

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Shemsw Bak, (2014). *Sanhat: An official of ancient Kemet*. Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh (343 pages).**

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Imagine this! You are reading a story told by a man who walked amidst the pyramids and sphinxes, not in an excavated site under the helmeted supervision of some learned western archaeologist. No! This story is a translation of a hieroglyphic text written by someone who lived at a time when pyramids were still being constructed; someone who himself had a stone pyramid built for him in the necropolis, complete with funerary furniture and all other appurtenances of a burial befitting a high official of Kemet, to give ancient Egypt its proper name.

This is a story which spreads before the reader's astonished gaze a view of life in ancient Egypt as it was witnessed and lived by a citizen of the time and place who participated in that ancient way of life and was affected by the political intrigue and uncertainties of the time. The story educates the reader about the military insurrections on the borders of the kingdom, the conduct of war, the way the king related to those of his courtiers whom he trusted, the clothing of the noblemen, the practice of agriculture, the food the ancient Egyptians ate, the way children were brought up... Indeed, *Sanhat's* story provides us with vivid pictures of a way of life we thought was lost or misappropriated forever, especially as we were brought up in the belief that those magnificent figures with sonorous names like Ozymandias, Tutankamun, Akhnaten, Cheops and the like were all white men, even if the noses on the statues did not always conform to the line of the Caucasian nose. Against the evidence before our very eyes we were expected to accept the sustained deceit that the people of Kemet were white.

The miraculous work of recovery which brings us *Sanhat's* story is the achievement of Ayi Kwei Armah and a team of collaborators who make up **Shemsw Bak**. The Shemsw, we are told, were individuals in Kemet 'who formed a long-term intellectual family for the purpose of doing some chosen work together.' This particular group of

intellectual workers, **Shemsw Bak**, are people who possess skills which have enabled them to identify the story in the ancient hieroglyphic script of Kemet, to transliterate it into modern script, and then to translate it into Akan, English, French, Kikongo, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Wolof and Zulu – seven languages widely used in Africa today. The very presentation of the text is ingenious and aesthetically appealing. Each page of the volume presents only one line of hieroglyphic text followed in alphabetical order by its translation into the languages mentioned above, each one occupying the same linear position on every succeeding page. Thus on turning each page the reader first sees the line of hieroglyphic text and its transliteration, and below that, in succeeding lines, the translation into the various languages listed above.

In outline, the story Sanhat tells is simple enough. This courtier and high military official is returning home to Kemet from a successful campaign to put down an insurrection in the land of the Libyans when he overhears information conveyed to Senwosret, the prince commanding the campaign, that his father, the Pharaoh, has died suddenly under suspicious circumstances and also that the younger princes who had accompanied them on the campaign should without ceremony return home immediately. Suspecting a palace coup, Sanhat, the courtier, decides rather rashly to go into exile. The story he tells then is mostly the narrative of his exile and his eventual return to Kemet where, now an old man, he is welcomed back with great pomp by Senwosret, his former companion in battle who has in fact succeeded his father as Pharaoh.

The reader obtains much fascinating information about ancient Egypt, more properly Kemet, from Sanhat's 4,000-year old story. In particular, the one thing it impresses upon the reader who did not know it before is the fact that the people of Kemet were black, and stood on higher than equal footing with their Asian neighbours and often got the better of them in war. The narrator refers to Kemet as 'the Black Nation' (p. 52) to which neighboring nations travelled to trade. Their culture was advanced to such an extent that the fame of King Sehotep Ra, the father of Senwosret, had spread as far as Palestine. We know from the Bible that Joseph and his brothers traded with the Egyptians; what is not too clear from that source is the complexion of the Egyptians. Sanhat tells us of the stone quarry from which the pharaoh obtained material to build a wall to keep out Asians and Bedouins. Further, such is the personal ability of Sanhat that the king of upper Palestine gives him his eldest daughter in marriage, puts him in charge of his children, endows him with land to farm for himself and is appointed a village chief. The fact of his being black does not seem to enter the king's reckoning: that Sanhat is a man skilled in many arts is what matters to the ruler.

As we read his story, we notice that a skill which Sanhat emphasises above all is military prowess. Fighting skill, whether at the individual level or in military formation, seems to have been highly valued. Equipped with a fine army, Kemet has subdued many of her neighbors, Asian as well as African. When we first meet Sanhat, he is returning

from a military campaign bringing captives and booty to Kemet. In his extended panegyric to the ruling pharaoh, Senwosret, Sanhat praises his military skills, particularly the fact that he has extended the frontiers of the state, adding that this ruler of Kemet was 'born to smash the Asians and Bedouins' (p. 101). It is interesting that many centuries later, kings of certain kingdoms in Africa saw it as their supreme duty on ascending the stool or throne to extend the frontiers of their kingdom by annexing neighbouring states. Was this territorial expansionism a link to Kemet?

Perhaps, it is in their reverence for death and the dead that the people of Kemet most resemble present-day Africans. Admittedly, we are not in the habit of building pyramids for our dead kings these days, and Sanhat's story does not provide us with an example of the manner in which ordinary people of Kemet were treated after death, but there is no mistaking the similarity between the ancient Egyptian attitude to death and our own today. We also bury our dead with lavish ceremony and fill the coffin with the most expensive finery.

No sooner does old age begin to crawl on Sanhat than he begins to think of returning home. 'What is more important than the union of my body with the land of my birth,' he says. And the Pharaoh repeats the idea when he sends Sanhat the message: 'You shall not die abroad. Return!' (p. 228). And so even while he is still alive, the most elaborate preparations are made, on Pharaoh's orders, for the funeral of the returned courtier, complete with a stone pyramid, funerary furniture, a tomb garden and gold-plated statue. The people of Kemet believed death to be a passage to blessedness, a reward for a life well-lived.

Armah and his intellectual family, **Shemsw Bak**, have promised us 'further pleasant surprises.' May they be enabled to keep their promise! May they guide us to walk further with the ancient Egyptians and learn more of their story so we do not continue to believe, for example, that Ghana's written history and literature began with the coming of the Portuguese, Diogo de Azambuja.

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