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The *sp tp.y* (First Occasion) and the Dreamtime: Egyptian *d.t* as a parallel to Aboriginal *tjukurrpa*?

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Abstract

Egyptologists have long struggled to translate *d.t nhh*, with expressions ranging from ‘linear and circular eternity’ to ‘everlasting completedness and ongoingness’. Similarly, ethnologists have found it impossible to translate the pan-Australian Aboriginal concept of *tjukurrpa*, resorting to neologisms such as ‘the Dreamtime’ or ‘the Dreaming’.

Steven Gregory’s new book [Archaeopress Egyptology 38, 2022] concludes that *d.t nhh* represents the duality of not-time (‘eternity’) and all time (‘sempiternity’), respectively, with the world of *d.t* resembling Plato’s realm of archetypal Ideal Forms. If so, the Egyptian *d.t* and Australian Aboriginal *tjukurrpa* – both of which have chthonic associations – may represent similar metaphysical constructs.

The *sp tp.y* (First Occasion) of Egyptian cosmogony was a pristine creative epoch which, in its atemporal extension as *d.t*, served as a template of perfection – an ideal state brought closer in physical reality by performing *m3̣.t* in daily life and ritual. In the Dreaming, the Ancestor-beings created all the features of the Australian landscape. However, *tjukurrpa* is not just an epoch in the distant past but also an eternal process which provides the model for all earthly activity (‘Aboriginal Law’) – an unchanging paradigm to be emulated in daily life and reenacted in ceremony.

Jan Assmann’s definition of *d.t* as ‘the enduring continuation of that which, acting and changing, has been completed in time’ could equally be a definition of *tjukurrpa*, and Gregory’s interpretation offers further conceptual overlaps. Here, I suggest that our understanding of *d.t* and *m3̣.t* may be deepened by exploring their homology with the Dreaming and with Aboriginal Law, respectively.

Keywords

Cosmogony, *djet*-eternity, atemporality, Dreamtime, The Dreaming, *maat*, Australian Aboriginal Law, intercultural comparison

Introduction

After providing some theoretical and methodological background, the paper commences by outlining the connections between ancient Egypt and Australia – both real and imagined – and then proceeds to present a new way in which the culture of the two might intersect. Specifically, it proposes that our understanding of certain ancient Egyptian concepts may be deepened by exploring corresponding categories in the worldview of indigenous Australians, exemplified here by Aboriginal groups from the Western and Central Desert region.

Leveraging insights from Steven Gregory's newly published book on the topic, the paper connects the Egyptian concept of *djet*-eternity (*d.t*) with the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming (*tjukurrpa* in Western Desert languages), both of which have been characterised as resembling Plato's atemporal domain of Ideal Forms. The ancient Egyptian and Aboriginal Australian cosmogonies are first presented and then compared; phenomenological overlaps are identified and some limitations are established. Next, several similarities in the practice of Egyptian and Aboriginal religion – pluralism, secrecy and the privileging of dreams – are presented and discussed. Returning to the core topic, the chthonic and afterlife aspects of *d.t* and the Dreaming are then addressed and overlaps are identified. Although both *d.t* and *tjukurrpa* have been illustrated by reference to Plato's realm of Ideal Forms, by this stage it should be evident that the Egyptian and Aboriginal constructs have more in common with each other than either do with their counterpart in Greek philosophy. An attempt is made to explain how societies with such very different lifeways might yet have arrived at similar religious constructs. Finally, the correspondence between *d.t* and *tjukurrpa* is used to propose a further congruence – an equivalence between Egyptian concept of *mꜣ.t* and the Aboriginal principle of 'the Law'.

The theoretical justification for the somewhat unusual intercultural comparison undertaken in the paper is simply that, in both cultures, the culture-founders were anatomically modern humans with structurally equivalent brains. Accordingly, these societies were quite capable of constructing similar cognitive solutions to shared metaphysical uncertainties; however, in view of the large temporal and geographic separation of the cultures, it is of interest to note instances where the convergence is acute. The presumption of mental structures that are innate to and shared by all humans situates the project within the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹ More specifically, the study could be considered to fall within the scope of phenomenology, cultural anthropology, human ethology and comparative religion;² its principal methodologies are rational inference and comparative analysis,³ with an emphasis on intelligibility and common sense. The nexus under study is an example of what is termed 'convergent cultural evolution'.⁴ Comparisons of ontologically equivalent constructs that have arisen independently in human society provide a holistic perspective which surpasses that obtained when each instantiation is studied in isolation; this is why researchers compare Egyptian, Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian step pyramids and ziggurats,⁵ and evaluate jointly the symbol categories in hieroglyphic and cuneiform scripts,⁶ and explore the 'Judgement of the Dead' nexus in the Egyptian, Greek and Abrahamic traditions.⁷ At best, each instantiation of a shared cognitive

¹ Becker and Wheeler, 2017.

² Neubauer *et al.* 2019; Feierman 2013; Stroumsa 2018.

³ Ormerod 2010; Collier 1993.

⁴ Caldwell 2008; Groucutt 2020.

⁵ E.g. Walls 2009; Herrera-Sánchez *et al.* 2021; National Geographic 2022.

⁶ Rude (1986).

⁷ Wagner 2016.

paradigm (or of two closely related paradigms) can be used to shed light on the other, and this is especially useful where – as in this paper – the concept under examination is alien to the mentality of the researcher. At very least, the comparison should inspire the formulation of good research questions. Guy Stroumsa sums up the need for comparative studies in the humanities thus:

[T]he more focused (read: limited) one's own field of expertise becomes, the greater the need to see the work being done in – to compare with – other fields. And the more that following this path becomes an imperative, the less it seems to be trodden. [...] Retreating to the traditional disciplines or fleeing into various post-modern approaches is easier, perhaps more appealing. 'Why compare?' 'What is gained from comparison?' Such questions imply that comparison is a threat to the traditional disciplines, ensconced within clear boundaries, not to be trespassed. To them, one might answer that, like all intellectual moves, comparison is most valuable when it is not obvious.⁸

The non-obvious comparison in the present paper is offered in the hope that it will add some value to both of the disciplines that it straddles.

Overall, the paper suggests that our understanding of *d.t* and *m^s.t* may be deepened by exploring their homology with the Dreaming and with Aboriginal Law, respectively.⁹ While the intercultural comparison undertaken in this paper ought to be of particular interest to Australian Egyptologists, the resulting learnings should be relevant to the field as a whole. Accordingly, practitioners from a variety of countries may be able to leverage traditional indigenous knowledge from their homelands to obtain insights into unfamiliar Egyptian concepts. Reciprocally, it is hoped that success in such activities would encourage a greater appreciation and respect for the worldviews of the planet's surviving indigenous populations.

Egypt and Australia

'No country in the world, except Egypt itself, is more deeply interested in the fate of that famous kingdom than is Australia', proclaimed a newspaper from Beechworth, Victoria, in 1888.¹⁰ And, while that pronouncement related primarily to contemporary Egypt, Australia's interest in ancient Egypt also ran deep from the early nineteenth century onwards.¹¹ Today, Sydney's Macquarie University is a major centre of Egyptological teaching and research; at the time of the university's semicentennial celebration in 2014, it boasted 'the biggest academic department in the world dedicated to the study of Egyptology.'¹² In addition, Macquarie hosts the Australian Centre for Egyptology. Egyptology is also taught at Monash University in Melbourne.

Connections between the worlds of ancient Egypt and indigenous Australia have been proposed previously, but none have withstood the test of time. Sir Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) – a New South Wales-born scholar who held chairs at universities in Cairo, Manchester and London – advocated a hyperdiffusionist view of prehistory in which migrations from Egypt had carried aspects of its civilization to Europe and the New World, including Australasia.¹³ Although this hypothesis has no academic credibility, it has not entirely disappeared from

⁸ Stroumsa 2018: 8-9. Similarly, Moreno García and Pines 2021: 228.

⁹ 'Homology' is used in this paper in its broad sense and merely refers to parallels and similarities; it is not used in the restricted sense of biological genetics where (as an antonym to 'analogy') it additionally implies common ancestry (Groucutt 2020: 1).

¹⁰ Richards *et al.* 2021: 5, quoting from the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* of 7 December, 1888 (p.4).

¹¹ Ockinga 2021: 488-50.

¹² Blair 2014: 16.

¹³ Crook 2012; Pretty 1969.

popular discourse. Smith's modern-day successors like to point to the 'Gosford glyphs' – a gallery of Egyptian hieroglyphs carved into both faces of a sandstone cleft at a site north of Sydney – as evidence that ancient Egyptians landed on the east coast of Australia,¹⁴ but sober analysis reveals that the incisions are not ancient and that the 'message' makes no sense. The glyphs were probably carved in the 1920s by Australian soldiers who had returned from Egypt at the end of the First World War.¹⁵ In 2012, Boyo Ockinga – an Associate Professor of Egyptology at Macquarie University – observed that 'as much as he would like the glyphs to be genuine, there is no doubt they are fakes. "I'd be the first person who'd welcome some sort of link [...] because it would make my subject relevant to Australian history," he said. "It'd be wonderful... but I'm afraid it's just not possible."' ¹⁶

This paper presents a way in which Australian culture might genuinely intersect with that of ancient Egypt, one in which – fortunately – there is no need to postulate any ancient contact between the two lands. Specifically, it suggests (1) that the Egyptian cosmogony or *sp tp.y* (First Occasion) has ontological overlaps with the Australian Aboriginal 'Creation era' or Dreamtime/Dreaming (Figure 1a);¹⁷ (2) that the Egyptian concept of *d.t*-eternity and the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming may constitute similar metaphysical constructs (Figure 1b); and (3) that the Egyptian principle of *mꜣꜥ.t* may have an Australian indigenous counterpart in what is known in English as Aboriginal Law. It is proposed that our modern comprehension of these ancient Egyptian concepts may be deepened by exploring their homology with the corresponding categories in the worldview of indigenous Australians. While especially poignant for the Egyptology community in Australia, whose meetings nowadays invariably open with an 'Acknowledgement of Country' in which respect is paid to the local Traditional Custodians, the resulting learnings should in fact be universal.

Lost in translation?

Egyptologists have long struggled to translate *d.t nḥh* (Figure 2a), with English expressions ranging from the liturgical 'forever and ever'¹⁸ to the quasi-scientific 'linear and cyclical eternity'.¹⁹ Together, the two terms form a dyad which represents a totality (Figures 2 and 3).²⁰ One insightful translation renders the pair as 'everlasting completedness and ongoing-ness', using complementary categories that in turn reflect the aspect of the verb in Egyptian grammar – the perfect(ive) and imperfective, respectively.²¹

¹⁴ Ancient Code Team 2017.

¹⁵ ABC News 2012.

¹⁶ ABC News 2012.

¹⁷ Anthropologists and many Aboriginal people prefer 'Dreaming' to 'Dreamtime', but a recent analysis focused on Central and Western Desert linguistic usage prompted its authors 'to go against the tide and say a few words in support of retaining the term "Dreamtime" in some contexts at least.' This, in part, is because the phenomenon 'does have a temporal aspect, albeit very vague; namely, the events of the *Jukurrpa*, *Altyerre* etc. took place "at some time before"' (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 58). In this paper, I use 'Dreamtime' only when the term stands in direct apposition to the Egyptian 'First Occasion' or 'Time of the God(s)' in order to highlight the ontological equivalence of the constructs as Creation eras. 'Creation era', too, is a conventional phrase which is used for convenience rather than accuracy; as we shall see, the Dreaming is atemporal in nature (Swain 1993: 14-36). 'Creation event' is even more problematic because it suggests a single instantaneous occurrence with(in) time.

¹⁸ Gregory 2022: 1

¹⁹ E.g. Siegfried Morenz, cited by Hornung 1992: 68. For *d.t* expressed using 'circular eternity' as a synonym for 'cyclical eternity', see Jay 2010: 180.

²⁰ Assmann 2001: 74.

²¹ Assmann 2001: 74-79; Hornung 1992: 65-69; Allen 2010: 227-29, 267. Specifically, the term *d.t* corresponds to the Present Perfect in Egyptian (Ockinga 2012: 38) insofar as it represents 'the *continuation* of the resulting



Figure 1 - Cross-cultural convergence: Egyptian terms from the title of the paper presented in 'Aboriginal hieroglyphs'. (a) *The First Occasion* (*sp tp.y*); (b) *Djet-eternity* (*d.t*). The Egyptian signs have been augmented using visual conventions distinctive of art from the Australian Western Desert, i.e. dotted infill and concentric outlining (e.g. Carty 2021: 225-34; Watson 2003: 116-17). The Egypto-Australian stylistic fusion in these 'paintings' is intended to provide a playful illustration of the conceptual overlaps explored in this paper.

Similarly, ethnologists cannot translate into English the pan-Australian Aboriginal concept of what is termed *tjukurrpa* in Western Desert languages and in Warlpiri (where it is spelled *jukurrpa*),²² the cognate term in Central Desert Arandic languages being *altyerre* (Figure 4); instead, they are obliged to resort to neologisms such as 'the Dreamtime' or 'the Dreaming'.²³ The concept of the Dreaming is shared across all of Australia, but the relevant terminology, narrative content and ceremonial implementation varies from one region to the next. This paper will focus on the Central and Western Desert regions (Figure 4) – especially the latter – for four reasons: (1) it reduces cultural heterogeneity to a manageable level, (2) it covers a large geographic area, (3) it confines our attention to the part of the continent least disturbed by European settlement, and (4) it corresponds to the author's area of greatest expertise.²⁴

While the sense of *nḥḥ* is reasonably well captured by expressions such as 'time everlasting' or 'infinite time',²⁵ no pithy gloss has emerged for either *d.t* or *tjukurrpa*. Rather, these are

condition in the present [...] the enduring *continuation* of that which [...] has been *completed* in time' (Assmann 2001: 76; italics present in the original). *Nḥḥ* corresponds to the aorist or imperfective; just as the imperfect is the verb form most closely associated with the future in Hebrew (Pratico and Van Pelt 2007: 130, 278), Egyptologist Eric Uphill associates *nḥḥ* with future eternity (Uphill 2003: 24).

²² Although the two are usually considered separately, we should note that 'Warlpiri culture is part of the Western Desert linguistic and cultural bloc' (Watson 2003: 73). In Pitjantjatjara – a southern Western Desert language – the official spelling is *tjukurpa* (Goddard 1996: 184). The variant spellings of (*t*)*jukur(r)pa* reflect differences in European linguistic notations more than any actual difference in etymology or pronunciation.

²³ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 43-44.

²⁴ Graham 2002, 2003 and 2017.

²⁵ Hornung 1992: 68; Assmann 2001: 75, 77-78; Gregory 2022: 16, 20-21, 152 (Table 2).

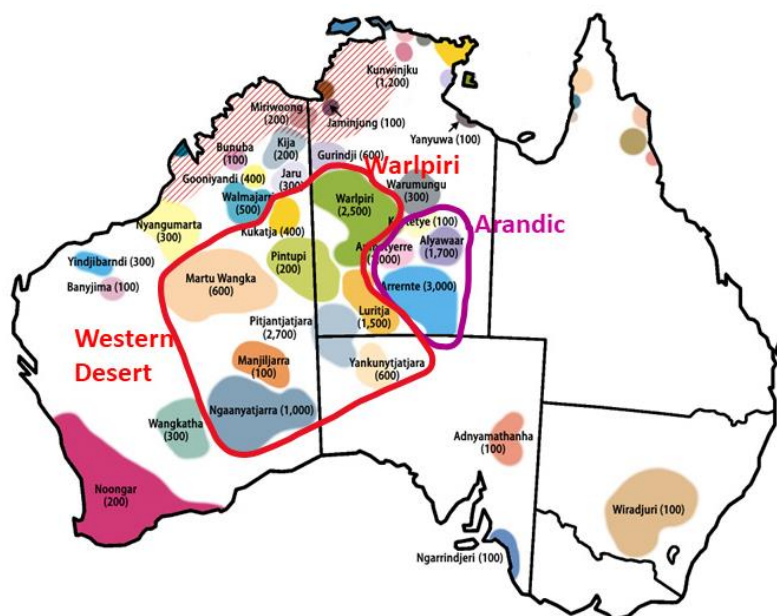


Figure 4 - Language blocs of the Central and Western Desert region of Australia. Red outline: Western Desert languages plus Warlpiri. Purple outline: Arandic languages. Base map (titled 'Living Indigenous Languages of Australia') by: *taillesskangaru*.

polysemous terms which are integral to a belief complex;²⁶ in other words, they form part of an intricate web of meanings which represent 'a shared way of thinking about many things'.²⁷

Gregory (2022): A new look at *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ*

Steven Gregory's newly-published book – *Tutankhamun Knew the Names of the Two Great Gods: *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ* as Fundamental Concepts of Pharaonic Ideology* – reviews the various scholarly understandings of *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ* in the literature to date.²⁸ Table 1 gives an impressionistic overview of the intellectual landscape by presenting a frequency table of key words and phrases that have been associated with each of the two terms; these have been taken from (or prompted by) Gregory's survey of the relevant literature and are listed in order of decreasing popularity.

Ultimately, Gregory revisits and reviews the primary sources. This exercise leads him to conclude that *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ* represent the duality of not-time ('eternity') and all time ('sempiternity'), respectively.²⁹ The shift in understanding of *ḏ.t* requires a reinterpretation of

²⁶ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 56-57.

²⁷ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 54.

²⁸ Gregory 2022: 1-12.

²⁹ Gregory 2022: 19-20. I accept this conclusion, at least as a working hypothesis. Gregory's monograph represents the most recent and most thorough examination of *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ* in the field. He considers all of the previous scholarship, retains the best of what has gone before, and extends it in a manner that is reasonable, well-argued, and supported by a detailed re-examination of the primary evidence. The complementarity of not-time and all-time, a dyad whose union encompasses metaphysical totality, makes sense on an intuitive, first-principles, level. Moreover, while novel in some important respects, the attributes imputed to *ḏ.t* and *nḥḥ* by this interpretation sit well with mainstream opinions in earlier scholarship.

Table 1. Word-frequency table of expressions associated with *nḥḥ* and *d.t* in Gregory’s section ‘Notions of *d.t* and *nḥḥ* as presented in modern Western scholarship’.^a

Frequency^b

nḥḥ

- 12 cyclic eternity = circular perpetuity
- 10 Re
- 8 human/measurable/moving time
- 7 endless repetition/recurrence
- 6 future eternity = tomorrow = forward infinity / sempiternity^c
- 5 day, Osiris, forever, physical world = present order
- 3 beginning, renewal, seasons, dynamic, eternal continuity
- 2 sky = celestial, finite, annual cycle, discontinuous eternity, life = birth and death
- 1 solar, imperfective/aorist aspect, masculine, demiurge, becoming, change, pre-temporal, Horus, Shu, Nut, morning sun, particular manifestations, intellectualised time, Yang, ritual calendar, suspension of time, underworld associations, the horizon, spatial eternity
- 1 divine/sacred time, eternity as complementary to time, infinity

d.t

- 18 immutable/permanent = eternally fixed and unchanging/static/stable
- 11 Osiris
- 10 infinite linear continuity
- 8 afterlife/underworld/death/Duat
- 7 temporal eternity = totality of time = endless duration = forever = everlasting
- 6 non-time = timelessness = atemporal eternity
- 5 night, past eternity = yesterday/memory
- 4 earth-related/chthonic, Re
- 3 evaluative, admitting only the perfected, conceptual/archetypal/absolute, spatial eternity, progressive time / forward infinity, end
- 2 completedness = perfective aspect, hidden, nonbeing, formless, human/measurable time, stone/inert, accumulative/intergenerational
- 1 pregnant/latent, passive, feminine, non-spatial eternity, Nun, Tefnet = Tefnut, Geb, evening sun, post-temporal, instrumental, Yin, primordial, unlimited, time as complementary to eternity, experience
- 1 divine/sacred time, eternity as complementary to time, infinity

^a Gregory 2022: 1-12, including footnotes. Words present in the original are underlined, phrases continuously so if present in that exact form; the current author’s synonyms, paraphrases and translations are not underlined. Later in the book, Gregory has a table of his own which lists terms associated with *d.t* and *nḥḥ* that reflect their respective meanings as ‘atemporal eternity’ and ‘temporal sempiternity’ (Gregory 2022: 152 (Table 2)).

^b Approximate number of times that each term – including its equivalents (linked by ‘=’) or close relatives (linked by ‘?’) – is connected with either *nḥḥ* or *d.t*. Where deemed appropriate, proximal repetitions of a term are scored as a single occurrence. Terms in the last line of each list are found in equal association with both *d.t* and *nḥḥ*.

^c Sempiternity properly means ‘all time’, but the term has been included in this group because, in Western thought, it has traditionally been thought of as future-focused, e.g. ‘Existence within time but infinitely into the future’ or ‘Future duration without end’ (Definitions 2022).

common phrases that include the word; special attention must be paid to its hieroglyphic orthography in order to distinguish between *d.t* in the sense of eternity (which almost always carries the determinative N16/17; see ahead to Figure 7) and *d.t* with the meaning of ‘body’ (which typically lacks N16/17 and instead often carries a logographic stroke). Examples drawn from – or at least modelled upon – those provided by Gregory are listed in Table 2.

For our purposes, one of Gregory’s more important observations is that the world of *d.t* resembles Plato’s realm of archetypal ‘Ideal Forms’, which the Greek philosopher outlined in the *Timaeus* and in the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic*, VII).³⁰ In this scheme, we humans are like cave-dwellers who live all their lives watching shadows cast on the rear wall of their cave by objects which pass behind them (but in front of a fiery light-source) on an ongoing basis, mistaking each travelling shadow for the thing itself, namely the Form (Figure 5). Gregory goes so far as to suggest that Plato’s domain of Ideal Forms may have been directly inspired by the Egyptian concept of *d.t*.³¹

Interestingly, Fred Myers’ classic account of Western Desert Aboriginal identity – an ethnological monograph titled *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* – also refers to Plato’s realm of Ideal Forms in an attempt to convey the essence of *tjukurrpa*. In Myers’ words:

although the Dreaming [...] is presumably a product of historical events, such an origin is denied. These human creations are objectified – thrust out – into principles or precedents for the immediate world. As in Plato’s Cave, the Ideal comes first. The principles to which the Pintupi look for guidance [...] are] seen as imposed by an embracing, cosmic order.³²

That all-encompassing cosmic order is, of course, grounded in *tjukurrpa*.

If the nature of both *d.t* and *tjukurrpa* can be illustrated by reference to Plato’s domain of Ideal Forms, this naturally suggests that the two may constitute similar metaphysical concepts.

Egyptian cosmogony: The First Occasion

The *sp tp.y* (First Occasion) of Egyptian cosmogony – also known as the *rk ntr* (Time of the God) or *rk ntr.w* (Time of the Gods) – began when the primeval mound emerged from the inert waters of *nw.w* and the gods and the world were brought into being by a self-generated creator-deity, the sungod.³³ The primeval mound is identified as Tatenen in the Memphite tradition and as the *benben* in the Heliopolitan one.³⁴

Details of the cosmogonic process vary between (and even within) cult centres, but may briefly be sketched as follows.³⁵ The Hermopolitan creation begins with the *nw.w*, within which arise the gender-paired *hh.w*-gods of the Ogdoad, including Nun and Amun (with their respective female counterparts, Naunet and Amunet). Thereafter, the creator-sungod emerges from the

³⁰ Gregory 2022: 22.

³¹ Gregory 2022: 21-23, 28-29, 38-43.



³² Myers 1986: 69.

³³ Allen 2010: 130-31. For *nw.w*, see *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2022: lemma 500005 (later 50006, ‘Nun’).

³⁴ Hart 2005: 154.

³⁵ The composite account which follows has been synthesised from a range of works, including staples such as Tobin 2005; Hornung 1982 and 1992; Assmann 2001; Hart 2005; and Wilkinson 2003. In the interest of brevity, the passage conflates sub-variants within each major tradition; accordingly, it should be considered an impressionistic overview rather than a complete account.

Table 2. Expressions from the Pyramid/Coffin Texts that involve *d.t*, interpreted first according to conventional practice and then following Gregory.^a

Expression (PT/CT)	Conventional	Gregory (2022) ("eternal" = ideal & atemporal)
<i>k3=k...</i> 	your <i>ka</i> ... of your body forever	your <i>ka</i> ... of your eternal form (p.56)
<i>s3=k...</i> 	your son ... of your body for ever	your son ... of your body-of-eternity
<i>k3=k...</i> 	your <i>ka</i> ... for ever and ever	your <i>ka</i> of eternal form (p.56)
<i>ntr...</i> 	a god ... for ever and ever	a god ... of eternal form (p.55-6)
<i>n sk.t(w)=t...</i> 	you will not be erased... for ever and ever	you will not be erased ... in absolute atemporality (p.58-9) (= <i>d.t sp 2</i>)

^a For ease of comprehension, cognate terms in the table are shown in colour (yellow, red or cyan). At the end of the reinterpretations in the third column, the relevant pages in Gregory (2022) are shown in grey. In some cases, modifications have been made. Gregory translates several instances of *n* as the preposition ‘in’ even though the following noun, *d.t*, means ‘body’ and is therefore not time- or eternity-related, a circumstance which would encourage such a reading (Ockinga 2012: 18). Here those *n*-glyphs are taken instead as indirect genitives, following Faulkner’s lead in *k3=i n d.t-i*, ‘my own *ka*’ (Faulkner 1962: 317), which is presumably a contraction of ‘my *ka* of my body’ (in line with Hannig 2006: 1065 {39361}) – a reading proven by *k3.t=f n.t d.t d.t*, in which the feminine antecedent makes the indirect genitive explicit (*Wb* V: 506.5). When *d.t* represents eternity, the preceding *n* may either be a preposition (e.g. third column, last example) or a direct genitive (e.g. third column, second example); the latter possibility is made explicit in *k3.t n.t d.t*, ‘the work of eternity’ (*Wb* V: 508.5), in *mnw.w n.w d.t*, ‘monuments of eternity’ (*Wb* V: 508.3), and in *i3w.wt n.(w)t d.t*, ‘offices of eternity’ = ‘hereditary offices’ (*Wb* V: 508.7). Abbreviations: PT, Pyramid Texts; CT, Coffin Texts, *Wb*: *Wörterbuch* = Erman and Grapow 1971.

cosmic egg and becomes manifest as Re upon the Nefertum-waterlily. The Heliopolitan cosmogony begins also with the *nw.w*, from which rises the creator-sungod Atum; from Atum issues the Ennead – Shu and Tefnut, their offspring Geb and Nut, and a further generation which consists of Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys. The Memphite Theology modifies the Heliopolitan cosmogony by inserting Ptah as the progenitor, mind and tongue of the Ennead.

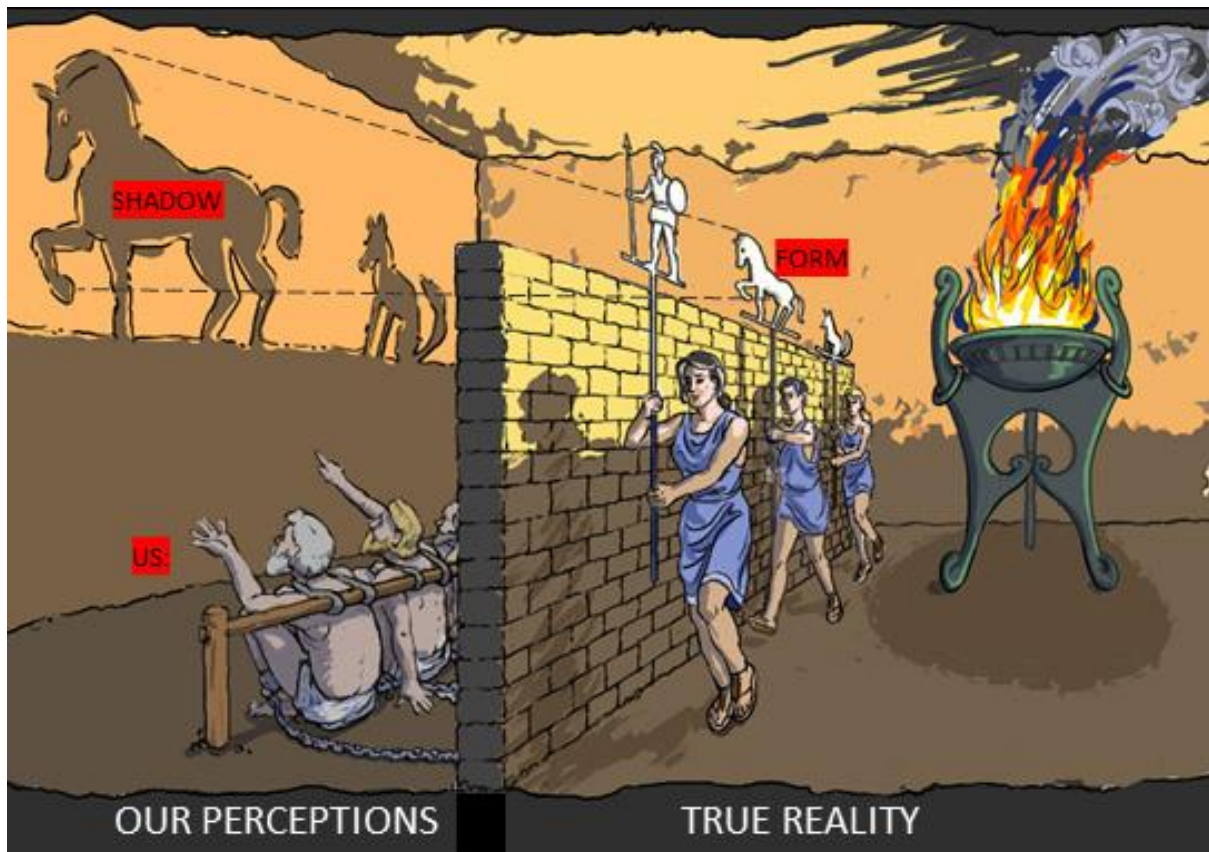


Figure 5 - Plato's Allegory of the Cave. This illustration conveys, in conflated form, the essential features of Plato's concept. The complete model posits an additional (and even more true) level of reality outside the cave, where the sun is the light source. Source graphic by: Wikimedia Commons contributor 4edges (here modified).

In Steven Gregory's understanding, this pristine *sp tp.y* never went away;³⁶ in its atemporal and ever-present extension as *d.t*,³⁷ it provided a template of the perfection that was desirable for the real world – an ideal state sustained and brought closer in physical reality by performing *m3̣.t* in daily life and in ritual.³⁸

The principle of *m3̣.t* requires some elaboration. Erik Hornung characterises it as:

the foundation of all order in the created world; it is the basis for life in a specifically social sense, and in the much broader sense of cosmic order or balance. With this image we begin to sense the timeless applicability of the concept. For the Egyptians, creation is the positing of *maat* [...] to keep *maat* among human beings it is necessary to 'do' and 'speak' *maat*. Individuals must do what is correct and reasonable, must speak with appropriate words.³⁹

³⁶ In ritual, the *s.t n(.t) sp tp.y* (Place of the First Occasion) was identified with Luxor Temple during the Opet Festival (Gregory 2022: 103-4).

³⁷ For 'ever-present', see Gregory 2022: 99-101. On the orthography of *d.t* as 'the land of Atum' and references to this domain, see Gregory 2022: 85-86, 111, 122, 124, 152 (Table 2). Note that *d.t* is also a word for 'flood' (*Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2022: lemma 181390), which may link back to the *nw.w*.

³⁸ Gregory 2022: 89-90.

³⁹ Hornung 1992: 134-35.

Like our claim in respect of *d.t*, Hornung notes that ‘the universal sense of the term *maat* has no precise equivalent in any other language’.⁴⁰ By the end of this section, we will have seen that the meanings of *d.t* and *mꜣ.t* are in fact closely enmeshed.

Spell 80 of the Coffin Texts reveals that, by the Middle Kingdom, Shu and Tefnut were considered avatars of *nḥḥ* and *d.t*, respectively,⁴¹ with the gender of the deity reflecting the grammar of the cognate noun (Figure 6). As a feminine entity, *d.t* was viewed as passive, latent, and pregnant, giving birth to *nḥḥ*.⁴² On the First Occasion, *nḥḥ* was a perfect reflection or simulacrum of *d.t*,⁴³ but the world of time soon diverged from the paradigm of perfection.

The equivalence of *d.t* and *mꜣ.t* is also established in Spell 80. There, the creator-god Atum says: ‘Tefnut is my living daughter, she is together with her brother Shu. “Life” is his name, “Maat” is her name.’⁴⁴ But (as noted above) we find that: ‘in another passage, the text explains

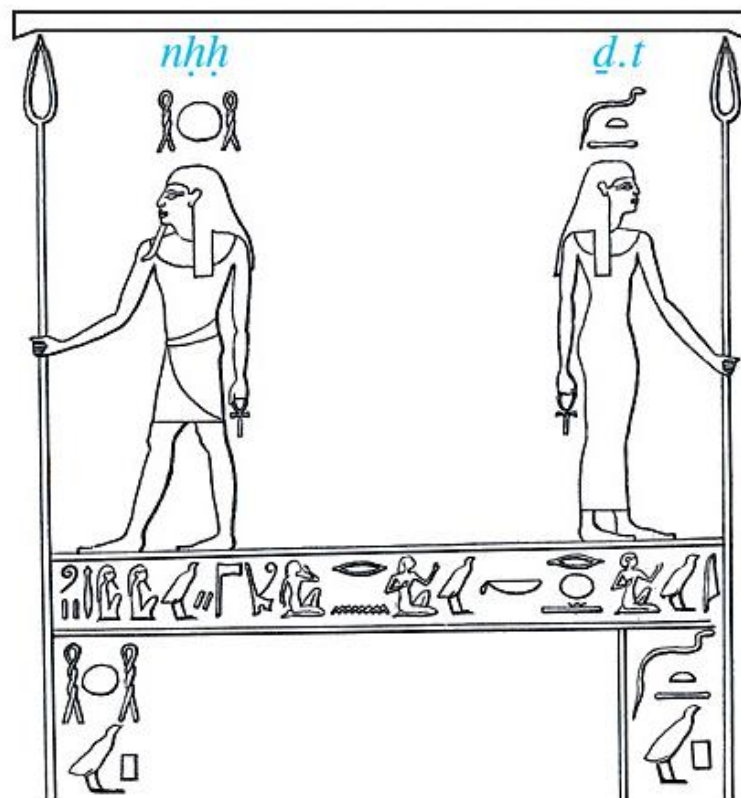


Figure 6 - Neheh-eternity (*nḥḥ*) and djet-eternity (*d.t*) depicted as anthropomorphic deities on the first shrine of Tutankhamun, left side (after Piankoff 1951: Plate 1). The lower inscription reads: *ḥw=ḥ rḥ.kw rn n(.y) nṯr.wy ꜣ.wy* (horizontal), ‘I know the name of the two great gods’, then *nḥḥ pw* (vertical left), ‘It is neheh’ and *d.t pw* (vertical right), ‘It is djet’.

⁴⁰ Hornung 1992: 136.

⁴¹ Coffin Texts, Spell 80 (CT II 28-29); Faulkner 2015: 83; Hornung 1992: 69; Gregory 2022: 75. Similarly, Re and Atum are the corresponding aspects of the creator-god (Gregory 2022: 93, 113-14).

⁴² Gregory 2022: 9-10, 86.

⁴³ Gregory 2022: 63 (note 80), 85.

⁴⁴ Coffin Texts, Spell 80 (CT II 32-33); Faulkner 2015: 83; translation of Assmann 2001: 178.

the [same] two children of Atum as *neheh*, “plenitude of time,” and *djet*, “unchanging endurance”.⁴⁵ From this, it is clear that *mꜣ.t* is a realisation or actualisation of *d.t* – the perfect made practice, one might say, in a near-inversion of the familiar English adage. To perform *mꜣ.t* in this world is to invoke *d.t* and implement it, thereby re-actualising the original pristine state of the Creation.⁴⁶

Aboriginal cosmogony: The Dreamtime

In the Dreaming, the *tjukurrpa* Ancestor-beings emerged from the featureless earth and travelled about. As in Egyptian religion, the transition to existence was envisaged as an awakening of personhood,⁴⁷ and – like the Egyptian gods – many Ancestors had both human and animal attributes: ‘Snake Man’, ‘Emu Woman’, ‘Bandicoot Man’, ‘the Budgerigar Men’, etc.⁴⁸ The Ancestors’ adventures and interactions created all the features of the Australian landscape, and their essence abides in many of those places today – locations recognised as ‘sacred sites’.⁴⁹ The Dreaming also accounts for all plants, animals and humans.

Dreaming stories employ the past tense. They relate to events ‘at some time before’, and the storytellers acknowledge that ‘things like this can’t happen now’.⁵⁰ However, ‘one cannot fix the Dreaming in time; it was, and is, everywhen’.⁵¹ This is not to say that the events of the Dreaming are happening at all times; rather, it means that the Dreaming is ‘without time’ as we know it.⁵² In other words, the Dreaming occurred and exists ‘outside of time’.⁵³

Tellingly, Jan Assmann’s definition of *d.t* as ‘the enduring continuation of that which, acting and changing, has been completed in time’⁵⁴ could equally well be a definition of *tjukurrpa*. Reciprocally, Fred Myers’ observation that: ‘As the invisible framework of this world, The Dreaming is its cosmic prototype’ could just as well be said of *d.t*.⁵⁵

Tjukurrpa is the foundation of the Aboriginal world.⁵⁶ It provides the model for all human and non-human activity, the basis for all Aboriginal Law, and an unchanging paradigm to be emulated in daily life and reenacted in ceremony. All of these aspects are intimately interconnected and indeed overlap. As Myers explains:

The Pintupi, like other Western Desert Aborigines [...] describe the Dreaming as ‘the Law.’ In doing so, they emphasize not only the norms or precedents established in The Dreaming, but also the sense of moral imperative that it embodies. People must continue The Dreaming and preserve it, making first things continuous with last, by ‘holding the Law’ for coming generations. Thus, human beings play a role in the maintenance of the instituted order. Pintupi explain about The Dreaming that it is not a product of human subjectivity or will. It is, rather, an order to which all are subordinated.⁵⁷

⁴⁵ Assmann 2001: 179; the passage has already been specified in note 41.

⁴⁶ Equally, in terms of solar time and *nhh*, every sunrise is a re-actualisation of the one on the First Occasion.

⁴⁷ Chatwin 1987: 80-81; Assmann 2001: 179.

⁴⁸ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 47; Chatwin 1987: 80-82.

⁴⁹ Myers 1986: 47-51, 54-60; Kimber 2000; Graham 2002.

⁵⁰ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 55.

⁵¹ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 46. Sylvie Poirier, too, uses ‘everywhen’ (Poirier 2005: 121).

⁵² Swain 1993: 14-36.

⁵³ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 46.

⁵⁴ Assmann 2001: 76.

⁵⁵ Myers 1986: 51.

⁵⁶ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015; Myers 1986: 47-57, 69-70.

⁵⁷ Myers 1986: 53.

An important point needs to be made in respect of ritual. More than merely being an *homage* to the original creation, each ceremonial reenactment of a Dreaming episode is in a vital sense a re-creating of the physical world – a new creation.⁵⁸ To quote Mircea Eliade: ‘The ritual reactualization of the mythical history reactivates communication with the Dream Time, regenerates life and assures its continuation. In short, the ritual “re-creates” the world.’⁵⁹

Phenomenological overlaps and their limitations

Reactualization of a sacred cosmogony through ritual or festival plays an important part in many religions, so one could presumably find conceptual overlaps between the metaphysics of the ancient Egyptians and those of religious peoples other than Australian Aborigines. Mircea Eliade identifies aspects of ritual re-creation in Mesopotamian religion, native North American and Polynesian belief and Chinese shamanism, as well as in world religions such as Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity.⁶⁰

Steven Gregory’s book includes one ethnographic comparison, but this is not based upon a recurrent re-creating of the world through ritual. Rather, on linguistic grounds, Gregory notes that:

the Hopi culture of Arizona [...] construct expressions in relation to an objective state which comprises ‘all that is or has been accessible to the senses’, and a subjective state giving reference to what might now be thought of as matters of a ‘mental or spiritual’ nature. [...] It is not the intention here to imply any direct, or even indirect link between the Hopi and the ancient Egyptian cultures, but merely to suggest that the use of what may be seen as a metaphysical-physical division in language construction in the Hopi culture points to the possibility of similar cognitive distinction in other cultures.⁶¹

Aborigines of the Australian Western Desert make a similar distinction in the nature of phenomena; that which is not *tjukurrpa* is often described as *yuti*, i.e. ‘real world’ or ‘here and now’.⁶² The same ontological category is covered by *mularrpa*, which stands in opposition to *tjukurrpa* insofar as it denotes real-world events, in the sense of historical or witnessable incidents.⁶³

If the Egyptian *d.t* can be identified with the Aboriginal *tjukurrpa*, then it is tempting to posit either *yuti* or *mularrpa* as a cognate for the temporal world of *nḥḥ*. However, the root meaning of *yuti* is ‘visible’, so this adjective has a spatial foundation rather than a temporal one.⁶⁴ Moreover, *yuti* does not have the connotations of cyclicity or infinitely long time that *nḥḥ* does. *Mularrpa* (‘true’, ‘real’) is perhaps a better candidate, as it may be used to distinguish recent or historical occurrences from Ancestral ones,⁶⁵ but while this word specifies immanence, it too lacks the connotations of cyclicity and infinite duration.

From the foregoing analysis of *tjukurrpa* antonyms, it seems that only one half of the Egyptian dyad that consists of *d.t* and *nḥḥ* has a credible linguistic counterpart in Aboriginal desert culture. It is on the congruence of *d.t* and *tjukurrpa* that the paper will come to focus.

⁵⁸ Chatwin 1987: 64.

⁵⁹ Eliade 1973: 61.

⁶⁰ Eliade 1959: 68-113.

⁶¹ Gregory 2022: 14-15.

⁶² Myers 1986: 48-49, 69.

⁶³ Myers 1986: 49.

⁶⁴ Myers 1986: 48-49, 69.

⁶⁵ Hansen and Hansen 1992: 66; Watson 2003: 114-15.

Although both *d.t* and *tjukurrpa* have been illustrated by reference to Plato's domain of Ideal Forms, the next two sections will reveal that the Egyptian and Aboriginal constructs have far more in common with each other than either do with their counterpart in Greek philosophy, the same being true of the practices that surround them. Finally, the paper will seek to expand the congruence inherent in the *d.t-tjukurrpa* nexus by proposing an equivalence between the Egyptian concept of *mꜣ.t* and the Aboriginal principle of 'the Law', concepts introduced in the earlier sections on Egyptian and Aboriginal cosmogony, respectively.

Convergent praxis: Tolerating variants, restricting knowledge, privileging dreams

Pluralism

One practical similarity between Egyptian and Aboriginal religion is the ease with which both belief complexes accommodate divergent explanations and narratives – variants which the modern Western mind would regard as mutually exclusive or contradictory. In Egyptian belief, 'alternative facts' from different cult centres were tolerated, and seemingly discordant narratives were viewed as complementary rather than competing.⁶⁶ Willeke Wendrich describes this capacity as the Egyptians' 'enormous flexibility in allowing non-harmonized parallel truths'.⁶⁷ The differing cosmogonic accounts of Heliopolis, Hermopolis and Memphis have already been described. Specifics about individual deities also vary. For example, Horus may be either the nephew or the brother of Seth;⁶⁸ temple 'conception of Horus' scenes variously identify the bird above the phallus of the deceased Osiris as an Isis-kite, a Nekhbet-vulture or Horus-falcon;⁶⁹ and the Memphite Theology has Horus helping Isis to rescue Osiris's body from the water even though Horus has not yet been conceived.⁷⁰ Pluralistic interpretations of this kind exemplify the Egyptians' penchant for flexible 'both/and' thinking and their well-known ability to entertain multiple parallel versions of religious truths.

Peter Hiscock attributes a similar pluralism to Aboriginal Dreaming narratives:

Standard published renditions of Aboriginal myth present them as canonical, as though each was a single, simple, agreed narrative. The nature of 'myth'-telling within Aboriginal societies is not well captured by those normative depictions. Even within a single group there was a multiplicity of perspectives and versions of any story, configured in accordance with knowledge and perspectives of sub-groups defined by differences such as sex, age, acquired status, kinship relationship and formal internal social divisions such as moieties. [...] Keen (1994) documented profound differences between group members who shared the 'same' narratives or songs, differences about what has been called totemic geography: not only which supernatural entity did what but also how those events are taken to imply identity and rights in land.⁷¹

For example, within the Western Desert one finds different versions of the Nakhirra Nakhirra (Seven Sisters) Dreaming among the Law women at Balgo. Christine Watson records how one custodian observed that her sister-cousin 'had "forgotten" to sing a number of verses. The Ngardi-Kukatja Napanangka then provided another twenty verses, virtually a second version of the cycle [...] with alternative stanzas for Tirrin, Ngantalarra, Tarlapunta and Mangkayi'.⁷² In a study of Pintupi and Kukatja creation accounts for Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay), the

⁶⁶ Allen 2010: 131.

⁶⁷ Wendrich 2010: 4.

⁶⁸ Hart 2005: 72.

⁶⁹ Graham 2020.

⁷⁰ Lichtheim 1973: 55.

⁷¹ Hiscock 2019: 4.

⁷² Watson 2003: 202-3.

dominant Dreaming themes included a devastating bushfire, snake ancestors, kangaroo hunters and sexual jealousy. The snake and kangaroo narratives came mainly from Pintupi custodians while the sexual jealousy stories came mostly from Kukatja ones; the all-consuming bushfire was common to both groups.⁷³ A further layer of heterogeneity was added by informants who provided idiosyncratic variants of the thematic narratives and/or combined elements from normally separate themes to form composite accounts.⁷⁴

Secrecy

Another quality shared by Egyptian and Aboriginal religion is an emphasis on secrecy. In his Egyptological study of the topic, Jens Jørgensen observes: ‘Judging from the frequency with which this concept is met in religious texts, secrecy is an essential part of Egyptian religion.’⁷⁵ Relevant Egyptian terms include (*s*)*št* (inaccessible, restricted), *imn* (hidden), *ḏsr* (sacred) and *ḥbs/ḥꜣp/kꜣp* (covered).⁷⁶ Access to the interior of temples was restricted, and there were prohibitions against revealing secret religious knowledge to unauthorised persons and severe punishments for transgression. For example, in respect of a ritual re-enacting the solar-Osirian union, we are told: ‘It is a great mystery, it is Re and Osiris. He who reveals it will die a sudden death’.⁷⁷ Similarly, priests entering the temple of Horus at Edfu should: ‘Keep silent concerning what is seen in his sacred place; do not reveal what you have seen’. ‘Do not reveal anything of what you have seen of any secrets in the temples’.⁷⁸ Some injunctions are extreme; the Hymn to Amun in P. Leiden I 350 warns that any man who dares to pronounce the secret name of Amun – intentionally or unwittingly, and seemingly even if alone – will immediately die.⁷⁹

In the same vein, much *tjukurrpa* information is secret/sacred, with punishments ranging up to death for transgression.⁸⁰ Firstly, ritual knowledge and performance is divided by gender into ‘men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’, although the two groups may cooperate (often at some distance from one another) in rituals such as male initiation ceremonies.⁸¹ Secondly, for most Dreaming narratives, there exists a hierarchy of ever deeper interpretations; these range from superficial ‘public versions’ suitable for children, mixed-sex and non-Aboriginal audiences through to ‘inside stories’ whose circulation is restricted to initiates of the appropriate gender and seniority.⁸² The symbols used in *tjukurrpa*-related Aboriginal designs (which feature also in paintings made for the art market) are multivalent, so they can simultaneously support the multiple interpretations that correspond to different levels of ritual knowledge.⁸³ Rights to speak for (or paint) a stretch of land and its associated Dreaming stories are determined by a complex web of factors which include a person’s conception site, birthplace, kinship relations, territorial occupancy, initiatory status, and inheritance from parents, uncles or aunts; reciprocally, such rights entail a responsibility to care for the land and to perform the proper rituals for it.⁸⁴ Naturally, there are strict protocols for access to sacred

⁷³ Graham 2003.

⁷⁴ Graham 2003: 34.

⁷⁵ Jørgensen 2006: 89.

⁷⁶ Jørgensen 2006: 89-90.

⁷⁷ P. Salt 825 XVIII, 1-2; Derchain 1965: 144; Assmann 2001: 79.

⁷⁸ Edfu V 344.10 and III 361.2 (Chassinat 1930, 1928); Gutbub 1973: 144-84; Jørgensen 2006: 94.

⁷⁹ P. Leiden I 350 IV, 20 (= end of ‘Chapter 200’); Assmann 1999: 332 (no. 138, lines 26-28).

⁸⁰ Anderson 1995: 3; Palmer 1995.

⁸¹ Watson 2003: 18, 166-93.

⁸² Graham 2003: 31; 2017: 170.

⁸³ Graham 2017: 170. For a sense of the levels of symbolism inherent in ritual objects from Central and Western Desert, see Testart 1993.

⁸⁴ Palmer 1995; Myers 1986: 127-58. Ownership, which is never sole, is invariably negotiated and can be contested (Carty 2021: 329-37, 351-55).

sites; there are restrictions on who can go there, when they can visit, and what they are permitted (or required) to do when present.⁸⁵ Again, severe penalties may apply to those who violate these injunctions. An Aboriginal guide who – in the 1890s – was pressured into giving ethnologist F. J. Gillen unauthorised access to a secret location from which the latter removed a number of sacred objects was eventually executed for his betrayal.⁸⁶

Sleep and dreaming

For Egyptians, sleep was envisaged as sinking into the primeval *nw.w* like the sun at sunset, i.e. entering the *dwꜣ.t* or Netherworld.⁸⁷ As Erik Hornung observes: ‘In the Egyptian view the sleeper dwells in the world of the gods, in the next world.’⁸⁸ Adriaan De Buck neatly summarises the situation thus:

[I]n the divine world time does not exist and there is only an eternal present. That infinite world is the dwelling-place of the gods and the dead, but it is also accessible to man in his sleep. Therefore dreams were deemed to be significant and true: the sleeper got them while being in that world, where he conversed with the gods and the dead.⁸⁹

Even in modern Egypt, ‘Egyptians [...] hold dreaming in a much higher regard than is generally true anywhere in the West’, with the result that ‘significant aspects of worldviews, especially those related to invisible domains, are validated and substantiated by dreams.’⁹⁰

A Warlpiri dictionary defines *jukurrpa* in terms of ‘Ancestral beings associated with life-forces and creative powers, knowledge of which is generally communicated to people by means of Dreams.’⁹¹ The English term ‘the Dreaming’ reflects the fact that ‘people can know things about this (about *Jukurrpa*) because they see some things when they are asleep (in a dream).’⁹² While most dreams are considered inconsequential, a Pintupi person may describe a *tjukurrpa*-related one as ‘seeing Dreaming’. Sometimes this involves the revelation of Ancestral songs, designs or ceremonies – while ostensibly new, they in fact always existed but were previously unknown to humans.⁹³ A dream relating to conception or death provides ‘a transitional space-time, and is the necessary medium for the passage of the spirit-child from *Tjukurrpa* to the human realm at conception, and vice versa at death.’⁹⁴

Many of the themes introduced or reprised in this subsection – death, the *dwꜣ.t* and the Dreaming – are associated with the earth, and more specifically with the underworld. Since *d.t*-eternity, too, is linked with the chthonic realm, this overlap will be explored in the next section.

Chthonic overlap: *d.t*, *Duat*, death and the Dreaming

The popular understanding of *d.t* and *nḥḥ* as ‘linear and circular/cyclical eternity’ (Table 1) derives in part from the determinative for each of the two terms; for *nḥḥ* it is the sun-disk

⁸⁵ Myers 1986: 151; Watson 2003: 202-4.

⁸⁶ Jones 1995: 73-74.

⁸⁷ De Buck 1939: 28, citing a sun-hymn from P. Chester Beatty IV, *recto* 11, 8-10; Hornung 1982: 131, 183.

⁸⁸ Hornung 1982: 131.

⁸⁹ De Buck 1939: 30.

⁹⁰ El-Aswad 2010: 441-42.

⁹¹ Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 44, quoting from Laughren *et al.* 2006.

⁹² Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015: 55; likewise p.47-48 and Green 2012 for Arandic *altyerre*.

⁹³ Myers 1986: 51-52.

⁹⁴ Poirier 2005: 133-41. Poirier (2005: 121-97) addresses the full diversity of dream themes and meanings.

(Gardiner sign N5) whereas for *d.t* it is the earth or land (Gardiner sign N16/N17) (Figure 7).⁹⁵ The former glyph is circular (Figure 7a,b) and the world is commonly glossed in Egyptian as *šnn.t itn*, ‘that which the sun-disk encircles’.⁹⁶ The latter glyph is a thin and straight linear bar which signifies flat alluvial land.⁹⁷ Whether shown with (Figure 7b,c) or without (Figure 7a) three grains of sand below the bar, this glyph signifies the terrestrial world itself.

The association of *nḥḥ* with the solar cycles of the day and the year gives it a strongly temporal nature, which is reflected by the popularity among scholars of interpretations which connect *nḥḥ* with human, measurable and moving time (Table 1). In contrast, the association of *d.t* with the earth or land suggests permanence and links it more to place than to time;⁹⁸ accordingly, terms such as ‘spatial eternity’ and adjectives such as ‘earth-related’ or ‘chthonic’ appear near the middle of the *d.t*-related list in Table 1.

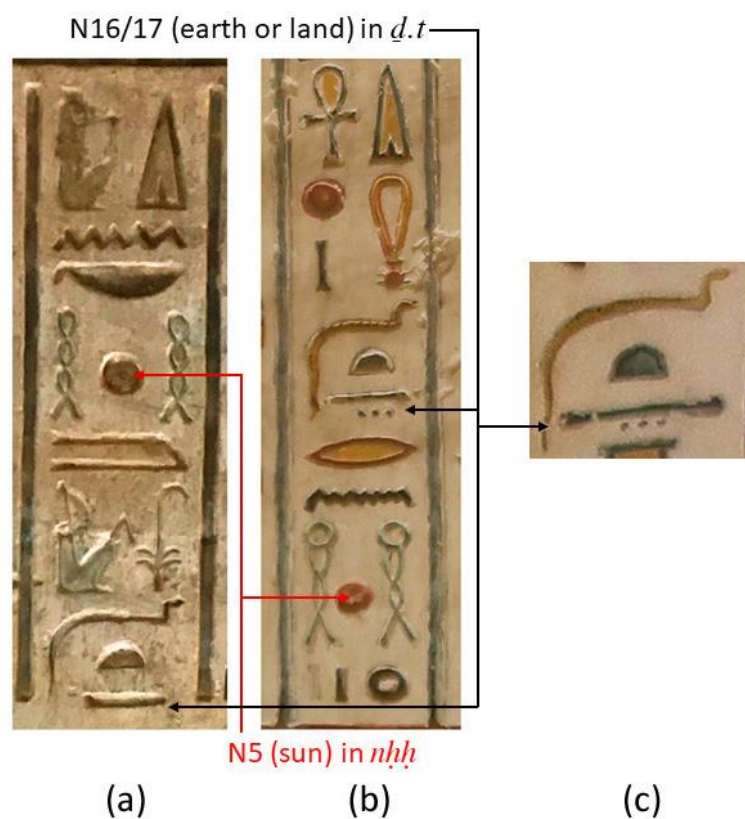


Figure 7 - Determinatives in *d.t*-eternity (Gardiner sign N16/17, earth or land) and *nḥḥ*-eternity (N5, sun-disk). In panel (a) the land sign lacks the three grains of sand below the bar (N17), whereas in panels (b) and (c) they are present (N16). Panel (a) is from the Ptolemaic Temple of Maat, Hathor, Imhotep and Amenhotep son of Hapu at Deir el Medina, and reads *ḏi-ı̄ n-k nḥḥ m nsw d.t* ('I appoint for you neheh-eternity as king of djet-eternity'). Panels (b) and (c) are from the tomb of Ramesses VI (KV 9). The former reads *ḏi(.w) ḥḥ m R̄.w d.t r nḥḥ sp 2* ('given life like Re eternally for ever and ever'), while the latter is a close-up of another instance of the word *d.t* in which the N16 determinative is used.

⁹⁵ Gardiner 1957: 485, 487.

⁹⁶ E.g. Jay 2010: 180.

⁹⁷ Gardiner 1957: 487.

⁹⁸ Gregory 2022: 84-85. For spatial correlates of *d.t* that we have already encountered, see notes 36-37 above.

In line with these attributions, Frédéric Servajean ‘distinguished *dt* as being not only immutable but also chthonic in nature [...] he related *nḥḥ* to the sky and *dt* to the earth or underworld.’⁹⁹ Context in the Amduat allowed Ina Hegenbarth-Reichhardt to conclude that (in Gregory’s English paraphrase): ‘while *nḥḥ* is generally translated as “(cyclic) eternity”, *dt* lacked a precise translation as the spatial equivalent, but everything pointed to the fact that *dt* meant the regenerative space that appears as “D(w)at”, i.e. the Duat (*dwꜣ.t*) or Netherworld.’¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Jan Assmann identified *dt* with the realm of night, the earth, the underworld, and the kingdom of Osiris, which admits only that which has become changeless and perfected.¹⁰¹ Gregory’s reappraisal of *nḥḥ* and *dt* led him to propose that *nḥḥ* relates to the physical ‘world under the solar cycle’ (*Rꜥ.w* or *hrw*) and *dt* to the atemporal darkness (*grḥ*) of the *nw.w*, in which the Creation occurred prior to the first sunrise;¹⁰² in the afterlife, these are the domains of the *bꜣ* and *kꜣ*, respectively.¹⁰³

For Aborigines, the Dreaming has – in addition to its temporal root in the Creation era – ‘a “spatial” location on the other (in-)side of the earth’s surface; it is the realm of the ancestors – those whom the dead become as they recede from living memory into a “past”.’¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, Dreamings are embedded in *ngurra*, ‘country’, i.e. within the land, from which human spirits emerge and return. As Ronald and Catherine Berndt explain: ‘Every person is in effect an incarnation of a totemic being: death means the destruction of the material body but not of the spirit, which returns to its source.’¹⁰⁵ In Central Australia, the spirit typically goes back into the ground at the person’s Dreaming conception site to ‘become – or re-become – the Ancestor’ from which the person had emanated.¹⁰⁶ In the Western Desert, ‘*walya* – the earth, dirt, sand or ground – is the periphery of the underground zone which is thought of as female, a mother to the people living on it and the final destination of the life forces of the Ancestors and generations of people who have died in the area.’¹⁰⁷

The Egyptian and Aboriginal perceptions of the chthonic domain are both strongly gendered. Although the Egyptian earth-god Geb is male, the Netherworld-associated terms *dt* and *dwꜣ.t* are grammatically feminine, and the female and mothering aspect of *dt* has been remarked earlier in connection with its avatar, Tefnut. This, of course, accords well with the mothering aspect attributed to the underground zone in Aboriginal thought. In each culture, it combines the qualities of both womb and tomb.¹⁰⁸

As Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is well known to Western scholars, it is not surprising that this paradigm has been used to convey the metaphysical essence of both *dt* and *tjukurrpa*. However, the issues considered in this and the previous section have revealed much wider similarities between these constructs – similarities such as their insistence on secrecy, their ability to accommodate dissonant truths, and their overlap with dreams, death, the afterlife and

⁹⁹ Gregory 2022: 8 (note 31).

¹⁰⁰ Gregory 2022: 5 (note 16), citing Hegenbarth-Reichhardt 2009: 26.

¹⁰¹ Assmann 2001: 75-78; Assmann 2013; Gregory 2022: 6 (note 19).

¹⁰² Gregory 2022: 65-67, 72-73.

¹⁰³ Gregory 2022: 60-61. Assmann, too, connected the *bꜣ* with *nḥḥ* (Assmann 2001: 79; 2013: 360).

¹⁰⁴ Dubinskas and Traweek 1984: 24 (*djugurba* = older spelling of *jukurrpa*, as Walbiri is for Warlpiri).

¹⁰⁵ Berndt and Berndt 1999: 485.

¹⁰⁶ Chatwin 1987: 325.

¹⁰⁷ Watson 2003: 75.

¹⁰⁸ In Egyptian, compare the orthographically unrelated yet homonymic *mw.t* (mother) and *mwt* (death, to die); *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2022: lemmas 69040 and 69310, respectively. The main manifestation of the mother-goddess *Mw.t* was as a lioness (Hart 2005: 97), a nocturnal killer (e.g. Simpson 2003: 280; Evans 2010: 111), while the correct response to death was underground burial.

the feminine underworld. None of these attributes accord with Plato's model, in which an awareness of the realm of the Ideal – and such access to it as is possible – is reserved for the rational mind of the philosopher, which privileges logic, argument and debate over tradition, revelation and secrecy. Accordingly, we may conclude that the Egyptian *d.t* and Aboriginal *tjukurrpa* have far more in common with each other than either do with their shared counterpart in Greek philosophy.

Metaphysical congruences despite lifeway differences

The conceptual similarities discussed in this paper have emerged from quite different civilizations – one a populous agrarian nation with a centralised bureaucracy in which the elites (including at least the senior priesthood) were literate,¹⁰⁹ the other a sparse nomadic hunter-gatherer society in which (prior to the recent arrival of European linguists) all societal and religious information was transmitted orally. The fact that the majority of people in both cultures lived from the land and in close proximity to nature could explain why the ancestors/deities often take therianthropomorphic form and may also account for the deep importance of place in both Egyptian and Aboriginal religion.

On the presence of human-animal hybridity in both religions, we should heed Ian McNiven's reminder that 'the human-animal duality of Western thought is limited in scope for most of humanity and most of human history, where the human-animal divide was more commonly seen as ontologically fluid and permeable and understood in terms of overlapping personhood.'¹¹⁰ On the issue of geography, we should recall that Egyptian mythological events often occurred at named sites with real-world correlates,¹¹¹ and that unique variants of the major gods and goddesses are tightly associated with specific cult centres throughout Egypt.¹¹² Similarly, in Australia, 'individual Dreamings are firmly anchored in the individual location that they embody and that embodies them.'¹¹³ Accordingly, sites such as Uluru and Abydos constitute sacred landscapes,¹¹⁴ even if the former is a purely natural feature and the latter has repeatedly been modified by human activity.¹¹⁵ Egyptian 'cult topographies' reflect the passage of a god or goddess's cult through the land and connect their cult centres in a kind of litany; for example, the one that commences the Great Hymn to Osiris on the Stele of Amenmose (Louvre C 286) reflects the diffusion of Osiris's cult from Lower to Upper Egypt.¹¹⁶ Such formulations have elements in common with Aboriginal Songlines, i.e. song-cycles which trace

¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Greece in the time of Plato would have been primarily agrarian and pastoral, with literate elites. Of course, Greek lifeways would be of little consequence if – as Steven Gregory suggests – Plato's realm of Ideal Forms was not an indigenous Greek innovation but rather was directly inspired by the Egyptian concept of *d.t* (Gregory 2022: 21-23, 28-29, 38-43).

¹¹⁰ McNiven 2013: 97.

¹¹¹ For example, Osiris was murdered on the river-bank of Nedyet/Nedit in Abydos (Hart 2005: 117; discussed at length in Graham 2019: 45 (note 295)). Similarly, Kher-Aha, the location of the mythical battle between Horus and Seth, was believed to be within the area now known as Old Cairo and was associated specifically with the site on which the Greeks built the Babylon (Sheehan 2010: 30; El-Kholi 2003: 353-54).

¹¹² For instance, there are many variants of Horus derived from *Hr.w wr* (the sky-god and national deity of Egypt), of whom Horus of Behdet and Horus son of Isis are just two manifestations. One local form of the latter is Horus of Hutnesu, which represents Horus 'at the moment of his victory over Seth and the unification of the Two Lands' (Bryson 2018: 187-89). Localities with major Horus cults include Hierakonpolis and – for Horus of Behdet – Edfu, where he is the consort of Hathor of Dendera (Hart 2005: 70-76; Shonkwiler 2014).

¹¹³ Graham 2002: 2.

¹¹⁴ Bridgewater and Lester 1991: 11-26; Mudrooroo 1994: 169-70. For a broader treatment, see Langton 2000.

¹¹⁵ O'Connor 2009.

¹¹⁶ Moret 1930: 730-32; Assmann 1999: 477-82.

the journeys of specific Dreaming ancestors across the continent and commemorate the events that occurred at the many places where they left their traces in the land.¹¹⁷

There are also similarities in the methods of information storage and transmission; both societies encoded meaning in visual and haptic designs, even if the highly schematised and multivalent Aboriginal iconography used in skin painting, in ground designs and on incised sacred objects does not directly correspond with speech in the manner that hieroglyphs do.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, early figurative drawings/paintings done for Europeans by desert Aborigines combined side-on and top-down views of objects in an aspective manner reminiscent of Egyptian two-dimensional art.¹¹⁹

More importantly, in both civilizations there was an emphasis on orality; during the Old to New Kingdoms, no more than 1% of the Egyptian population is thought to have been literate,¹²⁰ and Australian Aborigines never developed a way of recording speech in writing. Accordingly, in both cultures there was a strong association between hearing and understanding. There are telling overlaps in semantic range between words relating to aural experience; *sdm*, the ‘typical verb’ of Egyptian grammar books, means not only to hear or listen but also to understand, obey and judge,¹²¹ while in the Australian Western Desert, ‘*kulila*, the Kukatja verb meaning to hear or listen, also means to understand and to think, to recognise and obey. Its meanings focus on a person interacting with the words of another and acting appropriately.’¹²² Perhaps it is relevant that both societies emerged from – and remained embedded in – harsh and expansive deserts; as John Carty, writing about Kukatja speech, says: ‘Words in the desert are powerful, dangerous things.’¹²³ In any context, speech has an immediacy that reading lacks, for ‘sight isolates people from objects by situating the observer outside what he or she views, and [by] concentrating on the exteriors of surfaces. Sound on the other hand proceeds from the inside of people (or birds and animals) and “pours into” – penetrates – both the speaker and the hearers.’¹²⁴ It therefore serves as a bridge to the psychic interior, where time is effaced by memory and ultimately there is only the ‘eternal now’.¹²⁵

Of course, any corpus of knowledge that relies substantially on human memory for storage and on speech/hearing for transmission will, over time, become subject to ever greater levels of divergence and heterogeneity.¹²⁶ This will especially be true when the information is distributed across a large geographic area. One way to minimise this problem is to restrict the channels of communication by ensuring that only a small number of suitably qualified individuals ever has access to the knowledge. A complementary response is to accommodate the system’s limitations by being highly tolerant of variation. In an earlier section, we have already noted these two attributes as features of both Egyptian and Aboriginal religion.

¹¹⁷ Strehlow 1971; Myers 1986: 59-68; Chatwin 1987; Kimber 2000.

¹¹⁸ Munn 1986; Watson 2003: 70-108, 301-51.

¹¹⁹ Individual drawings done by Ngardi and Kukatja men in 1945 ‘show objects and people from both aerial and side views’ (Watson 2003: 123, 134 (Plate 5)), while many Pintupi paintings from 1971-2 do the same, ‘using different perspectives within a single painting’ (Watson 2003: 123, 135 (Plate 6)). For the aspective quality of Egyptian art, see Robins 2008: 21 and Peck 2015.

¹²⁰ Baines and Eyre 1983: 66-69.

¹²¹ Faulkner 1962: 259.

¹²² Watson 2003: 54.

¹²³ Carty 2021: 13.

¹²⁴ Watson 2003: 54, following Ong 2002: 70.

¹²⁵ Watts 1951: 144-45.

¹²⁶ Henige 2009.

If each of the two cultures exhibits a ‘continuity between language, knowledge and bodily praxis, a view which is characteristic of preliterate (oral) societies’,¹²⁷ then the discovery of more esoteric overlaps between the two cultures – correspondences of a cosmological and theological nature – should not cause much surprise. Perhaps, with its seemingly boundless expanse and timeless austerity, the desert again exerted an influence. Whatever the cause, both of the cultures in our comparison seem to have achieved a compounding of temporal and spatial domains¹²⁸ – or, more accurately, a sublimation of the former into the latter – such that eternity became embodied as a place, an authoritative voice-filled *topos* accessible in dreams and in death. Anthropologists have characterised ‘Aboriginal history as spatially based rather than time based’,¹²⁹ with ‘song cycles present in the land’¹³⁰ and Ancestors whose essence is symbolised by sound.¹³¹ For their part, the Egyptians located *d.t* in the *dw3.t*, within which each hour is ‘an expression of space as well as time’ and concerning which ‘the Underworld books place particular emphasis on sound’ – not just speech, but singing, wailing, chattering, roaring, and more.¹³² In a realm where ‘time has become space’, to quote the founder of the Aboriginal Desert Art movement, ‘the so-called story is an eternal idea in the culture of the painter. The elements or images of the story therefore have no reading direction as we understand it.’¹³³ With that, we already seem to have arrived in the atemporality of *d.t*.

Conclusion: Egyptian *d.t* and *m3̣.t* have parallels in Aboriginal *tjukurrpa* and Law

In 2003, David Jeffreys remarked that ‘Until quite recently, few students of pharaonic Egypt seemed prepared to make cross-cultural comparisons with civilizations elsewhere in the region, much less to consider Egypt’s achievement on a global scale against those of more remote cultures. [...] Egyptologists are collectively accused of being concerned with the particular and descriptive rather than the general and explanatory.’¹³⁴ His aspiration was that ‘Egypt [...] might be rehabilitated into a more rewarding worldwide debate, and contribute more substantially through new approaches to cognitive aspects of all past societies.’¹³⁵ In the case of indigenous cultures, we – uniquely – have past societies that also survive into the present, so I hope that the intercultural comparison which forms the topic of this paper may be considered a legitimate attempt to respond to Jeffreys’ challenge. It is not alone; for example, two recently-published studies contrast ancient Egypt with premodern Mesoamerica and China, while another compares the concept of *m3̣.t* with a potential Chinese counterpart, *tianxia*.¹³⁶

In the course of this paper, we have seen that Gregory (2022) concludes that *d.t* and *nḥḥ* represent the duality of not-time (‘eternity’) and all time (‘sempiternity’), respectively, with the world of *d.t* resembling Plato’s realm of archetypal Ideal Forms. Upon accepting this

¹²⁷ Watson 2003: 59, quoting Jackson 1989: 140. The clarifying interjection ‘(oral)’ is Watson’s.

¹²⁸ Such formulations reflect the perspective of the contemporary humanities scholar. A complete separation of the temporal and spatial domains is integral to the world-view of today’s historians, but of course this segregation is part of a cultural construct whose objectivity cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, modern theoretical physics sees the two domains as being inseparable and envisages the geometry of the universe as a single four-dimensional manifold known as the ‘spacetime continuum’ (Odenwald n.d.)

¹²⁹ Watson 2003: 34.

¹³⁰ Watson 2003: 34.

¹³¹ Hill 2002: 10, 716; Watson 2003: 295.

¹³² Darnell 2008: 110.

¹³³ Bardon 1991: 134.

¹³⁴ Jeffreys 2003: 5.

¹³⁵ Jeffreys 2003: 6.

¹³⁶ Feinman and Moreno García 2022; Barbieri-Low 2021; Moreno García and Pines 2021. Previously, ancient Egypt had already been likened to Japan, China and Brazil (Jeffreys 2003: 16).

appraisal, I pointed out that the Egyptian *d.t* and Australian Aboriginal *tjukurrpa* – both of which have chthonic, dreamworld, feminine and afterlife associations – seem to represent similar metaphysical constructs. It is not clear why this should be so; it may be mere coincidence, but conversely – as suggested in the previous section – the situation might owe something to the desert setting and the dominance of orality in the two cultures.

Table 3 summarises cognate aspects of the Egyptian and Aboriginal cosmogonies by highlighting in the same colour those text segments that represent equivalent concepts. The table also broadens the intercultural comparison from theory to practice, thereby establishing a correspondence between the Egyptian concept of *mꜣꜥ.t*, i.e. order, justice, balance and harmony in the world (a state sustained by the correct behaviour and speech of individuals) and the ethical code known in English as Aboriginal Law, i.e. ‘right way living’,¹³⁷ in which individuals emulate *tjukurrpa* precedents when performing routine activities (e.g. preparing food) and reenact Dreaming events (or, more accurately, cause the Creation to occur anew) in ritual and

Table 3. Egyptian <i>d.t</i> and <i>mꜣꜥ.t</i> as counterparts to <i>tjukurrpa</i> and Aboriginal Law. ^a	
Egypt	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Egyptian Creation era (<i>sp tp.y</i>) persisted in an atemporal domain known as <i>d.t</i> which provided a template of the perfection that was desirable for the real world. • This ideal state was sustained and brought closer by performing <i>mꜣꜥ.t</i> in daily life and in ritual. • The order of <i>mꜣꜥ.t</i> cannot just be respected or followed passively but ‘must be established and actively realized time and again’^b (Hornung 1992: 135). 	
Australia	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Aboriginal Creation era (<i>tjukurrpa</i>) occurred and exists in a domain ‘outside of time’, whence it provides an unchanging model and paradigm for all human and non-human activity. • ‘Right way living’ means observing Aboriginal Law, done by emulating <i>tjukurrpa</i> precedents in daily life and reenacting <i>tjukurrpa</i> events in ceremony. • Enacting <i>tjukurrpa</i> ‘is part of the endless remaking of the desert world. It is not an act of representation but an act of <i>creation</i> [...] of actual Country’ (Carty 2021: 13).^c 	
<p>^a Correspondences are highlighted in the same colour.</p> <p>^b This repetition no doubt ties in with the cyclicity of <i>nḥḥ</i> and the daily renewal of Creation with every sunrise.</p> <p>^c John Carty’s words relate to Western Desert painting, but his insights are equally (if not more) true of Aboriginal ceremony, as remarked earlier on the authority of Eliade (1973: 61).</p>	

¹³⁷ “‘Right-way’ is a familiar term across many Indigenous communities applied in many different situations. For example, “right-way fire” is an accepted term that relates to fire management that respects sacred sites, stories, cultural protocols and different types of country’ (Bush Heritage Australia n.d.).

ceremony. As we saw earlier, the Law is also termed *tjukurrpa*,¹³⁸ the exact sense of this polysemous word being determined by context. The situation is reminiscent of the identity that was established earlier (via Tefnut) between *mꜣꜥ.t* and *d.t*.

The Egyptian notion of ‘performing *mꜣꜥ.t*’ or ‘presenting *mꜣꜥ.t*’ (where the eponymous goddess is held in the hand of the presenter, usually the king)¹³⁹ is thus comparable to the Aboriginal English phrase ‘holding the Law’, an expression that we encountered earlier.¹⁴⁰ Of course, the Egyptian and Aboriginal bodies of ‘natural law’ differ substantially in the details of what they require from their adherents; the point, however, is that they represent similar ontological categories. They resemble one another because both have arisen from cosmogonies and perceptions of reality that – on the metaphysical level – have key elements in common. Once one has made the connection between the Aboriginal and Egyptian paradigms, encountering *tjukurrpa* as a lived experience in the desert brings an immediacy to the concept of *maat* – a feel for its likely quality and scope – that is difficult to obtain from the impersonal abstractions of academic Egyptology.

In conclusion, I suggest that Egyptologists from many countries – but perhaps most of all from Australia – may be able to leverage traditional indigenous knowledge to obtain insights into unfamiliar Egyptian concepts. As mentioned earlier, Steven Gregory has already made a start by drawing attention to the metaphysical-physical division inherent to linguistic expressions of the North American Hopi people and by suggesting that the same dichotomy may have been embedded in the ancient Egyptian worldview. Intercultural comparisons along these lines may reveal that Egyptian terms which resist translation into modern European languages or into contemporary Egyptian Arabic have meaningful counterparts in the languages and practices of surviving First Nations peoples. This paper represents an initial attempt at such a comparison. In it, I have suggested that the Egyptian *sp tp.y* – the First Occasion or Creation era – may have a metaphysical parallel in the Australian Aboriginal cosmogony known in English as the Dreamtime / Dreaming (Figure 8). More specifically, I have used Steven Gregory’s newly-published findings to propose that the Egyptian concepts of *djet*-eternity (*d.t*) and *maat* (*mꜣꜥ.t*) have conceptual counterparts in the Dreaming and in Aboriginal Law, respectively, at least insofar as these constructs are understood by the peoples of the Australian Western and Central Desert (Figure 8). The underpinning indigenous term – which may equally be used to refer to the events of the Creation era, to the atemporal realm of the ideal in which the Ancestors abide, and to the Law that arises from it – is *tjukurrpa* among the Pintupi, Kukatja, Pitjantjatjara, and other Western Desert groups;¹⁴¹ *jukurrpa* among the Warlpiri; and *altyerre* among the Arrernte and related groups in the Central Desert.

¹³⁸ The identity of ‘Dreaming’ and ‘Law’ was established earlier in the quotation from Myers (1986: 53). Some language-groups do have additional terms with different nuances, e.g. in the Western Desert, Ngaanyatjarra or Ngaatjatjarra speakers may use *ngurlu* or *pikangurlu* to mean Aboriginal Law; the former has connotations of fear, while both words can also refer to sacred ceremonies (Glass and Hackett 2003: 234, 311, 669).

¹³⁹ Hornung 1992: 131-34

¹⁴⁰ The presenting/holding correspondence is not exact as each culture assigns a different identity to both the giver and receiver. Thus *mꜣꜥ.t* is presented by the Egyptian king to the gods, while (as we saw earlier) the Law is held by the current generation of Aboriginal people so that they can pass it on to future generations. Nevertheless, the Egyptian king acts on behalf of all his people to ensure the perpetuation of *mꜣꜥ.t* into the future, so the two expressions are functionally equivalent.

¹⁴¹ As mentioned in note 22, the official Pitjantjatjara spelling is *tjukurpa* (Goddard 1996: 184).

Positive outcomes from future studies of this kind would not only afford further insights to the global Egyptological community but might also – in their own small way – provide additional relevance and respect for the (often endangered) languages and worldviews of the world’s indigenous populations.

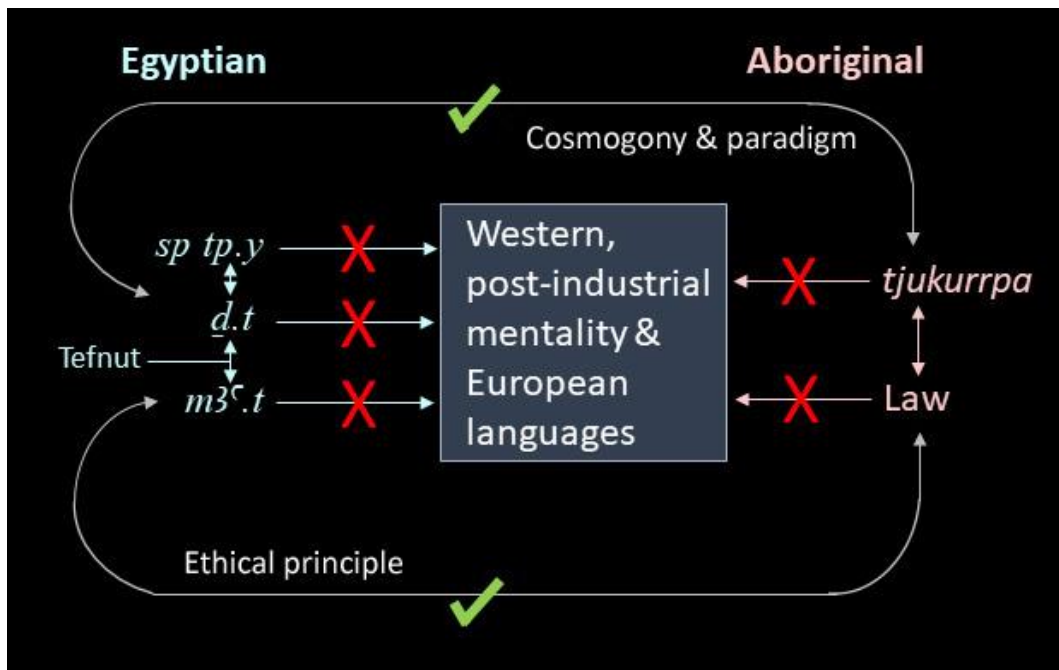


Figure 8 - Accessing unfamiliar Egyptian concepts by leveraging Aboriginal knowledge. Certain terms and concepts (Egyptian: left / cyan colour, Aboriginal: right / salmon colour), which resonate amongst themselves (vertical double-headed arrows), lack Western equivalents (horizontal arrows, interdicted with red X-marks). However, there is a direct correspondence between the Egyptian and Aboriginal terms (curved grey arrows, affirmed with green tick-marks); the terms themselves can be categorised as cosmological-metaphysical (upper grey arrow; *sp tp.y* / *d.t* – *tjukurrpa*) or ethical/moral (lower grey arrow; *m3̣.t* – Aboriginal Law).

Figures

Figure 1. Cross-cultural convergence: Egyptian terms from the title of the paper presented in ‘Aboriginal hieroglyphs’. (a) The First Occasion (*sp tp.y*); (b) *Djet*-eternity (*d.t*). Digital artwork by: Lloyd Graham, March 2022.

Figure 2. Some royal tomb inscriptions which juxtapose *d.t* and *nhh*. Luxor: (a) Tomb of Merenptah, Valley of the Kings (KV8); (b) Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens (QV 66). Photography by: Lloyd Graham, November 2017.

Figure 3. Another inscription which juxtaposes *nhh* and *d.t*. Abydos, Temple of Seti I, Osiris suite. Photography by: Lloyd Graham, January 2018.

Figure 4. Language blocs of the Central and Western Desert region of Australia. Adapted with permission from the base map made by Reddit user [taillesskangaru](https://i.redd.it/57nxvy1qrb8y.png) for the MapPorn thread. <https://i.redd.it/57nxvy1qrb8y.png> [Last Accessed: 5 May 2022].

Figure 5. Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Cropped and modified from a graphic by Wikimedia Commons contributor 4edges, reproduced here under Creative Commons licence BY-SA 4.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_cave#/media/File:An_Illustration_of_The_Allegory_of_the_Cave,_from_Plato%E2%80%99s_Republic.jpg [Last Accessed: 15 May 2022].

Figure 6. *Neheh*-eternity (*nḥḥ*) and *djet*-eternity (*d.t*) depicted as anthropomorphic deities on the first shrine of Tutankhamun, left side. Redrawn from Piankoff 1951: Plate 1.

Figure 7. Determinatives in *d.t*-eternity and *nḥḥ*-eternity. (a) Deir el Medina, Ptolemaic Temple of Maat, Hathor, Imhotep and Amenhotep son of Hapu; (b) and (c) Luxor, Valley of the Kings, tomb of Ramesses VI (KV9). Photography by Lloyd Graham; panel (a) November 2017 and panels (b) and (c) February 2020.

Figure 8. Accessing unfamiliar Egyptian concepts by leveraging Aboriginal knowledge. Graphic by: Lloyd Graham.

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