In *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*, Roberta Binkley states that working with cultures more ancient than the Greeks ..."illuminates the particular embeddedness that shapes and formulates the eurocentric tradition of rhetoric…” (p. 47). Choose a particular non-Western ancient rhetorical tradition (or weekly theme from the course) and consider the influence of a eurocentric rhetorical history. Frame your response as an argument that includes: a.) the major contributions of this ancient tradition and b.) how the Greek lens oversimplifies (or in some cases discredits) this tradition. As part of “b.” you must address Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as *techne*. Though you may bring in other readings as support for your argument, please base your answers primarily on the texts we studied in the class.

The ancient Egyptians use and practice of rhetoric is an example of a non-western rhetorical tradition that is important to the overall history and tradition of rhetoric. Maat, the system that influenced various aspects of ancient Egyptian life, provides us with several different practical examples of how rhetoric functioned in ancient Egypt. Furthermore, the ancient Egyptians various uses of rhetoric exemplifies the dangers of maintaining a Eurocentric history. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the contributions of ancient Egyptian rhetoric to the rhetorical history and tradition, but also to examine the role of ancient Egypt rhetoric when juxtaposed against the commonly attributed, and associated with rhetoric, Greek lens – specifically, Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as techne.

Ancient Egyptian rhetoric was heavily influenced by the beliefs of the Egyptians, and their approach to language. The Egyptians believed that “language should not be used carelessly” (Hutto, 2002, p. 214), and as such they viewed silence positively. Their specific linguistic practices were tailored to their notions about what it means to be a good citizen in public and private life. Specifically, their use of language and rhetoric was intended to maintain the status quo, because doing so was in accordance with being a good citizen. The rhetoric of the ancient Egyptians, according to Hutto (2002) “advocates that a good citizen should be conscious of social status and speak accordingly, but speaking truthfully” was also important (p.214). Repetition of previously stated or written by someone in a high position was common, because it reinforced hierarchy, social status, and would have been in accordance with their concept of Maat.

Egyptian rhetoric was influenced, and essentially based on the cultural concept of Maat. The concept of Maat is a system based on what Carol Lipson (2004) defines as “what is right,” although it is commonly translated as “truth, justice, order” (p. 81). The practice of rhetoric in ancient Egypt is influenced by morality and trustworthiness, which are important traits of the concept of Maat. Carol Lipson’s (2004) “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric: It All Comes Down to Maat,” researches the ways in which the concept of Maat influenced the writing of the ancient Egyptians.  This understanding of Maat refers to the “premise that humans must not disturb the balance state of creation, but instead must respect and live in accord with the cosmic harmony and natural order” (p. 81) as introduced by Lipson. Lipson claims that Maat influenced the writing done in ancient Egypt, as it must always be in accordance with the key concepts of practicing Maat Therefore, all of the writings could not upset the natural order, Maat, and needed to reflect deliberate choices made by the authors to appeal to Maat.

The arrangement and the entire Maat system, not only reflects the concepts and values of Maat, but of the culture of the ancient Egyptians. Maat refers to the “premise that humans must not disturb the balance state of creation, but instead must respect and live in accord with the cosmic harmony and natural order” (Lipson, 2004, p. 81). Maat, and its use of eloquence centered around their five canons, which stressed the importance of “maintaining silence, resisting feelings, finding the right moment to speak, speaking fluently, and speaking the truth” (Hutto, 2004, p. 216). These canons were in accordance with Maat, which influenced the writing done in ancient Egypt. Language was not used frivolously. There existed a strong appreciation and respect of silence. According to Hutto (2004), “silence was deliberately used as a rhetorical choice,” because they viewed silence differently than the Greeks. For the ancient Egyptians, “silence is not from lack of ability to speak,” lack of “power” to be a speaker, or a result of “fear of speaking” (p. 216). Due to the writing always maintaining accordance with the concepts of practicing Maat, all of the writings could not upset the natural order. Eloquence was not viewed unfavorably so long as it served the greater purpose of abiding by Maat. Eloquence was not used for nefarious purposes, because rhetoric, or eloquence for the ancient Egyptians was not about persuasion necessarily. Ancient Egyptians may have used rhetoric to be persuasive, as made clear by the texts found in tombs designed to persuade visitors to perform rituals for the deceased, but because it was always to be within the context of Maat texts needed to be in search of “truth, justice, and order.” To the ancient Egyptians “eloquence came from straight thinking” (Hutto, 2002, p. 216), and to maintain a good person publicly and privately it would go against Maat to use eloquence in a negative way.

The major contributions to the rhetorical tradition and history by the ancient Egyptians stem from the ways in which their approach to rhetoric/eloquence, and language, differed from the ancient Greeks. Since the ancient Egyptians base their rhetorical and linguistic practices on Maat, they do not have issues of questioning the practice of eloquence/rhetoric. Specifically, their practices are intended to continue to exemplify both translations of Maat, “what is right” and “truth, justice, and order.” Therefore, they present their texts in multiple genres. Letters were read publicly to reach “broader audiences” so that anyone in “hearing range would hear such texts” (Lipson, 2004, p.84). The tombs of ancient Egyptians contained elaborate performances in “visual, textual, and material form” (Lipson, 2009, p. 97). The texts found in these tombs were intended to draw in visitors so that rituals necessary to preserve the identity of the deceased were performed. The letters and tombs are examples of how the ancient Egyptians use rhetoric, or eloquence, in both public and private aspects of life, whereas ancient Greeks commonly associated rhetoric with public life, such as the courts, etc. The ancient Egyptians viewed persuasion as a positive, because it is used within Maat, and therefore when a tomb is elegantly and thoroughly presented to the public, it is with the intention to persuaded the living to perform prayers and rituals for the dead (Lipson, 2009). Lipson (2009) states it is not necessarily self-serving as some scholars suggest such an autobiographical text may be, because these actions done within Maat.

This view of eloquence, or rhetoric, and language greatly differs from those held by the ancient Greeks. In ancient Greece the practice of rhetoric was a topic of conversation for philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s view of rhetoric, or eloquence, was particularly unfavorable. He distrusts rhetoric, and those that practice it because practitioners of rhetoric were not “concerned to educate the people assembled in lawcourts and so on about right and wrong; all he wants to do is persuade them” (455a). The main purpose of rhetors, according to Plato, was to persuade, and as such they were not interested in education, and/or knowledge. If rhetoric’s sole purpose is to persuade, then those that practice it may be more inclined to ignore that which may result in knowledge, because knowledge isn’t a priority in persuading. Aristotle did not hold as negative a view of rhetoric as Plato.

Rather, Aristotle in *On Rhetoric* defines the use of eloquence/rhetoric as a means of persuasion. Specifically he defined rhetoric as the ability to “see available the means of persuasion” (1355b). Aristotle doesn’t necessarily distrust rhetoric/eloquence, but he does address how one can have good character, or credibility/ethos. For Aristotle this trust comes from the speech itself, and not the person speaking. It is the way in which the speech is spoken that helps the speaker gain the trust of the audience. According to Aristotle when “the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence” (1356a), it can make the speaker trustworthy. Trusting those that speak only to persuade may be difficult for an audience, therefore Aristotle brings to our attention that an audience is more likely to believe “fair-minded people” quicker and easier “on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (1356a). Any preconceived notions of the person, or their practicing of eloquence can be overcome if their speeches reveal their good character and trustworthiness. Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that trust can be gained, or earned, from the speech itself.

Aristotle’s view of the techne of rhetoric limits the understanding of ancient Egyptian rhetoric. Simply put, Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, and his subsequent thoughts found in On Rhetoric can’t be blindly applied to ancient Egyptian rhetoric in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of the rhetorical practices of the ancient Egyptians. Aristotle’s understanding of the art of rhetoric does not account for collective identity, which is an important characteristic of the concept/system of Maat. Those that follow Maat are in service of the king, and kingdom, and when their writing, performances, images, etc. are in accordance with Maat, then they are repeated throughout society. These favorable uses of Maat are approved, and therefore become part of the collective identity and practices of the ancient Egyptians.

Maat was a concept and system intended to maintain “truth, justice, and order” and “what is right,” so to apply a Greek lens limits the understanding and impact of ancient Egyptian rhetoric. By only using that specific Greek lens would categorize the rhetorical practices of the ancient Egyptians as religious and/or cultural acts. The rhetorical practices of the ancient Egyptians based on their concept of Maat make it easy to dismiss them as based on religious and/or cultural beliefs, and not about their specific use of rhetoric, and creation of rhetorical texts in ancient Egypt. It would do a disservice to the rhetorical tradition and history to exclude the ancient Egyptians simply because they exist outside of the dominant western view of rhetoric. Their ideas about language, and their performativity of rhetoric richen our rhetorical history as much as any mainstream Greek rhetorican or philosopher.

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