

# Medu Nefer (Ancient Egyptian) Rhetoric

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## ***The "Good" of Medu Nefer Rhetoric***

Ancient Egyptians developed the *Sesh Medu Netcher* (hieroglyphs) system of written language over seven thousand years ago. It is believed *Sesh Medu Netcher* remained in use until 100 BC and underwent many modifications along the way. It may even surprise the reader to know the *Medu Netcher* language survives today in parts of the Coptic language. The Remetch (as the ancient Egyptians called themselves) developed ethico/spiritual principles such as *Ma'at* that guided communication, and a distinctive rhetorical style they called *Medu Nefer* (*beautiful speech*). It is important to note that while *Ma'at* supplied the philosophical and moral guidelines for excellent human speech, the method, the techniques for achieving this excellence were the providence of *Medu Nefer*. In this way, *Ma'at* functioned as the regulatory principle of morality while *Medu Nefer* was seen as a tool to manifest *Ma'at*. Thus, the relationship between *Ma'at* and *Medu Nefer* is one of end goal and instrument to achieve said goal.

Rhetoric and philosophy have had a paradoxical relationship since antiquity. On the one hand they have battled for legitimacy and superiority over one another. Other times philosophical wisdom has served as the very foundation for what is considered "good" for a society, including forms of speech. These two have been friend and foe, but there is a sense in which a

culture's style of rhetoric is determined by prevalent views on the ultimate nature of reality—undoubtedly, a philosophical question (i.e., the sophists vs. philosophers). The word "rhetor" in Greek referred to any public speaker, giving us a glimpse into a society that had conceptually separated speaker from audience. Moreover, this rhetorical triangle approach separated speaker, audience, and context. Aristotle conceived of human beings as the only "speaking animals" or animal with logos. Here is a case in which the ontological/philosophical commitments shape the rhetorical style at a cultural level. Based on the philosophical tenet of the "speaking animal," ancient Greeks came to see themselves as different from the rest of nature, believed in the primacy of speech as that one uniquely human quality, and developed a corresponding rhetoric style anchored in the use of speech to address, win over a "public."

Similarly, ancient Egyptian *Medu-Nefer* (beautiful, good, just speech) was based on the ontological assumption that human beings are indistinguishable from other parts of nature. Thus, rather than focusing on the proper techniques to speak to an audience (public), the Remetch saw speech as part of nature ( *NTR*, spirit) of its own. The name of the language itself points in this direction. *MDW NTR (Medu Netcher)* is translated as "divine word" and in the cosmology of the Remetch all things in the cosmos are divine, including human beings and including speech. As the daughter of Ra (the sun spirit) and Hathor (the feminine, fertility, love spirit) *Ma'at* is also woven into the Memphis Theology as part of the story of creation.

*Ma'at* was personified as the *NTR* of balance, justice, and harmony. The feminine representation of *Ma'at* was ever present in the culture of the Remetch, including the stories of final judgement like those written in *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* in the Papyrus of Ani (c. 1250 BCE). In this imagining of life after death, our souls travel to the *Duat*(Hall of Two Truths) where each individual heart is weighted against the feather of *Ma'at*. If the

heart is found to be lighter than the feather, then the individual achieves *Maa Kheru* status (True of Voice) and would go on to work in the *Fields of the Blessed* from sun up to sun down cultivating the earth as a reward for their good character. If, on the other hand, the heart was found to be heavier than the ostrich feather of *Ma'at*, then the heart of that person would be immediately devoured by Ammit, the dreaded half hippopotamus, half crocodile beast, and in essence, be forgotten.

As an organizing principle, *Ma'at* provided *Medu Nefer* with the ethical goals of beautiful speech. Of special note is the fact that the word *nefer* in *Medu Nefer* has a plurality of meanings that range from beautiful, good, or just. It is an interesting linguistic feature of *Medu Netcher* that the words good, beautiful, and just were treated as synonyms. Thus, to do and speak *Ma'at* was also to do and say what was most beautiful and what was most loved, as the literature often describes "goodness." To speak *Ma'at* was to engage in what Egyptologist Jan Assman has called "communicative solidarity." What did it mean to speak *Ma'at* or to manifest beautiful speech? 1) First and foremost, beautiful speech could also take the form of silence. For the Remetch silence has many uses including: (1) to take time to listen, to show deference, to intimidate an opponent, or simply to take time to reflect; (2) Beautiful speech was also thoughtful, artful, carefully chosen; and (3) beautiful speech highlights the aspects of the cosmos that are everlasting, permanent. The Remetch had a significant distaste for fleeting, temporary or ephemeral things as they were considered unimportant. Culturally, architectural masterpieces like the Pyramids at Giza are evidence of the cultural predilection for those things that have an ever-lasting impact. Similarly, in its rhetorical style *Medu Nefer* put a premium in managing our speech in a way that reflected the divine and the sacred. This is often achieved through references to the Neteru (forces of nature), to model ancestors, to those features of the natural landscape that sustained life

along the Nile. Moreover, *Ma'at* infuses *Medu Netcher* and *Medu Nefer* with a recurrent theme of ecological facilitation. In the worldview of the Remetch, humans and their natural environment were all part of the same community, the same substance. In other words, humans and nature were not separated in the Cartesian bifurcation to which we subscribe today. Part of *Ma'at's* emphasis on balance and harmony indeed referred to actively maintaining said balance and harmony with other species and landscapes on which they depended for survival. In modern parlance, we would speak of these ideas as ecological principles. The principle of ecological facilitation, for example, asserts that in evolutionary terms, those species that make it through the process of evolution are those who are able to develop symbiotic relationships with other species in its environment that afford them food, protection, etc. in order to survive at various points in time. *Ma'at* scholar Maulana Karenga describes *Medu Nefer* as having a restorative imperative in which humans are expected to participate via speech in the work of creating or maintaining a balanced relationship to the local natural environment.

In short, because the Remetch based their rhetorical style *Medu Nefer* on a cosmology and ontology that focused our attention in the things are everlasting, the things that we have in common with nature (as opposed to what sets us apart from it, like the Greeks), the rhetorical style of *Medu Nefer* called for thoughtful, ecologically-centered, artful, listening-centered speech that gives *Medu Nefer* its own character and importance in the canon of classical rhetoric.

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## ***The "Magic" of Medu Nefer Rhetoric***

Since *Ptah* spoke the world into existence, speech acts take on a decidedly divine nature in the context of ancient Egyptian culture(s). Words are considered to be capable of transforming reality and manifesting *Ma'at* unto our social interactions. For this reason, magic becomes part of the ancient Egyptian worldview and speech (language) is identified as the tool or vehicle through which magic can manifest into our lives. What does such a manifestation look like? (1) Just as *Ptah* did in the beginning, humans can use their speech to impose or restore order into chaos in relationships with one another and with the natural environment. By speaking in a measured, humble, artful, and attentive manner, humans can maintain a certain social order. Beautiful speech also invites collaboration, and the practice of self-reflection; (2) The Remetch created conceptual frameworks for things like evil (*isfet*), magic (*heka*), *hu* (authoritative utterance), and *sia*(perception). The use of these words is evidence of a shared moral language with which to judge the ethicality of various speech acts.



The theme of magic is one that has to be included in any meaningful discussion of *Medu Nefer* rhetoric. In this tradition speech is endowed with the most powerful and sacred function of manifesting that which is above, that which is most loved, the most beautiful. Putting aside the stereotype of magic as something extra-human and nefarious, the Remetch were not far from our contemporary ideas of social constructionism in which language shapes our reality. To our contemporary sensibilities this may not be of great consequence but to ancient Egyptians that is the kind of "superpower" that far from being "supernatural" is the very essence of our connection to all that surrounds us. In sum, *Medu Nefer* afford artful language use with the ultimate for of consequence to our lives. Today, western societies have come to view magic as something superhuman and mystical but the Remetch saw a magic as intimately tied to our "natural" state, if you like. The use of artful speech in this context is magical in the sense that it is part of parcel of the

human experience, and available to us all through study, reflection and *Medu Nefer*.

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### ***The "Art" of Medu Nefer Rhetoric***

Lastly, but importantly, the technical aspects of *Medu Neferian* rhetoric are relevant to its study. In this particular rhetorical style both silence and speech are considered of great utility and value to rhetors when done artfully, beautifully. This is one of the many interesting paradoxes that show up in some facets of ancient Egyptian thinking. Here silence and speaking are supposed to work in tandem (not conflict) to help a rhetor manifest *Ma'at* to their communities. Speaking is not believed to be superior to silence, they are believed to have equal importance and beauty. Such an approach contrasts greatly with the ancient Greek focus on speaking as a way of achieving communicative excellence. The difference is that for the Remetch, good (beautiful) communication requires a careful deployment of both silence and speech. Speech was considered a creative instrument to help sustain or restore *Ma'at*. Therefore, both modalities are considered central to a proper balancing of artful conversation.

Beautiful speech is also speech that prioritizes good listening skills. An excellent *Medu Neferian* rhetor would have to spend some of their time engaging in communication through listening. In this context, listening is not seen as a passive act but a silent powerful rhetorical strategy when deployed in a timely, appropriate way. There is almost an aesthetic sense in which it takes an artful, superior mind is skillful in balancing silence, listening, and speaking in conversation. A fascinating aspect of *Medu Nefer* is also the way in which a rhetor is also highly encouraged to listen to themselves. Before

the Greek, "Know Thyself" was already a cultural imperative for the Remetch. Additionally, the proper "speaking" of *Ma'at* included individual members of Egyptian society reciting to themselves each morning the 42 laws of *Ma'at* in their negative form (i.e. I will not speak evil of others) as a way to remind themselves of their commitments and values. Each individual was encouraged to engage in this practice of their own will and accord as this took place before the establishment of organized religion in the first century BCE. As a final end to their day, individual citizens were encouraged to recite the 42 laws of Maat to themselves once again, but this time in the affirmative (i.e. I spoke justly of others, I did not speak evil of others) as a way for each individual to assess their behavior each day and in a very intimate way truly come to know themselves.

Lastly, an excellent Medu Neferian rhetor would have to be able to engage multiple perspectives. Part of the meaning of the word "creative" in this context emphasizes the "creator" part of creative as in "one who creates," one who brings things forth through their imagination. As the cosmic creative force "*ka*" represents human beings having unlimited access to the creative, generative force of *ka* so long as they have the right moral orientation. In this way, language is viewed as raw creative material from which to express one's divinity. Additionally, evidence of a commitment to pluralism, can be found in other artforms of ancient Egyptian culture(s), like painting and sculpture.

Art historians have long noted that some ancient Egyptian portraits configure bodies in peculiar and confusing ways. One may be looking at an image of a young man kneeling on profile view only to discover, upon close examination, that the face of the young man is on profile however his chest is facing directly forward while his legs appear oriented in the same way as the face. Such quirks have been observed with enough regularity, that scholars have theorized that the paintings were illustrations of a metaphor of the

(communicative) virtue of looking at one singular issue through as many perspectives as possible. This style of painting/drawing has been called "aspective" in so far as: (1) it offers a reduced account of a person or circumstance by presenting a two-dimensional composition focused on what it is most essential to know about the subject of the portrait. For example, a given image may feature one or more persons with different parts of their body drawn as seen from hypothetical different perspectives. At the same time the image features a host of other symbols of good character (and good speech) that has brought them nice garments, a full belly, or other indicators of a person whose good reputation has brought them stability and prestige. When we look at *Medu Nefer* as a vehicle of magic-making, radical creativity, and divinity begin to grasp the uniqueness and cultural logic of this rhetorical art.

Sculpture is another ancient Egyptian artform in which iconic renderings like that of the *NTR* (force of nature) *Thoth* feature the body of an obviously fit, young man but with the head of a falcon. To the uninitiated it may appear that ancient Egyptians worshipped animals or idolized such mutant-like creatures. Today, more and more scholars have (re)discovered the culture of the Remetch as highly metaphorical, a trait that is rewarded in speech and other arts. Thus, to contemporary scholars it has become obvious that the use of animal imagery in Egyptian art and language, written and oral, is deployed to represent a particular set of qualities for which particular species of animal are generally known for. Literal interpretations, therefore, are finally being abandoned. In the case of the sculptural depiction of *Thoth*, as the *NTR* (force of nature) representing knowledge and wisdom, he dons the head of a falcon signaling his bird-like ability to be able to assess a situation from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Other cultural artifacts of the Remetch feature interesting exercises in perspective-taking as well. From short stories being told from the perspective of a tree or from the

"voiceless" (i.e. the story of *The Eloquent Peasant*) taking on a plurality of points of view is deemed virtuous and worth of emulation.

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