King Silko and the Roots of Nubian Christianity: A Reappraisal of the Post-Meroitic Period. Rethinking Cultural Hybridity and Multiple Religious Identities (Salim Faraji)

Nubiologists and scholars focusing on the Post-Meroitic period of Nubian history have often described this era as a transitional period from “paganism” to Christianity. Archaeological discoveries have also confirmed the presence of an embryonic Christianity alongside classical pharaonic forms, yet the scholarly consensus is that formal Christianity emerged in Nubia in the sixth century. This study proposes that Christianization began with the triumphant campaigns of the Nubian king Silko during the Post-Meroitic period. The Silko inscription written in Greek and dated to the fifth century CE represents the genre of triumphant inscriptions, a genre that articulates the tradition of sovereign religion and kingship ideology that was so fundamentally important in classical Nile Valley history. The inscription’s proclamation “God gave me the victory” suggests that the Nubian King Silko appropriated Christianity as one of the key elements of Nubadian monarchial religion and thereby sanctioned it as a part of the Nubadian state without excluding the traditional role of Meroitic culture and religion.

Nubian sovereign religion in the fifth century was an amalgamation of Classical Sudanese traditions, Meroitic imperial culture, Christian traditions indigenous to Coptic Egypt, and Roman military piety.

The focus of this study is to situate the Silko inscription as a religio-cultural and theological text rooted in the sovereign religion of ancient Nubian and Egyptian divine kingship traditions, and to explore how this archaic ideal of monarchy shaped the origins of Christianity in the Middle Nile Valley. The second goal of this exposition is to position the Silko inscription as a text that reflects the processes of cultural encounter and religious transformation in late antiquity. By utilizing contemporary African and African diaspora religions and applying methods that are traditionally employed in contemporary studies of conversion in Africa and the African diaspora I will highlight the themes of cultural hybridity and multiple religious identities in late antique Nubia.

This paper will address the questions: did the process of ancient Nubia’s encounter with Byzantium and subsequent conversion to Christianity resemble the encounter between Portuguese Catholicism and Congolese monarchial religion in the fifteenth century? Was the character of early Nubian Christianity fundamentally African or was it simply an imitation of Greek culture and Byzantine Christian traditions? Did Nubian Christianity represent an Afro-Creole culture or did Christianity function as a veneer by which indigenous traditions existed in parallel relationship to new religious forms? By raising these questions I seek to challenge conventional views about religious conversion that privilege “pagan-Christian” dichotomous discourses and give voice to indigenous perspectives that upset Christian triumphalism.