in Bell’s definition of ritual is the fact that

power is always, in some way, integrated into the ritualized performance. It re-asserts elite ideology, instills hierarchies, and actuates power (Bell 1992, 195). Ritual, specifically “ritualization,” is not just an instrument of power, but is a manifestation of power itself (Bell 1992, 193–223). Public, social performances, as in “ritualization” and “ritual social drama,” then, could be a means by which the state or other interested institution (such as the temple) could demonstrate its power and negotiate relations through directed social programming, that is, mass education.

In Egypt, this could manifest as one of the many royal and divine festivals that were celebrated throughout the year. The *heb sed* and *Opet* festivals emphasized royal renewal and divine access (Bleeker 1967). The Beautiful Feast of the Valley emphasized the fertility of the land of Egypt, as personified by the sexual union between Amun and Hathor, and was a celebration of continued life after earthly death, culminating in a feast where the dead were honored attendees (Ullmann 2007). Festivals that on the surface seem to be celebratory (certainly a state paid feast was a high point in the calendar for most), could also have been, and certainly were, opportunities to confirm social behavior and instill ideologies and shared histories. Festivals, in particular, made use of landscape and place as points of departure for education. Indeed, the repeated patterning of ritual acts, from a post-processual perspective, is the means by which cognitive structures of ideology are imprinted on the material world. As anthropologist Keith Basso states, “wisdom sits in places” (1996). Thus, I suggest that informal, performative education in ancient Egypt and Nubia can be accessed through an analysis of repeated, ritualizing acts in which a community’s worldview and ethos are enacted. These performances could teach, through experiential learning, social values, at the micro- and macro-levels, to a wide range of audiences. Following are two case studies in which ritualizing performances, specifically acts of cooking, eating, and drinking, were mobilized to educate populations, though to two very different ends, within the larger community (macro) and at the individual level (micro).

### *Case Study 1: Rules to Be Learned; Food and Drink as Instruction at the Community Level*

Food procurement, cooking, eating, and drinking are mundane activities of daily life. We must eat to live. Nevertheless, a world of symbolism and power negotiation has emerged around these otherwise mundane practices. Our foodways, that is what we consume, how we consume, when we consume (and don’t consume), have become markers of our cultural, geographic, economic, and religious identities (Goody 1982; Harris 1985). Ritualized food and drink consumption, then, can also be a performance in which social conventions, hierarchies, and ideology are taught and reaffirmed.

Speaking specifically about the Fur of the Darfur region (lit. “land of the Fur”) of western Sudan, Randi Haaland describes how her husband, Gunnar



Haaland (1998), was able to show how the staples of millet/sorghum products, beer, and porridge were also “sources for metaphorical associations with which the Fur interpret their social world and act in it” (Haaland 2007, 165). Food, then, could be mobilized and used as a tool of instruction, confirming the Fur’s unique social world. Beer drinking could be similarly social and instructive. Haaland (2007) points to the practice, which she describes as “wide-spread in East Africa,” with beer drinking being a “fundamental part of the definition of the social person” (166). She observes that “elaborate rules specify how the straw is to be held and how one should suck the beer” (Haaland 2007, 166). While we do not know of such explicit rules associated with beer drinking in ancient Egypt and Nubia, images from the ancient Near East show groups of people drinking beer through straws as early as the third millennium BCE. Thus, I suggest this specific method of beer drinking has a long history in East Africa and the Near East. Indeed, while we lack images of beer and alcohol consumption in ancient Nubia “there can be little doubt that alcohol was known and valued in the region, not only during the Kushite period, but also considerably earlier” (Edwards 1996, 73).<sup>18</sup>

The earliest extant depiction of this type of communal beer drinking through straws comes from a Sumerian cylinder seal, titled Lapis Luzili Cylinder Seal (BM 121545).<sup>19</sup> The line drawing below is representative of this seal (Fig. 2.2).

In Nubia, archaeological evidence confirms that “within Kushite society, sorghum and its products, especially beers, developed considerable significance in mortuary and other ritual contexts as well as in socioeconomic relations more generally” (Edwards 1996, 65). Specifically, the Kushite ceramic assemblage includes approximately 75% liquid storage vessels, many of which stored beer (Edwards 1996, 71). The role of beer as a labor mobilizer is



Fig. 2.2 Line Drawing of a Sumerian cylinder seal, based on British Museum 121545. Drawing by Akira Alves



suggested by Edwards (1996) and Haaland (2007), among others (see Barth 1967; Dietler 1990), but neither put much emphasis on the educational role of beer drinking. Edwards, in following Dietler's study of Iron Age France (1990, 360–365), contends that “ceremonial drinking appears to be particularly prevalent in societies where drinking customs were developed aboriginally and have a long history, often reflecting and reinforcing aspects of status differentiation; gender-based distinctions often being prominent” (Edwards 1996, 68–69). Butler would describe this, arguably, as evidence for “systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures” being “enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices” (Butler 1988, 522). Certainly, within Kushite society, sorghum was beyond mundane. A tomb scene, for example, shows that sorghum was a gift given to King Sherkoror from the gods (Edwards 1996, 75, fig. 3). Sorghum, and arguably also beer as its product, was thus symbols of power. Ritualized beer drinking in ancient Nubia provided an opportunity to teach a community about the power dynamics inherent in that community. Notably those who participated, elite men, wielded more power than those who were only able to observe, such as women, children, and servants. The performance reiterated this power hierarchy, and passive observance of the performance would reconfirm one's acceptance of their position within this network.

*Case Study 2: Rules to Be Broken; Food and Drink  
as Subversion at an Individual Level*

As much as food and drink could be used as tools within instructive, ritualizing performances of power, they could also be used as subtle modes of transgression. The subversive use of food and drink confirms their role as tools of instruction. The assumption is that food and drink have embedded cultural meanings that are learned through social experience. If the social experience is subversive, then the food and drink can take on second lives and become tools of instruction anew; this time for a counter-culture. This would only work if food and drink were, in the first place, implements of informal social instruction.

In rare instances do foodstuffs remain intact from antiquity. Instead, scholars of ancient foodways often rely on visual culture and archaeology: for example, physical remains of hearths and ceramics, i.e. the vessels in which, and upon which, food and drink are stored, cooked, and consumed. Ceramics from Nubia and Egypt are distinguishable and reflect different cultural practices (see Smith 2003, 43, fig. 3.2). These cultural practices were generalized by Haaland (2007) as a Near Eastern “bread-oven” tradition versus an African “porridge-pot” tradition, with Egypt expressing entangled elements of both traditions, but in a way unique and archaeologically identifiable.<sup>20</sup>

It is within the cultural “Third Space”<sup>21</sup> of southern Egypt and northern Nubia (roughly the area between the second cataract of the Nile and ancient Thebes) that Stuart Tyson Smith (2003) has looked for evidence

of an Egyptian-Nubian culture, which subverts the imperial rhetoric of the Egyptian state. That is, instead of subjugating the “wretched Kush,” Smith finds artifacts of Nubian culture within an Egyptian controlled context. Specifically, he looks at Nubian ceramics at the site of the Egyptian fort at Askut (located near the second cataract) as a marker of Nubian cultural presence. While pots may not equal people, cooking vessels are particularly imbued with cultural heritage and practices.<sup>22</sup> This is why, as Haaland has shown, a bread-oven culture emerged in the Near East and a porridge-pot culture emerged in Nubia (Haaland 2007). Furthermore, ceramics and acts of feasting (which can be traced via ceramic artifacts), in both ancient Egypt and Nubia, expressed social capital and identity. Thus, the use of Nubian versus Egyptian style ceramic wares was culturally significant especially during a period, the New Kingdom, in which Egypt was actively expressing its cultural and political dominance in Nubia. This process was once described as “Egyptianization” and presumed a Nubian acculturation to a “superior” Egyptian culture (Reisner 1919). Most Egyptologists, however, in light of the growing discourse on colonial history, have moved away from this narrative, instead favoring a narrative that recognizes Nubian agency, and embraces concepts like hybridity and entanglement (see Smith 1995; Török 2008).

Egyptian soldiers (who were almost exclusively male) resided at Askut alongside a significant population of Nubians. During the New Kingdom, at the height of Egypt’s imperial expansion into the Near East and Nubia, one would expect Nubian pottery at this site to be at an all-time low. Instead, there is a preponderance of Nubian cooking vessels (three times more in the New Kingdom than the Middle Kingdom) across the site, which could indicate a rise in inter-marrying, as women typically did the majority of the cooking, and/or cultural entanglement (Smith 2003, 51–53).<sup>23</sup> In spite of the xenophobic, Egypto-centric rhetoric of the New Kingdom state, it seems as though (presumably) Nubians at Askut used Nubian wares, which were symbolic of their foodways, and by association their cultural values, histories, and practices. Other artifacts, such as Nubian jewelry and fertility figurines, further suggest that these vessels were in fact being used by people who at least partially identified as Nubian, versus Egyptian (Smith 2003, 53).<sup>24</sup> However, the use of Nubian cookware seems to have only occurred within the home or among the local community of women who cooked together. Within “public” spaces, serving vessels of Egyptian style, not Nubian, were dominant (Smith 2003, 55). It is possible and probable, that these vessels were records of cultural histories and identities that were used as part of informal, cultural education that occurred within the home and among the community of Nubians at Askut. At the very least, it is likely that these vessels preserved Nubian, specifically Kerman, foodways, including recipes, techniques, and perhaps a shared heritage more generally. Because these wares were not consistently used within the public realm, they may reflect an act of individual transgression (or not—it is impossible to say how it was perceived). At the very least, it could reflect that Nubians, who lived at an Egyptian fort,

were holding on to some aspects of Nubian identity during a period of active Egyptian cultural and political dominance in Nubia. While we may not be able to access precisely what information was shared, it is argued here that these vessels are evidence that informal education was occurring in these contexts. Where these vessels could be used (private versus public) had to be taught, as well as the recipes and techniques inherent to these vessels. Furthermore, it suggests that the teachers were perhaps Nubian matriarchs who used the act of cooking as teaching moments.

Informal education, then, was assessed here in four manifestations: (1) Didactic lessons, based on extant textual copies, which were shared through oral performances; (2) Funerary texts through which the dead acted as moral role models; (3) Food and drinking as a “top-down” ritualizing process that instilled and confirmed social hierarchies and decorum within communities; (4) Food and drinking as a “bottom-up” mode of creating and transmitting knowledge on an individual or sub-family level, that was sometimes mobilized by counter-culture agents to retain identities that could be understood as transgressive. In all four of these instances, education was informal—it was not regulated or even planned. They were oral, social, and performative, making them more ephemeral within the archaeological and textual records. Sociological and anthropological theory, however, helps to fill in the gaps and allows for us to reconstruct possible processes of informal education in ancient Egypt and Nubia.

## CONCLUSION

Knowledge production and transmission in pre-Hellenistic Egypt and Nubia were dynamic and largely informal, often built around communities of practice. Schools certainly existed, but archaeological evidence remains elusive. Textual and visual records speak to the existence of formal systems of education in Egypt, such as scribal schools and tutors, but evidence for this is notably lacking in Nubia, for Nubian elite did not emphasize literacy as a status marker (cf. Egypt) nor was written language their primary mode of communication for much of Nubia’s early history. Most education, then, took place within communities of practice, in public, and within local communities. The analysis of foodways is a productive category of study, for its ubiquity across social contexts and due to the recoverable traces left behind in the material record. Furthermore, food can be used by those with political and/or social power to instill group identity, but it can also be used by those with less power to retain alternative identities, histories, and cultures. In this chapter, there was not enough space here to do justice to everything deserving of consideration. What is presented are well-studied “facts” that push interpretive boundaries in an attempt to present the vast spectrum of what we know and what we do not know about education in ancient Egypt and Nubia. Instead

of accepting what we do not know, hopefully this chapter successfully provided an alternative approach; one that takes some analytical leaps, but is grounded equally in theory and historical reality. Because when confronted by minimal or challenging evidence, as is often the case for antiquity, for Nubia, for subaltern or illiterate peoples, academic silence is not an acceptable solution. Instead, as historians, the hope is to continue this academic trend of studying voiceless and underrepresented groups—even if that means we get it wrong sometimes as we deal with broken and inconclusive evidence. Because it is through this continual process of analysis, comparison, and evaluation, that we get closer to a better understanding of the dynamism and diversity of the human experience.

## NOTES

1. On education in ancient Egypt, see Brunner (1957). On education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, see Cribiore (2001). No study, however, has comprehensively considered both Egyptian and Nubian education in antiquity. While Brunner's work is foundational and a significant contribution to the field, it is largely text-driven. Thus, there is a lot of room to expand upon this work, especially in considering visual and material culture, more recent archaeological finds, and theoretical approaches, for instance, socio-behavioral psychology.
2. On women's literacy at Deir el-Medina, see J. J. Janssen (1992, pp. 81–94); in general, see Baines and Eyre (2007, pp. 83–89) and Grajetzki (2009, pp. 209–214).
3. On other tombs that depict female scribes, see Bryan (1984).
4. On genre in ancient Egypt more generally, see Parkinson (2002).
5. Translation is author's own, based on hieroglyphs published in Zába, 1956 and hieratic facsimile published in Jéquier (1911).
6. Possibly a Sixth Dynasty or Twelfth Dynasty date, with the earliest manuscript dating to the Middle Kingdom; for a translation, see Tobin in Simpson (2003) or Lichtheim (1973).
7. Translations are the author's own, based on hieroglyphs in Gardiner (1946).
8. Translations are the author's own, based on hieroglyphs in Helck (1984).
9. See Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy for a working definition: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition>.
10. Translations are the author's own, based on line 3 of Fig. 4b in Silverman 2000.
11. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Ibi; Urk. I: 145, 2.
12. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Harkhuf; Urk. I: 122, 13.
13. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Harkhuf: Urk I: 122, 9–10.
14. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Harkhuf: Urk I: 122, 6–8; 122, 17–123, 1.
15. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Qar: Urk I: 254, 15.
16. Translations are the author's own; from the tomb of Qar: Urk I: 255, 8.

17. This “collective set of beliefs” is in essence, I argue, Gadamer’s (1960) *Horizontverschmelzung*—fusion of horizons. Gadamer (1960) suggests that people have “historically affected consciousness” and are, thus, embedded within their particular histories and cultures, their fused horizons.
18. Specifically, in support of this assertion, Edwards points to the presence of wine imports from Egypt and the Mediterranean as early as second millennium BCE.
19. The Lapis Luzili Cylinder Seal (BM 121545, 1928,1010.236, AN32404001) is a surviving Sumerian cylinder seal that shows communal beer drinking through straws. It is housed at the British Museum. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/join\\_in/using\\_digital\\_images/using\\_digital\\_images.aspx?asset\\_id=32404001&objectId=368238&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/join_in/using_digital_images/using_digital_images.aspx?asset_id=32404001&objectId=368238&partId=1).
20. Haaland observes, based on her own work and that of others, that ceramic and food production were independent investments in both Africa and the Near East. In the Near East, evidence for cereal domestication predates ceramic technology by about two-three thousand years. In Africa, however, the exact opposite is true, with ceramics predating plant and animal domestication by about two thousand years. This is because, Haaland argues, Africa was characterized by pot and porridge-based societies, while the Near East was characterized by oven and bread-based societies. Bread production required cereal domestication, but did not require ceramics. Porridge, on the other hand, required a pot (or some sort of ceramic vessel), but not the domestication of cereal. Ancient Africa was, as argued by Haaland, characterized by a sorghum, porridge eating-tradition, while the ancient Near East was a wheat and barley, bread-eating culture. Pottery was, as in Africa, adopted in Egypt early on, but Egypt was also part of the Near Eastern wheat and barely tradition. In this way, ancient Egypt exhibits both influence from Near Eastern and African food traditions.
21. Homi Bhabha 1996, “Culture’s in-Between.” In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 53–60.
22. I am aware of the discourse surrounding the fallacy that pots equal people, including critiques that emphasize this issue is compounded in histories and archaeologies of Africa (see, e.g., Cruz 2011). Cooking vessels, however, are unique in that they are made for utilitarian use and are, thus, rarely considered a “prestige” item to be conspicuously consumed. They are also fundamentally tied to foodways, which is in turn often tied to cultural identity (Goody 1982; cf. Harris 1985).
23. Smith proposes, if there was a small population of Nubian families, the pottery would be spatially demarcated, and if the pottery was the product of trade, they would be almost exclusively storage vessels (Smith 2003, 52).
24. Of course, we must consider that these identities were not mutually exclusive. Ancient Egyptian royal discourse, however, clearly stated that the state differentiated between “Egyptian” and “others,” notably the “wretched Kush” of Nubia. While, we must consider intersectionality and the possibility that people of both Nubian and Egyptian descent could have identified as both Nubian and Egyptian, the emic, ideological rhetoric espoused by the state suggests that for the Egyptians, on an ideological level, these identities were in fact mutually exclusive. Archaeologically, however, it becomes difficult to identify this ideology in practice.

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