
RA°



RA

Most simply, RA is the story of the Egyptian sun god, particularly during the hours between sunset and sunrise. The myth tells how Ra (or Re) passes the night, travelling from west to east through the netherworld, a dangerous time for him and filled with encounters with his vilest enemies, in particular the serpent Apophis. It is easy to see how the myth satisfies the cosmological problem of how the dying sun can rise up newborn the next morning in the opposite sky.

RA is what might be called a hierophany, a religious drama. While in broad outlines it is easily comprehensible, I have sought in many ways to retain an aura of mystery in certain details. Much of the text has been retained in Pharaonic Egyptian. This is the language of the gods, which appropriately distances them. But it is interpreted as the drama proceeds by a high priest or Hierophant, together with his assistants (I call them Hierodules) and in explaining they embellish the myth, adding details suitable to a contemporary audience.

The audience is limited to 75 – necessary because of the location changes throughout the work, and fitting because this corresponds to the 75 magic names of Ra, one of which each individual will carry throughout the night as a seal of divine protection. But audience is the wrong word here, for those in attendance are more like initiates being conducted through a mystery ritual, and must consider themselves as such if RA is to have meaning for them. During the early part of the work they indulge in numerous preparation exercises designed to assist them when they eventually descend into the netherworld. They learn breathing exercises; they learn to distinguish the gods by their appearance as well as the sounds and perfumes associated with them; they learn to chant in ancient Egyptian; and at the conclusion of these preparations they are clothed like the priests themselves. The Hierodules then accompany them to the netherworld where Anubis will guide them, showing them the manner in which Ra's miraculous rebirth is carried out. There are many spectacles in the netherworld, but the work is experiential in other senses than the visual, with particular emphasis on the senses which function best in darkness: touch, hearing, smell and taste.

RA is certainly not intended for everyone. In a sense the initiates must be cast and play their roles as carefully as the actors, dancers and musicians who present the work. Perhaps a few lines from Serge Saurenon's book on *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* are not out of place here.

"The Egyptian temple does not admit the crowd: from the entrance of the sanctuary, a series of doors more and more effectively protects the holy place from the dangers of the open air. The darkness deepens as, room by room, one penetrates to the heart of the edifice; the floors go lower, the earth approaches, and, with an apprehension which increases from moment to moment, the visitor finds himself before the entrance, carefully closed, of the chapel where (the divinity) consents to embody itself. It is this sacred effigy that the priest contracts to maintain religiously, to clothe, to nourish, and above all to protect from the attacks of evil spirits...." (p. 35)

Symbols loom large in RA as they do in all Egyptian religious writings. In fact, as Henri Frankfort explains in *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, "they constitute in the case of many a god all – or almost all – we know about him," (p. 7) producing an "irreducible unity of image and thought." (p. 28) Then what does Ra symbolize? Ra, who in late Egyptian religion had become the chief or universal deity, moves in a perpetual cycle of ascent and descent, up to the heavens as the sun and down to the netherworld, to the realm of

the dead. Yet in death Ra gathers new strength for his resurrection, while in life he perpetually moves towards death. I have been paraphrasing Piankoff here, who continues: "Thus the terms of life and death become interchangeable: life means slow dying, death means resurrection and new life. The main theme of *The Litany of Re* is the meeting of opposites, Re and Osiris, who become united and form an entity." (p. 10)

Osiris, the god of rebirth and renewal, of planting and growth, mediates through Ra to return him to the sky where he may supply light and life so that nature may continue her course. This is the essential theme, for the Egyptians, as Frankfort explains, "viewed their living universe as a rhythmic movement within an unchanging whole." (p. 13) The myth then becomes the model for humanity. "Whether the dead man's aim is the solar circuit or that of the circumpolar stars, or the life of Osiris, the essential wish is the same: to be absorbed in the great rhythm of the universe." (p. 106) It is with this in mind that we will attempt, during the 8-hour production of RA to engage the initiates in a cycle of experiences that will give this cosmic theme a personal reality. This will not be easy for the stigmata of modern life are not easily erased. Nor will we ever perhaps know to what extent we will succeed. For Jung, who has influenced my thinking a good deal in the preparation of the total text, has said: "Rebirth is not a process that we can observe. We can neither measure nor weigh nor photograph it. It is entirely beyond perception."

R. Murray Schafer

The Litany of Re in Ancient Egyptian Religious Literature

The text which forms the basis for RA is *The Litany of Re*, or to give its proper ancient title, "The Book of the Adoration of Re in the West and of the Adoration of the One-joined-together in the West (i.e. Osiris)". This belongs in a category of mortuary texts in use in Egypt during the New Kingdom (c. 1550 - 1070 B.C.), and revived occasionally later. All these share one aim in common, namely to chart the nightly part of the sun through the Underworld in the course of which he unites with Osiris. In the process of describing this union of the creative, solar principle with the passive hypostasis of fertility, the mortuary books, with such names as the "Book of Caverns", "Book of What-is-in-Hell", etc., provide ample details of the twelve sections of the Underworld and their divine denizens. The *Litany* is built around the invocation of the sun-god by his 75 names, and the role played by the deceased in assisting and participating in the descent and re-emergence of the solar deity at dawn. Although the dozen or so copies of this book which are at present extant derive in the main from versions placed on the walls of royal tombs – the earliest (Thutmose III's, c. 1504 - 1450 B.C.) is an exception, being on the king's shroud – it is quite clear that the *Litany* could be read and used by anyone who had the means to do so. The text was, in fact, intended to be recited by one person, as the written directions accompanying the book indicate, at night over 75 representations of the sun-god drawn in colour upon the ground. In the versions in the royal tombs such illustrations are more elaborate and occur at intervals along the walls in a series of vignettes. Reciting the text with the proper intonations and adhering strictly to the directions, was considered to be especially efficacious for the pious ancient Egyptian, as it would assist him personally in triumphing over the perils he might encounter both in life and in death.

In the course of Ra's descent into the Underworld and his journey through it, he and his entourage of gods and human souls would travel on an infernal river, inspired by the phenomenon of the Nile which so dominated the thinking and life of every Egyptian, in a flotilla of boats. Every so often the sun-barque might be assailed by the forces of malevolence and chaos in a variety of forms (dragons, goblins, demons, butchers etc.), and it was the role of the devout who accompanied him to try and ward off usually by magical means the threats of these powers of darkness. Thus a sense of foreboding at the presence of evil hangs over the whole, and makes it incumbent on the true devotee of the god to come to his aid.

Although the *Litany* was never, as far as we know, performed in dramatic form, the phenomenon of "sacred drama" is well known from ancient Egypt. Myths of great importance to the community could be commemorated in simple "mystery" plays, in which priests and laity took part, playing the parts of the divine protagonists and their supporters. Almost always the action was symbolic and the dialogue brief and rudimentary; occasionally mock combat would be staged, but processions were especially popular. In all, however, no text was ever recited nor dramatized for pure enjoyment. There was a firm belief, prompted by a crude logic, that reproducing the myth in some form on earth would at one and the same time be magically effective in the realm of the gods, and prove beneficial to the well-being and salvation of the individual devotee. As the rubric to the *Litany* puts it, "this is the victory of Ra over his enemies in the West: it is profitable for a man upon earth, it will be profitable for him after his burial."

D.B. Redford



Some Notes on the Characters in 'RA'

The **Hierophant**, meaning high Egyptian priest, and his three **hierodules** Heftet, Nayt and Resur form the link between the every day world and the netherworld of ancient Egypt. They are responsible for the instructions of the initiates and for their safety while in the netherworld.

The **gods of ancient Egypt** form an elaborate hierarchy: the **Ennead**; the protective divinities of the Pharaohs and the Kingdom; the divinities of birth and death; and the deified man. The **Ennead**, meaning the cycle of nine, is a pedigree of gods descended from the creator god, and constituting the mythological ancestry of the king, or pharaoh. Basically a concept of the solar cult, at home in Heliopolis, the group comprises the following:

ATUM

(the creator who brought the world into being through self-fertilization)

SHU

(Air, the support of Nut)

TEFNUT

(Moisture)

GEB

(Earth, the "heir" of the gods)

NUT

(Sky)

SETH

(god of chaos and the infertile desert)

OSIRIS

(the personification of the king in death)

NEPHTHYS

(which means "lady of the castle")

ISIS

(personification of the throne of Egypt, "mother of the king")



Ra – common word for “sun” in the most ancient dialect, and name of the sun-god.

Osiris – the personification of the king in death, and by extension the ruler and later judge of the dead. Also connected with the fertility bestowed by the Nile, and identified with Nepri (young grain) and Andjety (pastoral god). Guarantor of triumph over death to all devotees who identify with him.

Isis – original personification of the throne of Egypt and therefore mother of the king; consort of Osiris who aids in revivifying him.

Nephthys – sister of Isis who, with her, performs the lamentations over Osiris.

Hasroet – obscure; probably personification of necropolis.

Amente Nufe – (literally beautiful west) a personification of the land of the dead beyond the western horizon.

The King – son of the sun god, identified as Horus, lord of the sky, and mythological archetype of Kingship.

Bes – a robust dwarf, an imp or a Puck character, Bes was the buffoon of the gods.

Anubis – (meaning “young dog”), a jackal god, originally a local god of the town of Asyat, guardian of the dead, and assistant at the revivifying of Osiris.

Thoth – scribe of the gods who invented writing and all intellectual pursuits.

Maat – goddess of law, truth and justice.

Seker – a greenish hawk-headed mummy, he was worshipped in a sanctuary which communicated directly with the underworld.



RA

Conception and Composition
Egyptian Text
Director
Assistant Director
Set Designer
Assistant to Set Designer
Costume Designer
Assistant to Costume Designer
Lighting Advices
Composer Electronic Music
Composer Middle Eastern Music
and M.E. Musical Director
Smell Consultant
Musical Director
Chorus Master
Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Sound
Production Manager

Hierodule (Resur)
Hierodule (Heftet)
Ra/Bes/Meh-urt
Osiris/Seket-Hra
Hierophant/Anubis/Thoth
King
Hasroet/Maat/Seker
Nephthys/Tcherau-Sheraut
Isis/Tcherau-Ur
Hierodule (Nayt)
Ud, Nay, Duff, Sagat
Percussion
Violin
Percussion
Percussion
Darabukkah, Duff, Sagat, Davul
Qanun, Nay, Duff, Sagat
Harp

R. Murray Schafer
Don B. Redford
Thom Sokoloski
Marijn v.d. Jagt
Jerrard Smith
Ton Dullaart
Diana Smith
Hanneke Glas
Reinier Tweebbeeke
Bentley Jarvis

George Sawa
Johan v.d. Burgt
John McDowell
Nico v.d. Meel
Jan van Velden
Joris Sluizer
Arjan van Egmond
Guus v.d. Kraan

Tamar Baruch
Donnie Bowes
Donald Carr
Marc Drost
Jan Filips
Theodore Gentry
Calla Krause
Janet Smith
Katherine Terrell
Maureen Webb
Ebrahim Eleish
Steef Gerritse
Jacques Holtman
Murk Jiskoot
John McDowell
Suzanne Meyers Sawa
George Sawa
Ernestine Stoop



HAPI

(ONE OF THE
CHILDREN
OF HORUS)

<i>Dancers</i>	Peet Hoffmanns, Debby Kowsoleea, Mike de Leeuw, Joke Molenaar, Lidy Mouw, Marc v.d. Velden
<i>Tenors</i>	Hugo v.d. Hoek Ostende, Nico v.d. Meel, René Melisse, Niek Nieuwenhuijsen
<i>Basses</i>	Hans Claus, Marc Drost, Eric v.d. Linden, Ton Stauttener
<i>Extras</i>	Henk Boerstra, Flipje de Lorm, Dries Piening, Dick Specksnijder, Diaan Vos, Helma v.d. Windt
<i>Helmsman</i>	Jacques Veringa
<i>Crew</i>	Aad Caboort, Ton Dullaart, Robin Meijerink, Klaus Vleeming, Wim de Vries
<i>Dressers/Make-up</i>	Hanneke Glas, Ellen de Goede, Riet Hoekstra, Carina Molier, Ellen Sandberg, Debbie de Vries
<i>Hair-dresser</i>	Annis Kouwenberg
<i>Box-office</i>	Marianne Bonarius
<i>Sets/Props</i>	Ton Dullaart, Hans-Jorg Ahrens, Phillip Barker, Willem Beekhuizen, Damiaan van Doorninck, Marc Harsveld, Elise van Melis, Arnoud Odding, Nicole Spaans, Maarten de Vries
<i>Costumes</i>	Hanneke Glas, Sanneke Fisser, Ellen de Goede, Astrid de Graaf, Caroline Schat, Mia Verboket, Debbie de Vries
<i>Company Photographer</i>	Frits Falkenhagen
<i>Egyptologists</i>	Dr. J. S. Borghouts, Willem Hovestreydt, Peter Launspach, Andrea McDowell, Huub Pracht



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COMUS Music theatre, Toronto, was founded in 1975 as an organization for the development of new Canadian music-theatre. Early in 1981, COMUS commissioned R. Murray Schafer to create a new work of music-theatre, based on the ritual of the Egyptian sun-god Ra. In May 1983, RA premiered at the Ontario Science Centre, Toronto.

Illustrations in this booklet by Jerrard Smith

Some Background Reading for RA

The Litany of Re, edited by Alexandre Piankoff, Bollingen Books, Series XL-4, New York, 1964. An English translation together with the Egyptian hieroglyphs of the document which forms the source for RA.

The Book of the Dead, edited by E.A. Wallis Budge, Dover Books, New York, 1967. This readily available translation is somewhat out of date. In some ways it is a parallel document to the item above and some details for RA have been taken from it.

The Gods of the Egyptians, edited by E.A. Wallis Budge, Dover Books, New York, 1969. This two-volume reference book contains chapters on all the major Egyptian deities. It is easily obtainable and quite readable.

Ancient Egyptian Religion, Henri Frankfort, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1961. This book is still in print and provides a good general account of the subject.

Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, Erik Hornung, Cornell University Press, Ithica, N.Y., 1982. The most recent and comprehensive discussion of the subject.

Ancient Egypt: Its Culture and History, J.E. Manchip White, Dover Books, New York, 1970. A general introductory volume for the layman.

Ancient Egypt, National Geographic Society, Washington, 1978. An excellent book for pictures. Also contains some interesting essays.

The Book of the Dead, edited by Evelyn Rossiter, Crown Publishers, New York, n.d. Illustrations from the papyri of Ani, Hunefer and Anhai, together with helpful commentary, show the course taken by Egyptians after death.

Ancient Evenings, by Norman Mailer. MacMillan London Ltd., 1983.

