Moses Kushite Connection

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A multimedia exhibition scheme, which strives to portray historical themes in an art gallery showcasing set in museum standards

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Introduction

My Capstone is a multimedia exhibition scheme, which strives to portray historical themes in an art gallery showcasing set in museum standards. The exhibition was held in the CSUMB campus, in the Visual and Public Art Department, in the Balfour Brutzman Gallery in building 71 from May 6-16, 2008.

The exhibition material is compromised of three collections categorized on bases of their sources of inspirations. The “Quranic Inspirations” are inspired by verses from the Quran, while the “Biblical Inspirations” are enthused by verses from the Bible, and the “Freudian” by Freud’s concepts on Biblical scripts. Each collection is presented by a statement elucidating the theme and content of the group. Also, each artwork is accompanied by a caption providing English translation of the Arabic verse/s incorporated in the piece. Most of the captions include a briefing about the inspiration of the particular work.

The information presented may be seen as a source of information and concepts for those studying the diverse areas of the social studies and, particularly, history and theology and those studying Biblical and/or Islamic history. The content may be of special relevance to those interested in understanding the cultural setting of the modern Northern Sudan.

The content may be of particular value to students of the CSUMB Museum Studies, who may use the content as a model for showcasing of cultural heritages and for applying historical themes to museum and gallery sites.

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Artist’s Statement

Because of my belief in the significance of the past to understand the present, what projects to me out of my reading in history directly inspires my art. The story of Moses reflects the Biblical perspective about Kush (or Nubia), which is the homeland of my ancestry and childhood memories. Hence, through exploring the story of Moses, I extend my perspective into the origins of my Kushite identity. By that, I do not only attempt to examine various aspects of social evolution, but to look deeper into the behavioral origins of my own family and community.

My work links between a wide variety of historical information and traditional, religion-based, legacy. The sources from which I have drawn my inspirations encompass the Quran text, books of the Bible, writings of the Sudanese thinker Ustath Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, and -to some extent- Sigmund Freud interpretations. The theme of the project, however, is not designed to review or verify any religious beliefs or ideas; is rather directed to explore idealistic human demands and aspirations.

Concerned with the methodology, my artwork combines both digital tools and traditional hand-drawing techniques to create forms and textures that reflect a sense of authenticity and generate nostalgic euphoria. Within many of my art pieces, I incorporate images of actual artifacts from the ancient civilization of Kush and contextualize them in relevance to the theme of my products.

Throughout my work, I aim to capture strength of the language in visual imagery. The Arabic language is the source of my culture and linguistic heritage. At the same time, Arabic is the medium of Quran and a descendant language to the Hebrew, which is the authentic language of the Bible.

I believe that, the remoteness of historic events retold in poetic language is what contributes to making the content of these religious-based books so mystically unique, mysteriously attractive, and emotionally moving.

*Incomplete and dim memories of the past, which we call tradition, are a great incentive to the artist, for he is free to fill in the gaps in the memories according to the behests of his imagination and to form after his own purpose the image of the time he has undertaken to reproduce.*

—Sigmund Freud, ‘Moses and Monotheism’, 1939

The Arabic verses incorporated in my artworks are derived from either the Quran or the Bible. Hence, the figures I depict appear to theatrically perform the content of the verses.
The Kush Civilization

Ancient Kush (in Northern Sudan) is one of the oldest civilizations of the ancient world and the earliest in the Nile valley.

Kush civilization is noted in archeological and historical sources for the richness and sophistication of its culture. A centralized political structure has emerged in Kush as early as 3300 B.C. The idea and norm of pyramids and the diverse range of cultural features that characterize the ancient Egyptian civilization, in particular, have originated in Kush. A total of 223 pyramids - 3 times those found elsewhere - were built overlooking the cities of Kush.

For centuries, Kushite merchants profited from trade in exotic materials (such as gold, incense, and ivory) they brought from regions further south; hence, establishing lucrative trade routes to the Mediterranean and the most remote areas of the ancient world.
Quranic Inspirations

The group of works “Quranic Inspirations”, is inspired by the interpretations of Ustath Mahmoud Muhamed Taha (1909-1985), the founder and leader of the Sudanese intellectual ideology called Alfikra Al Jumhuria (Republican Thought). He thinks that the Quran embodies an apparent meaning –represented by the literary rational validity of the verse– and a transcendent dimension of a deeper value. Several verses from Sourat Kahf of the Quran, he says, are connected to Sudan. The content of the verses refer to an encounter between Moses and a mysterious prophet named Al Khidir.

The Story:

In the story, God sent Moses to seek guidance from a holly man named AlKhidir. Moses made the journey to meet Al Khidir at the junction of two “water bodies”. Al Khidir put conditions that Moses would not object to his actions. At first, Al Khidr wrecked a boat navigated by two poor lads. Then, Moses became infuriated with Al Khidir and protested; thus, breaking his promise. This incident is portrayed on my artwork containing the verse “And they boarded the boat and he made damage”.

Illustrated on the second artwork: “And he found a kid and he murdered him”, Al-Khidr murdered a child. Moses got horrified and again objected. Al Khidir gave Moses a final warning. On the last incident, they traveled to a village with very unwelcoming people. Al Khidir instructed Moses to help him rebuild a wrecked wall and refused rewards. Again Moses lost his patience and complained; hence, putting an end to his journey with Al Khidir. The last incident is depicted on my piece “And he Built a Wall”.

Al Khidir then explained to Moses that by wrecking the ship, the poor owners would not loose their ship, where a ruthless king used to confiscate all sound ships from locals. Murdering the child was an act of mercy for the child would burden his parents by the cruel acts of his wicked heart. Lastly, there is treasure that belonged to helpless orphans under the wall that is built with no charges. By this, Al Khidir proved Moses impatience and inability to see beyond the look of things. The experience is a lesson that injurious actions may conceal mercy of God, which ordinary people may fail to see.

The Interpretation:
Ustath Taha explains that Moses represents the mind in each individual, while Al Khidir stands for the heart. The two entities – heart and mind– are always in conflict. By uniting them, Ustath Taha says, we can reach a state of perfection and peace with ourselves and surroundings. According to Ustath Taha, the journey of Moses with Al Khidir took place in Sudan. The junction of the two water bodies refer to the junction of the Blue and White Niles at “Khartoum”. Furthermore, the treasure hidden under the wall represents the spiritual legacy that is hidden in Sudan. The helpless orphans are the suffering prophets on one level, and the vulnerable condition of Sudanese people, on an other level.
Verse: “But when they reached the junction between the two [seas], they forgot all about their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight.” – (Al Kahf 18:61)

Verse: “And so the two went on their way, till when they disembarked from the boat, [Al Khidir] made a hole in it” - (Al Kahf 18:71)
Verse: “And so the two went on, till, when they met a young man, [Al Khidir] slew him” - (Al Kahf 18:74)

Verse: “And they saw in that [village] a wall which was on the point of tumbling down, and [Al Khidir] rebuilt it” – (Al Kahf 18-77)
Verse: “And when We appointed for Moses forty nights, and in his absence you took to worshipping the calf” - (Quran Al Baqara 2:51)

Description: The piece portrays young Moses holding a calf in affection. The calf is a symbol of the Kushite deity Amun, who was later adopted by the Hebrews as “the golden calf” when Moses ascended Mount Sinai during Exodus.

Verse: “And most certainly did We overwhelm Pharaoh’s people with drought and scarcity of fruits, so that they might take it to heart. But whenever good fortune alighted upon them, they would say, ‘This is [but] our due’; and whenever affliction befell them, they would blame their evil fortune on Moses and those who followed him. Oh, verily, their [evil] fortune had been decreed by God—but most of them knew it not.” - (Quran Al A’raf 7:130-31)
Biblical Inspirations

Since archeological work in Sudan today is at its minimum, the Bible remains to be the most valuable work on Kushite cultural history. Kush is an inseparable entity of the Bible world; geographically, historically, and culturally. A long legacy of traditions and social customs embedded in Kushite culture are evidently traceable in Biblical literature.

The Bible presents the Kushites in equal terms, if not higher, with the popularly known nations of the Bible world; the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. In Genesis “Kush” is listed as the first son of Ham before his brothers “Mizraim”, “Put”, and “Canaan”:

“The sons of Ham:
Kush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan.
The sons of Kush:
Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteca.
The sons of Raamah:
Sheba and Dedan.”
― (Genesis 10: 6-7)

Unfortunately, contemporary Biblical scholarship offer little valuable insights on Kush as a Biblical entity. In addition to the lack of research and the broad expanse of unreliable information on ancient Kush, American scholarship on Biblical literature, in particular, tends to reflect simplistic, stereotypical, and distorted perspectives on ancient Kush as an entity of the African continent.

Consequently, the crudity of contemporary Biblical literature encouraged me to focus my studies on studying the Bible independently, as well as the available methodological and archeological works on ancient Kush and adjacent civilizations.

In Biblical and Hellenistic sources, the region of Kush is commonly named “Ethiopia”. Contemporary historians frequently misreferred the region to the modern “Republic of Ethiopia”. Recent researches revealed the actual location to be within the boundaries of the modern “Republic of Sudan”.

My art in “Biblical Inspirations” is intended to reflect the influence of the ancient Kushites in the development of cultures as revealed in Biblical literature. My interest in social matters concerning the social status of women in the Biblical times is no less manifested throughout my art.

My art supports the reasonable argument that the suppression of women rights as manifested in contemporary Judo-Christian religious establishments is a fairly recent phenomenon that surfaced with the strict institutionalization of religious leadership and reached its heights during the medieval era. The influential roles of two women in Exodus, Moses sister Miriam and his Kushite wife Zipporah, correspond to the lofty status of women in authentic Biblical literature.
The frequent description of Moses Kushite wife, Zipporah, in Rabbinical literature as “beautiful” is consistent with the portrayal of Kushites in ancient sources, which includes Herodotus descriptions of the Kushites as "the most handsome people on earth" and Homer’s “Handsome Ethiopians (i.e. Kushites)”.

In Exgoge, Zipporah is quoted describing to Moses her ancestral land and its inhabitants:

“Stranger, this land is called Libya (i.e. Africa),
It is inhabited by tribes of various peoples, Kushites of darker skin,
One man is the ruler of the land: he is both the king and general.
He rules his kingdom, judges, and people, and is the priest.
This man is my father (Jethro) and theirs.”

— (Ezekiel 60-65)
Verse: “So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt.”
- (Exodus 4:20)

Description: On his way to the Pharaoh, and being concerned with his wife’s fate, Moses sent her back to Median.

Verse: “Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite,”

“When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow.”- (Numbers 12: 1 and 10)

Description: In this vivid Biblical account, God strikes Miriam with leprosy for harassing Moses’s Kushite wife Zipporah out of jealousy.
Verse: “At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met {Moses} and was about to kill him.”
“But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched his feet with it.”
“You are a bridegroom of blood to me,” she said. So the LORD let him alone.” - (Exodus 4: 24-26)

Description: Moses failed to fulfill his promise to surmise his son. On his way to Egypt, the angle of death came to take his life as a punishment. Zipporah saved Moses life by making the circumcision.

Verse: “And Moses reigned over the children of Kush since that day.” - (Jasher Chapter LXXII: 42)
Freudian Inspirations

My interest in the story of Moses has driven me to look into some sources of psychohistory. In “Freudian inspirations”, the story of Moses denotes a variety of concepts explained by Sigmund Freud through a series of publications compiled in 1939 as a book titled “Moses and Monotheism”. Although Freud asserts that Moses was a historical figure, he argues that Moses origins were Egyptian. Moses monotheism, Freud argues, was the legacy of Akhenaton’s monotheistic religion not the former Semitic patriarchs.

Freud attributes the development of Moses childhood story to psychic neurosis on part of the Jewish society. “Family romance”, is a conscious fantasy, in which the child becomes liberated from his parents by imagining that he was adopted from a royal family. Freud’s genius concept of “family romance” demonstrates the theatrical nature of the story of Moses regardless of its historic legitimacy. I express my interest in the concept of “family romance” in the story of Moses as accounted in the Bible Book of Jasher, i.e. one of the lost books of the Bible referred to in Joshua and Second Samuel. The Book of Jasher was read during the time of Jesus as part of the traditional Hebrew Bible. The content of the book presents the same foundation material as the Hebrew Bible; however, with numerous variations.

Unlike the traditional books of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Jasher offers a dramatic, and somewhat theatrical, account of Moses journey in the land of Kush. According to the Book, following the Moses murder of the Egyptian worker, he flees to Kush where he victoriously leads the royal military Kush against local rebels. Following the death of the Kushite king, Moses is crowned in his stead, and reigns as King of Kush for forty years. References to Kush are numerous elsewhere in the Book providing valuable insights on the cultural connections between the Hebrews and the Kushites. The text offers valuable insights into the personal life of Moses concerning his identity, and his relationship to his wife.

My work incorporates a variety of Freudian themes, notably the concept of “Family Romance”, as contextualized in accounts from the Book of Jasher concerning Moses personal life and his relationship with Kush.
Verse: “And he has not approached me” - (Chapter LXXVI: 5)

Description: Upon being crowned king of Kush, Moses had to marry the wife of the former king in accordance to the royal customs of Kush. Moses refused to approach Adonia as his wife in respect to the law of God forbidding intermarriage with Hamites (Kushites and/or Egyptians). Then Adonia accused Moses of disloyalty and he was thus banished from Kush.

Verse: “And Zipporah returned to her children from where she came,” - (Jasher Chapter LXXIX:18)

Description: This piece depicts Zipporah’s separation from Moses while he was on his way to the pharaoh.
Verse: “Zipporah begged her father to release him”- (Jasher Chapter LXXVII: 29)

Description: When Moses was banished from Kush, he fled to Median. There, he met Zipporah and her father Jethro, who put him in a cage. Feeling sympathetic for Moses, Zipporah begged he father to release him.

Verse: “And when Moses heard these things his anger was kindled against Balaam, and he sought to kill him, and he was in ambush for him day by day.” - (Jasher Chapter LXX:38)

Description: The Priest Balaam prophesized that Moses would grow up and overtake the house of the pharaoh. He therefore, attempted to convince the pharaoh to kill young Moses because of his Hebrew descent. Moses was enraged of Balaam and planned to murder him.
Verse: “And Zipporah [Moses Kushite wife] walked in the ways of the daughters of Jacob, she was nothing short of the righteousness of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.” - (Jasher Chapter LXXVIII:8)
Floating Moses Basket

**Descriptions:** This installation work is consisted of a looping-cartoon-video projection showing Moses basket floating in the background of a rainy and a cloudy sky, and three out of total six digital images of reed figures are arranged flanking either side of the projection (Below is a combined of the later images).
The Gallery

Below is a rough plan of the Balfour Brutzmann Gallery illustrating the distribution of the artwork collections:
The following are images showing the art show at the Balfour Brutzman Gallery: