Homosexuality as Submissive Behavior: Example from Mythology*

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Egyptians often regarded anal intercourse as a sign of submissive behavior and Egyptian mythology includes several stories demonstrating this belief. Whether this belief derived from a magical belief or from observation of animals or from an attempt to make a man "womanlike" is uncertain. Evidently quite early in recorded history, however, there is evidence that man recognized that certain forms of sexual behavior implied a dominant-submissive relationship.

Anthropologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists have been intrigued by the correlation of personality characteristics associated with dominance or submissiveness and sexuality. In some ways it seems similar to animal behavior described by ethologists. In most species, for example, males do not attack the females. Even among the males in the animal world fights are usually rare although two males might go through a series of escalating threats until one signals his surrender. Usually one does so by borrowing the language of sex behavior, pretending to be female. Among baboons, for example, the loser turns off aggression by taking the presenting position, almost as if to imply that he was “just a poor weak female.” The dominant male may then mount as though to demonstrate that the submissive male was vanquished and on the bottom like a female (Karlen, 1971).

A. H. Maslow, following in the same vein, suggested that homosexuality in humans was like the dominance-submission expression of higher animals and of folk language. In a series of papers on female sexual attitudes he argued that sexual positions were linked closely with feelings of dominance or submission and face-to-face positions expressed more mutuality and less dominance than rear entry ones (Maslow et al, 1966). Hugo Beigel in a small study of the psychological meanings of coital positions among married couples reported similar findings. He found many wives objected to the woman superior position because they held it was undignified, animalistic, cold, greedy, unfeminine, while the men who objected to it did so because they felt

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it was unnatural and made them feel they were relinquishing their initiative and aggressiveness. To both sexes it often seemed to represent a violation of their sex roles. Beigel found that even more individuals objected to coitus a tergo, from behind, and he concluded that rear entry exposed a part of the body considered by many as even more shameful than the genitals. In effect, embarrassment about the rectum persisted after modesty had disappeared (Beigel, 1966).

That such behavior could be learned as a kind of defense mechanism seems clear from Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey's study of the ghetto. They found that American patterns of segregation and hostility to the Negro reduced the feeling of potency in Negro males and that there was a strong relationship between prejudice, deprivation, and sexual expressions of dependence and/or dominance (Kardiner and Ovesey, 1962).

Ovesey himself wrote a series of papers on power and dependence as motives for homosexual thoughts in individuals usually classed as heterosexuals. Such individuals he called pseudohomosexuals because their thinking did not so much involve erotic excitement as submission, symbolic, he felt, of the ritualized mounting, and presenting of baboons. He believed that dependence and power striving were two sides of the same coin and the male who fears that he can't stand up to the world may deny that he wants to and make failure and dependence a way of life. On the other hand his dependency urges may pose such a threat to his self-esteem and male identity that he will deny his feeling of being a weak, inadequate male, by a compensatory striving for aggressive conquest. This sort of problem, he felt, was likely to be acute in a boy who feels at a competitive loss with his father and brothers and, unable to compete with them, he becomes a mama's boy or a homosexual. This results from a kind of unconscious reasoning which went from feeling "I am a failure" so therefore "I am not a man" to "I am castrated" = "I am a woman" = "I am a homosexual" (Ovesey, 1969).

Within the limits of historical materials there seems to be much support for this concept of dominance-submission among the ancient Egyptians, although I have not found similar materials in other ancient cultures. Moreover, even here the term "limits" the needs to be implied because there is not enough surviving material to enter into any of the psychological variables. With these qualifications history
still might furnish some food for thought to modern students of sexual behavior.

The relationship between anal intercourse among males and submissiveness appears most clearly in the story of Seth and Horus whose struggle against each other, constitutes a central theme in the religious literature of ancient Egypt. Most historians feel the legend of their conflict predates the historical union under Menes and reflects the tribal struggles preceding this union. There are various versions of the homosexual incident in question but a Middle Kingdom papyrus from Kahun seems to provide the earliest and longest version:

"The Majesty of Seth said to the Majesty of Horus, 'How beautiful are thy buttocks! How flourishing (?) ...' The Majesty of Horus said, 'Wait that I may tell it ... to their palace.' The Majesty of Horus said to his mother Isis '... Seth desires (?) to have intercourse with me.' And she said to him, 'Take care, do not approach him for that; when he mentions it to thee a second time, say thou to him, It is altogether too difficult for me because of (my) nature (?), since thou art too heavy for me; my strength will not be equal to thine, thou shalt say to him. Then, when he shall have given thee strength, do thou place thy fingers between thy buttocks. Lo, it will give ... Lo, he will enjoy it exceedingly (?) ... this seed which has come forth from his generative organ without letting the sun see it. ...'" (Griffiths, 1969).

Horus, following Isis' advice caught the semen which Seth ejaculated in his hands and when Seth was not looking threw it into the stream. Later Isis advised him to produce semen of his own and give it to her. He did and she spread it on a piece of lettuce which she then fed to Seth. Later Seth claimed before the court to have performed a sexual act against Horus as done to the "vanquished" and demanded the Gods recognize his supremacy. Horus naturally denied any such submission and the god Thoth who was presiding at the court attempted to arrive at the truth by summoning the seeds of both men to speak to him. The seed of Seth replied from the depths of the water within the marsh where Horus had thrown it. That of Horus, however, issued from the forehead of Seth in the shape of a golden disc. Thoth seized the disc and placed it on his own head as an ornament and it came to signify the moon god. Quite clearly then it seems that it was Horus who had achieved dominance.

What is the significance of homosexuality in the legend? Several interpreters have argued that it signified the ignominy dealt to the conquered by the conqueror, an explanation that would accord with
some of the psychiatric theory cited at the beginning of the paper. Anal penetration then becomes a sign of the victor over the vanquished. Horus does emerge victorious and obviously the implication is that he only pretended to submit. Though Seth is not ostracized, he is vanquished, and later in Egyptian history his place in the pantheon becomes less and less secure.

There is some other evidence which would support the belief that suffering anal penetration is a sign of submission if not humiliation. It is said of Shu and Tefent, two other Egyptian gods, that

"Their abomination is for the hand of the god to fall on them, and for shade of the god to abuse them sexually. His seed shall not enter into them." (Kees, 1922, 1925)

Later a coffin text contains the inscription,

"Re has no power over me, for I am he who takes away his breath. Atum has no power over me, for I copulate between his buttocks." (deBuck, 1935–36)

The implication seems to be that Re and Atum could be rendered powerless simply by being able to have anal intercourse with them. Is this sufficient evidence that the Egyptians practiced such acts on their conquered enemies? The supposition is there but conclusive proof is lacking. One investigator reported that

"Here, at all events, we have unmistakable evidence of the belief that such a practice existed, though of its actual performance, there is no proof either in Ancient Egypt, or ... anywhere else in Africa." (Gardiner, 1935)

But there is also other evidence which might imply the existence of such a belief. For example, it was more or less common practice for the Egyptians, at least during some periods in their history, to amputate the penis of the defeated enemy, thus making them more "woman" like. King Merneptah of the 19th dynasty, for one, listed among the booty taken from the defeat of the invading Libyan army a total of 6,359 uncircumcised phalli of the children of the chiefs, brothers of the priest, and others (Breasted, 1960). Probably most such phalluses represented dead corpses since few adults could survive such a drastic operation, but those who lived might have to undergo similar de-masculinization by suffering anal penetration. We know that to call a man womanly was a sign of scorn, and by implication to put him to sexual use in the place of a woman could only imply greater indignity (Griffiths, 1969).
If submission to anal intercourse or amputation of penises indicated that the victor assumed the masculinity of the defeated, then it might help to explain why the Egyptians were so concerned with the penis itself. In general they regarded the penis as something to be greatly admired and this is nowhere more evident than in the representations of the god Min who is usually pictured as a thin figure, standing rigidly at attention, with his right arm, bent at the elbow, raised over his head, while the other arm is under his robe and in his hand he holds the divine phallus, huge and stiff. Conversely, the vagina was not so positively regarded although it was believed that the female required periodic intercourse and numerous pregnancies to prevent her from succumbing to hysteria (Veith, 1965). The anus, on the other hand, received a lot of attention and in many ways the Egyptians might be classified an anal erotic people. There was, for example, a specialist known as the “shepherd of the anus” and though it has been suggested that this title was only a poetic appellation for the royal enema maker, this subordinate situation does not seem to accord with the pompous titles usually accompanying this euphemism. There is, moreover, considerable evidence to indicate that the Egyptians looked upon the anus as an erotic area, such as the fact that they believed enemas had been invented by Thoth, the chief of the healing gods. This symbolic importance of Thoth to the anus is carried over in his pictorial representations, particularly when he appears as an ibis or a man with the head of an ibis. According to Pliny, the Ibis used his curved beak to wash that part of his gut from which it was essential for health that the residues of digestion be evacuated (Pliny). Care of the anus is the subject of several sections of the surviving medical papyri including the Chester Beatty VI papyrus, the Ebers papyrus, and the Berlin papyrus. All of this would seem to indicate that the violation of the anus of an unwilling subject would be a clear sign of subjugation.

It would seem clear then that at least in some situations the Egyptians regarded anal intercourse as a sign of submission on behalf of the passive partner. Whether they arrived at this conclusion from watching animals, such as baboons, or whether it reflects something inherent to man, however, is not clear. We do know that not all forms of homosexual activity were regarded with such feelings. There are many portrayals of oral genital contacts and these seem to lack any of the hostile implications associated with anal penetration. In cases
where the passive partner was clearly subordinate and submissive, as in adult youth contacts, the Egyptians were likely to punish the adult, since pederasty was frowned upon. Probably in most cases of homosexual activity between males the passive partner was looked down upon since the adjective effeminate implied most of the same connotations to the Egyptians that it does to us. In spite of the difficulties of the Egyptian evidence, and all the above qualifications, it seems that men long ago recognized that certain forms of sexual behavior might have implied a dominant-submissive relationship. Perhaps they concluded this not from looking at animals but at their own mates. After all men throughout history have tried to demonstrate the “inferiority” of women by insisting on their submission.

References


Pliny. Natural History, VIII, 27.