

Chapter IV

The Cultural Value of the Coptic Hymns

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1- The Cultural Value Of The Coptic Hymns

Egypt and the musical culture:

Egypt is one of the most ancient countries in the world. It was a lighthouse through which many countries derived civilization, sciences and arts. Thus the ancient Egyptians were the first nation to attain such a high cultural level and such progress that made them an example for the whole world, which knew only the darkness of ignorance. Then the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans followed Egypt's steps.

The ancient Egyptians were the first to use music and singing in their religious ceremonies inside their temples, where they offered their oblations to their gods.

The writer Fikry Botros, in his book "Music and singing for Ancient Egyptians" Says, "The name music given to this art is derived from "Muse" the name of the goddess of art, and from it the word "Musica", i.e. Music in Latin language, has been derived."

"The Coptic Music", the author continues, "rich in the artistic treasures, has its basis in the Pharaohs Music. It is the remaining feature of the genuine Egyptian Pharaohs Music .

Many scientific researches have proved that the Egyptian Music heritage is the oldest in the world now. Undoubtedly, the Coptic music used in religious ceremonies is the legal heir of the ancient Egyptian music

preserved by the Egyptians. Pythagoras¹, in the sixth century B.C., got his musical knowledge from Pharaohs Egypt. Even the musical notations ascribed to him have their origin in Egypt, where he lived for twenty-two years.

The impact of Egyptian Music on Greek Music:

Music, poetry and rhetoric in the very ancient ages of Egypt formed one subject. Musicians, alone, were the poets, orators and historians. They were sometimes honored by giving them the title "Saints" as their poems were full of wise and deep proverbs and great ideals. Their poems always gave moral lessons to refer to whenever the matter is related to the interests of nations or individuals. The principles they contained make barbarians civilized and brute nature gentle.

Therefore, in ancient Egypt, no songs were recognized as beautiful expect those that were in conformity with virtue. Other songs were rejected and

¹ Pythagoras was a philosopher and mathematician (582-507B.C.) he spent part of his life in Egypt, his study of music focused on the relationship among sounds through mathematical formulas and numerical ratios. The invention of the monochord is ascribed to him. He discovered the effect of the length of the resonant string on the tune, and proved that the ratio between the main tune and its response is 2:1. whereas the ratio between it and the complete fifth dimension is 3:2, and between it and the complete fourth dimension is 4:3; and between it and the third great dimension is 5:4. By this the ratio between the various tunes could be determined. His discovery is still used up till now.

their composers were severely punished. Many philosophers and historians assert that ancient Egyptian music had a great influence on the Greek Music.

Plato for instance said in this regard, "The Greeks should choose from the Egyptian music whatever they like, if they want to know something about the music and the arts of others, as it has good artistic moral and educational characteristics unlike the music of other peoples". The Greek historian Herodotus also said "some of the songs and melodies of Egypt which I heard became afterwards in Greece popular songs chanted everywhere".

It is obvious now from the words of Plato and Herodotus that the Greeks were undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian music; that is why it spread among them and coped up with their tastes and turned into popular Greek songs.

Egyptian music and Astronomy:

The Egyptians believed that sacred sciences and arts such as medicine, astronomy and music are closely related to each others. These, like religion, are confined to clergymen, who alone have the right to study them. They found a great similarity between the heavenly bodies in their regular movement and discipline and the musical tunes from which the melodies are composed, as the latter also have an accurate and regular order.

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Pluto and Jupiter were the main planets Known to them. So the musical notation was fivefold, and when the known planets became seven, after adding the sun and the moon, the notation became seven too.

They referred to each of the seven tunes with the hieroglyphic symbol given to the related planet. By this they managed to define the seven main scales for their notation.

Everything to them consisted of seven: seven musical notations, seven planets and seven days of the week, in the following way:

Venus	Pluto	Mercury	Mars	the Moon	the Sun	Jupiter
Friday	Thursday	Wednesday	Tuesday	Monday	Sunday	Saturday
Fa	Do	Sol	Re	La	Mi	Se

So they managed to find the ratios and dimensions that accord and discord with the tunes. They also found that every hour of the day accords with a particular tune of the seven; for instance the first hour of the first day of the first week accords with one of these seven tunes, whereas the second tune accords with the second hour and the third with the third and so on till the seventh. Again, the first tune accords with the eighth tune, the second with the ninth and so on.

Astronomy and harmony for the Egyptians:

As the day has twenty-four hours whereas the tunes are seven only, so, the first day ends at the third tune, and the second day begins with the fourth tune. Hence, it is clear that the first hour of a day accords with the fourth tune corresponding to its similar tune on the previous day.

If the tune that accords with the thirteenth hour for instance is played, suppose it is "Fa", then the same tune of the same hour of the previous day will be "do", and the day before will be "Sol", and so on backwards for the other days to obtain "Re", "La". By this, the fivefold circle of the modern music rules has been known. This circle organizes the music notations together in a fantastic regular harmony.

Through this genius and strange astronomic process, it has been discovered that the first and the fourth tunes, or the first and the fifth, are the most harmonious tunes. This has become the basis on which "Harmony" science, i.e. the science of agreeable sound, is based.

The acceptability of Coptic music to harmony and polyphony²:

It is established that the Egyptians were the first to know the music notations and the harmony of sounds. Despite that, we have not even one proof that there were variety of sounds in Coptic songs in the early Apostolic Church, though the Coptic melodies accept that. I myself formulated harmonic and polyphonic melodies for some hymns, such as "O Kerios Mettaso" which presented stealthily within the illustrative music of "Saint Minas" by Samir Seif the Great Producer. I introduced it also in the long hymn "Kyrea Eleysoun" which I presented on "Devair Circus" theatre in Paris in 1995; again in the illustrative music of the documentary film "the Holy Journey" by the producer Emad Nasry. This was to assert the acceptability of the Coptic music to harmony and Polyphony.

² Harmony is the plurality of harmonious tunes when played at the same time.

Polyphony is the plurality of harmonious melodies when played at the same time.

There is also a thesis entitled "Polyphony and Harmony in Coptic Music", presented by Adel Kamel Hanna to the institute of Coptic studies for the Ph.D., that includes applied studies proving the acceptability of Coptic hymns to harmony and polyphony.

Moreover, the Institute of Coptic Studies has issued a cassette tape entitled "Classic Coptic music", on which various melodies based on some hymns like "O Mono Genies" "Meghalo" and "Ni Esnos tyro" are recorded. I think the aim of this tape is to prove the acceptability of the Coptic hymns to the polyphony (i.e. plurality of melodies horizontally) and homophony (i.e. plurality of melodies vertically).

We do not mean by all these studies and issues to introduce the Coptic hymns into the liturgy in a polyphony or harmonic style. We do not also mean that chorus of deacons be divided into sections of "Tenor", "Bass" on one side, and women's voices "soprano" and "alto" on the other side forming four varied voices in the church, nor to introduce symphony Orchestra to play music inside the church nave during the Divine Liturgy. The purpose rather is to throw light on the greatness and the beauty of the Coptic melody so that a greater number of people, including those who love the universal classical Music may enjoy it. However, it must be presented within the liturgy in the same traditional Monophony "that has one sound" which the church had preserved up till now.

Egyptian music for all fields:

Though we talk about Coptic hymnody and melodies, I would like to throw light on singing in general to get an idea - through the recognized

importance of music in general in all fields of life - about the great importance of hymnody in church on every occasion and in every ritual. Egyptians had songs in all fields of life. The Greeks followed their steps. According to "Athenaos", music was only used to perform whatever is honest and beautiful. And songs had various types and names, among which are:

- "Peans", i.e. war and triumph songs.
- "Dithyrambes", i.e. praise poems.
- "Joulos", i.e. songs for spring and vegetation.
- "Hymns", which were offered to gods.
- "Hyperkhima", which was performed by two persons, one sings while the other dances, alternately.
- "Scholyon", i.e. table songs.
- "Aierotickon", which were love songs.
- "Epthalmion & Hynmayon" which were wedding and nuptial songs.
- "Silos", i.e. satirical poems.
- "Therenos" i.e. elegies, "Epicedion", which were funerary songs.
- "Ausikhoforiun", or the songs chanted by vine harvesters.
- "Alinos", these were melodies performed both in cases of joy and sorrow, as they give comfort and calmness in both cases.

Our Coptic Church also has many melodies that are performed in both cases of joy and sorrow, such as the "Baik Thronos" hymn, as well as other hymns chanted on "Apocalypse" night; the eve of joy Saturday. In this hymn, the first part of the hymn is in sad tune that expresses the passions of the Lord Christ and His crucifixion. The other part is joyful, expressing the salvation & resurrection waited for. The whole hymn is a means of passing

from death to life, the introductory hymns to the Pauline Epistle, the Psalm and the Gospel.

The Ancient Egyptian songs included also:

- "Aletes", i.e. the beggars' songs.
- "Katabaucaleses" or the songs chanted by mothers or suckling women to babies to bring them to sleep.
- "Epimylios", i.e. the songs of grinders.
- "Himaeos", which were sung by workers lifting up underground water by water-wheel buckets, to regulate their movements.
- "Tyrocopicos" or the songs of those churn milk.
- "Boucolismas" or shepherds songs.

Thus the ancient Egyptians devised sorts of singing for every feast and occasion, and for every season, state and age. The Coptic Church likewise set melodies for every occasion, feast, fasting and ritual.

The Egyptians paid the art of music so great consideration and veneration that they were very careful, and even meticulous about choosing the words. They allowed only certain songs in accordance with definite rules, and rejected others. Moreover, they forced everyone to study music and to teach it for a certain period of time. Music thus constituted one of their sacred worship and formed all their religious songs. Music had produced surprising results and continued to arouse recognition and admiration, and the ancient Egyptians achieved great success in the field of music.

The title of musician or singer was most honored . Most famous poet musicians like “Milapus”, "Orphius", "Homer", "Mosaius", "Phithagore" were formed in the Egyptian and they received recognition more than many others .

Musical instruments and the Pharaohs:

Though the Coptic Church prevented the use of musical instruments in her ritual prayers, the Holy Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments mentioned repeatedly the musical instruments where it was necessary. Because of this close connection between what the Holy Scripture mentioned, and what musical instruments the Ancient Egyptians had, I preferred to present in this part some of the musical instruments of the Ancient Egyptians. As for the musical instruments mentioned in the Holy Scripture and those used in joyful rituals, I will tackle them in a separate chapter.

Egyptians, in olden times, used various musical instruments. These instruments were pure Egyptian, of limited types. But after the increased communication of Egyptians with the surrounding Asian Peoples, musical instruments developed greatly, and foreign instruments were introduced into Egypt.

Egyptian musical instruments may be divided into three main types: Stringed instruments, Brass instruments, Percussion instruments.

Stringed instruments:

"Gink" is considered one of the oldest stringed and most common instruments. It is composed of a wooden box and a number of vertical strings coming out of it and fixed at the end. The types and sizes of "Gink" varied, and the shapes developed. One of the oldest types was of medium size, placed on the floor directly or fixed on a base to enable the musician to play it while sitting. Later on, a huge type was used. It was wonderfully decorated and higher than the height of a man. The musician could play it while standing.

The "kinara" is an Asian wooden instrument, its 5 strings extend parallel between the sound box and the wooden frame, and long horizontally or vertically during playing. The Egyptians used also the "tambour", which is a circular wooden box from which a long neck stretches (which is shorter sometimes). It looked like the present lute, and was carried on the chest in a horizontal position, as the violin today, or vertically as the rebeck . The player of "tambour" uses a feather to play on 5 its strings.

Brass instruments:

The clarinet is the most important instrument, and it has various types. A short type is used in a horizontal position, whereas the longer type is used in a vertical position bending a little towards the back. The double clarinet was afterwards known. It is composed of two clarinets that meet at the mouth then separate as they move away.

Percussion instruments:

They are among the oldest musical instruments in Egypt. Among the important types are the metal and wooden castanets that produce a sound when they are struck against each other, such as the cymbals, clicking instruments or sticks.

As for the tambourine, it was usually composed of a rectangular wooden frame covered with thin skin and used mainly for dancing. Drums were cylindrical in shape, made of metal or wood, and hung on shoulders while struck clapping with hands was mostly accompanied by some types of music especially when combining with singing and dancing.

Egyptians used also clanks, usually made of a metal frame in the form of a horseshoe with thin bar inside it that ring when moved. These were used only by women and for religious purposes.

Music and "Aghabi":

Egyptians were fond of taking their meals while listening to music. This habit might be the origin of the meetings of the Christians in the early Church called "Aghabi". Copts used to use the flute in their Aghabi meetings till the year 190 A.D. When Saint Clement of Alexandria replaced the flute by the cymbalon .

The habit that spread wide was bringing a music band to play for guests and share in singing and dancing during festivities and parties. These bands were composed mainly of men, and by time, the number of women in those bands increased till they were altogether women bands. In the ancient

dynasty these bands were composed of one or more players of Genk and clarinet and percussionists and singers.

In the modern dynasty, players of tambourine, tambour and kinara joined the bands the musicians and singers included a big number of blind musicians³, especially among "Genk " players. However, not all musicians were professional. For many Egyptians were amateur musicians or singers. In the tomb of "Moroka" (one of the Nobles of the Ancient dynasty) in Sakkara there is a scene depicting him sitting quietly and relaxed listening to his wife's singing and playing the "Genk".

The court of pharaoh had a private music band. Music also had its role inside the temple, during religious rituals, in funerals, feasts, and festivals. The paintings of military battles were full of the pictures of soldiers blowing brass instruments and beating drums.

Egyptians were highly interested in Percussion. This helped fixing the time of the tone and regulating points of pause and transfer of the melody. Clapping or raising hands and arms or producing sounds by using fingers were the means to that. Probably the use of bells in the Coptic Church is a type of inherited interest in percussion.

The Ancient Egyptian music was distinguished for its development and progress along centuries. It was quiet monotonous during the era of the ancient dynasty, then it tended to be violent and noisy at the era of the

³ It is well known that the Coptic church derived from the Ancient Egyptians the idea of employing blind singers as "Cantors", because those have a strong memory that helps them learn and remember hymns and melodies.

modern dynasty, when "Genk" with its twenty strings. and the double clarinet, the drums and the strong tambourine were used. However, it stuck to its unique style that attracted the admiration of the ancient Greek visitors. It was perhaps wisdom on the part of the early Coptic Church to forbid using musical instruments during the Holy Liturgy fearing that violence and noise would creep into its sacred tunes if they were misused.

Egyptian music for treating diseases:

The Pharaohs were the first to discover music therapy. It is said that "Abidos Temple" was the largest Medical center in ancient Egyptian epochs, where they treated diseases by tuned songs. It was believed that music draws patients to the gods and wins their satisfaction, and thus cures them of their diseases.

Therefore, there were music bands that play music in hospitals, and the singers and dancers joined them. Music was played beside the patient and suitable tones were selected to each according to his illness.

Plato stated about music therapy that it is an ideal means of healing all kinds of diseases, especially if the music imitated human voices, Aristotle and Pythagoras asserted the same.

Dr. Nabila Mikhael mentioned in her Ph.D. Thesis entitled "Music in treating organic diseases": Music therapy is the regular Percussion of movement inside the living body by using the music waves, either through relaxation or by attaining a certain proportion of harmony between breathing and the speed of pulse. Music therapy depends on using the musical sounds

that help release the extra energy from the body defending the soul. Thus it helps getting rid of psychological pressure that causes various diseases .

As Hippocrates, one of greatest men of old medicine, says, “every patient needs a certain sort of music according to his case, so the choice of music should be careful so as not to cause passive effects”.

"Athanasius El Nahwy", who lived in the second century B.C., asserted the importance of music therapy. He wrote: It is possible to cure a muscle disease by playing hymns in a joyful tune over the diseased parts.

The British Museum, John Relandes' Library, and Michigan's Museums in U.S.A. included many papyri in Coptic language since the 3rd century – the flourishing epoch of Copts, on which were written pieces of advice on medical cases similar to those of the Pharonic era.

Some of those pieces of advice recommended chanting hymns for healing. The papyri contained the story of "Saint Abu Tarbo" who used to cure epileptics by a certain prayer called after his name "Abu Tarbo prayer" in which parts of the Holy Scripture are read and Psalms chanted.

So the entire world began to be convinced of music therapy. Now there are about sixteen universities in U.S.A. for music therapy based on Practical and theoretical basis. There are also more than six hundred hospitals for this type of therapy.

I've read in "Broadcasting and TV. Magazine", issue of 15/8/1998, an article by "Nagy Hekal" that presented a talk with Dr. Nabila Mikhael in which she said: Nervous Blood pressure can be healed by playing music beside the patient. The pressure will decrease while listening to music till it returns to its minimum when the suitable dose. After the first dose of music which extends 30 minutes at least, pressure will decrease ten points, then five on the second day and so on till it attains its normal level.

Studies and new medical research have proved the capability of music to cure paralysis in its early stage, and curb its passive effect. It has been proved also that we can get rid completely (100%) of insomnia by listening to music in a sound way, besides following the advice of the physician and complying with his commands; provided that the patient continue the music therapy regularly.

The results of these studies have proved the positive results of music therapy on heart diseases; it is also useful for indigestion and its pains, as music contributes to the speed performance of the digestive system. Moreover some physicians tried to treat addicts by using music by giving them clarinet to play on. This would help them give up addiction, on condition that the addict occupies his time in listening to music. It succeeded in some cases.

Listening to music is, sometimes, considered a sort of protection, as it leads to widening blood arteries and resisting arteriosclerosis that attack the aged and diabetics.

We conclude from the above that music plays an important role towards the body, how much rather would be the role of the Coptic spiritual music, which is more sublime, elevated and mature, towards the body, the soul and the spirit.

2- Cohesion of Coptic Music with Pharaoh Music

No one can cut off the coherent connection between ancient pre-Christian era music and ancient Coptic music. This connection between the old Pharaohs music heritage and doxology heritage was originated from the time of St. Mark the evangelist, when the Alexandrian Jewish worshipers - who were specialized in praise – met with Copts - who were specialized in deities music with its mysteries - in one church, side by side accepting the joyful faith in Christ.

This connection between the two genuine types of music, was not by any means extraneous but coherent, due to the high convergence and harmony between the two.

We can remark this close connection in the method Pharaohs used to approach their deities, the following religious anthem – which was addressed to the great Amon - shows that:

“O Amon you are the master of the unvoiced,
who comes on the sound of the poor,
when I hailed on you in my distress,
you came to save me”

We can see the verbal & psychic closeness between this anthem and how David the prophet approaches the Living God in his psalms:

“In the day of my trouble I will call Upon You, for You will answer me” (Ps. 86:7). *“Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck”* (Ps. 69:1)

They are so close, expressing feelings of a human seeking God in his distress and affliction, asking for deliverance. Despite the first is hailing an anonymous deity and the other (David) is hailing the true God, the music expression of the spiritual state they both went through – even through using different jars and tones - would be on the same chanting track.

Another anthem from the Pharaohs era (reference book :“History of Egyptian culture”) chanted by priests to Amon the deity:

“Thank you Amon Rah god of Karnack, the dominant in Tiba,
Greatest one in heaven and biggest one on earth.
Lord of all beings, who settle on everything,
Has no similitude in nature between the deities,
Chief of all gods, lord of truth, father of the deities,
Who created humans and animals.
Who creates fruit trees,
Who originates the green herbs and supplies the cattle,
Who created everything on earth and in heaven,
Who enlightens the two regions,
Who permeates the heaven in peace,
Rah the reverent, master of the terrestrials, the most powerful,
Lord of strength, the commanding one, creator of all earth,
Most powerful in his nature from any other deity,
Who other deities rejoice in his beauty,
Who are worshiped in the great temple,
Who other deities love his beautiful odor,
Who have a strong volition ... who have the great visage
Worship to you ... who had created the gods, raised the heaven and
extended the earth.”

We can go through several other anthems by Akhenaton and other kings, most of them coincide in purport and words with what David, Asaph, Heman, Ethan and all who praised the true God wrote, for the ancient Egyptians were searching with certainty for the true great God, creator of all things, who raised the heaven and extended the earth and has no similitude between deities. This may explain how it was easy for Egyptians to accept the Christian faith.

First Egyptians to accept the faith:

When St. Mark the apostle entered Alexandria city, his sandal was torn because of the much walking in preaching and evangelism. He went to a cobbler in the city, called Annianus, to repair it. While he was repairing it the awl pierced his finger. Annianus shouted saying "O, ONE GOD". When St. Mark heard this phrase his heart rejoiced exceedingly (as Pope Shenouda expressed in his book "Mark the Evangelist Saint and Martyr"), which was an appropriate chance to begin talking to him about the One God.

Pope Shenouda continues: "It was not suitable for the saint to start a theological conversation with a wounded and suffering man, the Apostle had to ease him first from his pain, he took some clay, spat on it and applied it to Annianus' finger, saying, "In the Name of Jesus Christ the Son of God heal this hand", and the wound healed immediately, as if nothing happened to it.

Annianus was surprised at the miracle which was done in the name of Jesus Christ and opened his heart to the Word of God. St. Mark asked him about the one God he called, but Annianus replied that he heard about him, but did not know him.

When his sandal was repaired he was invited to go to Annianus' home to talk more about that God.

As St. Mark entered the house ⁴ he made the sign of the cross and asked God's blessing to fill it. He stayed with this family talking about Lord Christ. When Anianus asked to see the true God, St. Mark assured him that he will, he talked with him about the scriptures, the prophets, the incarnation, the miracles, the crucifixion and the great sacrifice He provided to the world. Arianus and his family became believers and St. Mark baptized them, this home was the first fruit in St. Mark's preaching in Egypt."

St. Mark then ordained St. Annianus to be the Bishop of Alexandria, and after the martyrdom of St. Mark he became the first successor and Patriarch of the see of St. Mark.

Accepting the Christian faith was not difficult for old Egyptians since they had this belief of the One God, their anthems and worships showed that kind of belief without seeing, touching or knowing Him truly. They searched for Him, and produced some melodies expressing their state, until they knew the true God, forsaken the idols they shaped and worshiped the Lord creator of all things, and started to produce other melodies expressing their new spiritual state.

Comparison of Pharaohs era attributes and those of Christian era:

Hymns were not the only thing that linked ancient Egypt with Christian Egypt. There are several studies comparing between the attributes of old

⁴ This house became a church afterwards, as stated in the Synaxarium (20th of hatour), and in the book of Ebn Elassal : "History of Patriarchs"

Egyptian religion and Egyptian Christianity. The researches concluded that Christianity in Egypt took some symbols from the religious intellect in ancient Egypt.

One of these studies is the research work of the French savant “Doresse Jean” (“From the hieroglyphic era to the cross”), a study about what attributes did the Christianity in Egypt had taken from the past era. The French scholar traced the concepts and norms that Christianity in Egypt inherited, not from theological point of view but through customs and traditions.

Another study written by the Egyptian savant “Aziz Sourial Atia” , in his book (“History of Eastern Christianity”) where he enumerates the parallel and similar things between ancient Egypt and Christian era. He considers this similarity to be one of the main reasons that smoothed the path for the new faith which is totally different in essence from the Pharaohs’ beliefs.

From which we mention:

- 1- The idea of “the Oneness of God” which was known by Egyptians from the time of Akhenaton the rebellious (1383-1365 B.C.) and by the eighteenth dynasty.
- 2- The sign of “Ankh”, sign of eternal life for ancient Egyptians, which had the shape of the cross the sign of salvation in Christianity.
- 3- The belief of life after death and the rituals that show the belief of resurrection and death as a path to life, not an end of it. There

- were also the custom of the living sending letters to the deceased relatives, seeking their support in their daily sufferings. (This might be considered as a form of intercession that the Coptic church believes in).
- 4- The customs of grief for the dead, rituals of burying the bodies, making of pavilions and banquets for funerals , and the remembrance at the fortieth day.
 - 5- Feasts, Egyptians used to celebrate several occasions, most important feast was the feast of Diana (Artemis) (the deity with a cat head), they used to go with boats to Talbasta (Zakazik nowadays) while playing music.
 - 6- The way of building churches, dividing it to an altar, chorus and public hall, with the pattern of the old temples that had the sacrifice in front, the place of priests near to the altar, and the big hall for the public worshipers. (Even the similarity is clear between Solomon's temple as described in the Old Testament and the architect of Luxor and Karnack temples).
 - 7- The belief of paradise in heaven, at its door stands "Yahor" who controls the truth's spear which prevents any untruthful person from entering. The persons who enter are bestowed with the presence of the deities, protected by God, holding their wands, wearing the most beautiful purple linen clothes, eating figs, drinking wine and perfumed with the most lovely perfumes.

8- The word “Amen” which is used in church prayers, matches with slight change the word “Amon” the deity.

3- The Impact of Pharaoh Melodies on Coptic Melodies

We hear often that Coptic melodies were originated from the pharaohs music, we cannot deny this phrase but I have a personal opinion regarding this matter. Naturally the ancient Egyptians - who were specialized in deities music – when accepted Christianity they could not forsake the music that lived in their sentiments, mingled through their life and stored in their unconscious, so they composed through the Holy Spirit that overwhelmed them new hymns and melodies. The melodies produced might have had in between some ancient musical themes⁵ or some musical sentences from the unconscious storage (that are exported to the consciousness when they harmonize with the feelings required to be expressed). The dissolution of the old musical themes with new sentences, produced a new musical textile tintured by the Holy Spirit with a Coptic Orthodox tincture.

This opinion agrees with what “EL-Faraby” confirmed in his book (Musiqā Kitobi) that music are not created from nothingness.

To elucidate this musical concept to the unmusical reader, imagine that on the day Mozart (the noted artist) was born, he was taken and kept with a dumb lady in the desert, away from noise and music, until he reached thirty years old. If it was so, no one would expect from this brilliant musician to produce any melody of his redundant work of sonatas, operas and symphonies, for how he can produce any if he had nothing collected inside, except sound of winds in the desert. What I mean is that, what Mozart

⁵ Musical theme is the musical idea that through it the melody's subject are constructed with the varieties and methods of development to this musical idea. Mostly the musicians take their idea from a public song or known melody or from his own initiatives.

produced was an outcome of what he had heard through his life from diverse types of music, of different cultures, after they were mingled inside him, and then produced in a new form, with a new vision, by a new spirit.

Many studies show how Coptic music had an impact on Mozart, though he did not live in Egypt (born in Salzburg 1756), studies confirmed that some of his themes and musical statements were taken from or inspired by the Coptic music (Refer to the research work of Soliman Gamil).

One of the great producing establishment in France (E.M.I. Virgin) produced jointly with the “Egyptian center for culture and art” (managed by Dr. Ahmed Elmagreby) a compact disc named “Mozart in Egypt”, confirming the previous concept. I had an opportunity to share in this work, with David’s chorus and the soloist “Monica George” (8 years old girl, who was chosen for her pleasant voice, by the French producer “Ogas De Corso” to chant “Golgotha” hymn alone on the stage of Opera Marcellia and at the Basilica of San Dony in Paris on June 1998, thus making the “Golgotha” hymn intermingled with the funeral mass “Requiem”⁶ produced by Mozart).

Anyone listens to this CD will find how music of Mozart have fused and merged with the Egyptian Coptic music in one textile, in a wonderful way making it difficult in some moments to differentiate if it is a Mozart’s or an Egyptian’s tone. In this CD also the Egyptian themes that inspired Mozart were exposed.

⁶ Funeral mass is a musical mass in the catholic church, around a religious Latin phrase that starts with the word “Requiem”. Several musicians wrote funeral masses like Berlioz, Verdi and Prams.

This is not extraneous, for Mozart was so fond of Egypt. He also gave Egyptian names to some of his works like “Thamos king of Egypt”, “L’ oca del Cairo” and “Egyptian symphony”.

If Mozart - who did not live in Egypt – produced music that was influenced by Egyptian music, then certainly Coptic music was influenced by Pharaohs music, the music which was practiced by the composers before accepting the Christian faith.

Early Fathers with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit produced the Coptic hymns with the impact of the ancient music.

Considering Coptic melodies absolute Pharaoh:

Were the Coptic melodies absolute pharaoh and Coptic words were composed through it, some say so depending on feeble points like extending of jars, the Melisma toning, and the names of hymns that have old Egyptian cities (like “Sengary” hymn that refer to an old city with the same name in the north of Delta at the time of Ramses the 2nd, and the Atriby hymn “Keiperto” that refers to town “Atriba” at Sohag province in upper Egypt), but in my point of view this opinion is weak for the following reasons :

- 1- Melisma toning was used in pharaohs music, Demetrius the Fleuron (297 B.C , one of the managers of Alexandria library) clarified that : “Priests of Egypt praised there deities through the seven vowels, they sang through it one after another, and by iterating this letters, they produce pleasant voices” . This shows that the method of singing by Melisma toning was known in the

- Pharaohs era, and continued in the Coptic church as a technique and not as inclusive melodies.
- 2- It is not logic that a Coptic letter extends with a melody, taking sometimes several minutes, for no reason except for using an old pharaoh melody.
 - 3- Melisma toning in Coptic melodies always comes to express a spiritual meaning, to explain a verbal purport, if it is not so then it turns to be a naïve hymn, for an example the intense melisma toning that we find in hymn “Arihoo tchacf sha nei eneh” is there to express effectively the meaning :“Exalt him above all ... for ever”.
 - 4- It was possible at that time to choose – from thousands of old melodies - melodies that suit the number of Coptic words required to be intonated, or choose sufficient musical statements from the old melody that equate the number of required Coptic words and close it up smoothly, for it was not befitting for the church to choose a long old melody to express with it few words and complete the work with tones without any spiritual objective or even a logic music objective.
 - 5- Most probably, the few that have this opinion did not support it with any scientific proofs or ancient codices or musical notations of pharaohs’ melodies that are used currently in the

Coptic church, for definitely at that time musical notations and recording equipments were not known.

6- The several trials of composing words on melodies was produced without using Melisma toning. All Coptic hymns that were translated to Arabic did not use Melisma toning (hymn “Onof Emmo Maria” & hymn “Epchoic Evnoty” & others from the mid night praise, all were translated without melisma toning).

7- Several books in church history confirm that our ancient fathers used to spend time in composing songs and hymns to God, like Didymus the blind and St. Athanasius the Apostolic (most probably he is the one that composed the magnificent hymn “Omonogenees” that are chanted on the Great Friday). Also as we previously mentioned, the phrase of Philo: “They do not just spend there time in meditations but they compose songs and hymns to God with all kinds of modes, and classify them to different scales”.

I have no doubt that there were composers among the Egyptians that accepted the Christian faith, composers that studied musical sciences in the Catechetical school of Alexandria, and as their emotions turned to Christ they started composing and praising the Lord with “a new song” expressing their love to Christ the King.

Philo the philosopher mentioned also in another phrase: ”the first Christian congregation took melodies from ancient Egypt and placed

for it Christian texts. From these melodies “Golgotha” which was chanted by pharaohs during the embalming operation and in funerals, and hymn “Pek Ethronos” in which its first half - sad melodies - were used at the Pharaoh’s funeral and the other half - joyful melodies - were used in the induction of the new Pharaoh”.

The contradiction that may appear in the two phrases of Philo (1st: “they compose songs and hymns to God with all kind of modes” & 2nd: “took melodies from ancient Egypt and placed for it Christian texts”) can be explained through my previous clarification (the fathers could not forsake the music that lived in their sentiments, stored in their unconscious, so they composed new hymns through the Holy Spirit that overwhelmed them. The melodies produced might have had in between some ancient musical themes or some musical sentences from the unconscious storage. The dissolution of the old musical themes with new sentences, produced a new musical textile tintured by the Holy Spirit with a Coptic Orthodox tincture)

I can clarify now my personal inference – it is up to the reader to accept or refuse - Old pharaohs music that appear in our Coptic music, are not inclusive hymns but musical themes, terms or musical sentences in which Coptic words were composed on their tones (otherwise we might give the church the face of Plagiario that steals other’s productions).

8- By accepting that we deny the spirituality of the hymns, and contradict ourselves,

and cancel what is written in the Scriptures about the coming down of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, filling them with spiritual wisdom and several gifts: *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple ... praising God and having favor with all the people”* (Acts 2:46,47).

9- If we now - as a strong Coptic orthodox Church stable through centuries – refuse spiritual hymns that are produced by the youth because they compose their words on secular songs, despite that they are not chanted in our sacred liturgy or inside the church but recorded on cassette tapes and heard at homes, trying to prevent the spirit of secular songs to penetrate to the hearts, thus dispersing thoughts out of the spiritual meanings (Some spiritual institutions stood against this cassette tapes, Rev. Bishop Hydra published a book against such hymns, and also “Watany newspaper” published several articles) , do we think that the Apostolic church in establishing the spiritual concepts, traditions, rituals, prayers and praises, permitted using some melodies in the sacred liturgy that were at the same time used by unchristian people in their worship, thus dispersing thoughts and confusing the worship of God with other cults !, I do not think that the ancient wise Apostolic church permitted that.

10- It is well known that the apostolic church prohibited the use of musical instruments in the sacred liturgy - despite that they were used as a main element in the old temples - to let the congregation concentrate

on the divine words, and to prevent any intellect connection with worldly cults.

If the early Apostolic church had prohibited the use of musical instruments – the innocent instrument which can be used for positive or negative purposes – since it was used for hymns of other cults, would the church leave these same melodies inclusively, with the same structure that usually clings to the mind, so during chanting in the sacred prayers – that raise the heart unto heaven – a pharaoh melody gets the worshiper attracted to old forms of worship?!. I think the early wise Apostolic church did not permit that.

11- It is also known that old pharaohs music was connected logically and intensively with dance, but the Apostolic church prohibited dance totally as she did for musical instruments. Despite that dance and musical instruments were mentioned in the old testament “*Miriam the prophetess took the timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances*” (Ex 15:20), and when “*David danced before the Lord with all his might*” (2Sam 6:14)) the objective of the church was so clear, to cut off all what is related to other cults whether musical instruments or dance or melodies or clapping ... etc.

Finally, I iterate that this is a personal inference, and I ask from the specialized researchers to confirm it or prove the reverse.

4- Reciprocal Influence between the Coptic and the Hebrew Melodies

If we want to know to what extent is each of the Coptic and Hebrew melodies influenced by the other, we have to search into the Holy Scriptures. We read in the Book of Exodus:

"Now these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt; each man and his household came with Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. All those who were descendants of Jacob were seventy persons (for Joseph was in Egypt already) ...the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them" (Ex.1: 1-7)

From this text of the Exodus we know that the children of Israel, i.e. the twelve tribes, lived in Egypt and listened to the Egyptian Pharaoh melodies for the four hundred and thirty years they lived in Egypt (Ex.12: 40). No doubt, throughout those years, the six hundred thousand men - besides children - of Israel who journeyed from Rameses could learn many ancient Egyptian melodies. Those melodies had their influence on them, and became implanted within them. They learnt well the modes, the distances, the bars, the rhythm, the forms and the compositions of those melodies. They carried them from Egypt with their emotions, their memories and the rituals of their worship.

On the other side, St. Mark lived for some time the tunes of David of Bethlehem resounding in the synagogues of the Jews, then in the Upper Room on the lips of the Lord Christ "Jesus the Son of David". The twelve

disciples chanted those melodies with the Lord Christ when they praised and went out to the Olive Mount. Certainly, St. Mark carried those melodies with all their details with him to Egypt, probably chanting them to refresh himself on such a long and hard journey in which his shoes were torn. Undoubtedly also when he established the "theological School" in Alexandria he taught those melodies and music side by side with the theological subjects. Some of those melodies he added to the Divine Liturgy he compiled, which is the oldest Liturgy known in the Coptic Church.

We conclude from all this that both Coptic and Hebrew melodies mixed together and each influenced the other.

However I once read a certain point of view in a specialized book that says, [It is completely impossible to say that the Coptic melody is derived from the Hebrew or copying from it not even one of its marvelous motions. But we can only say that the Coptic melody followed the established ways of chanting the Hebrew psalms, and preserved its own spirit and genuine Coptic scales.]

Nevertheless, I prefer that professional music researchers interfere and determine accurately to what extent the Coptic and Hebrew melodies are influenced by each other.

The environment in which melodies emerged:

When the Lord Christ was hung on the cross, they asked Pilate that the inscription of His Accusation be written above the cross. So an inscription

was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: “This is the King of the Jews” (Lk.23: 38).

This reveals that when hymns emerged in the Coptic Church of that time, there were three Civilizations: the Greek, the Roman, and the Latin on one side. On the other side, there was the ancient Egyptian Civilization. This means that those melodies and hymns emerged in the synagogues of the Jews, in the imagination and minds of the Greek about their gods, and in the Ancient Egyptian temples.

The Coptic Church has adopted some musical pieces from the Jewish music, especially the finale "hallelujah" of the psalms. That is why there are many melodies for the word "hallelujah", the most famous of which is that said before "the Procession of the Lamb" as a beautiful long introduction to the hymn "hallelujah fai pe pi eho-oo". This hymn is a marvelous hymn, genial in its music, its spirituality, its expressivity, its rhythmical and mode motions, and its unique musical stanzas. Other similar hymns are Kiahk Allelujah (response of the psalm); and the finale Allelujah of "Bek Thronos" hymn, which is chanted at the twelfth hour of the Good Friday.

The German Scholar Hekmann says, [Though the music of the Jewish synagogues has played an important part in the development of the Syrian and Byzantine Liturgies, the case is different in Egypt. The opposite happened, as the Jewish music has been influenced by the ancient Egyptian prayers. This is due to the period which the children of Israel spent in Egypt

away from home, for they certainly merged with the Egyptian environment and life⁷.

There was also mutual production and exchange of music between the Greeks and Egyptians. In this atmosphere many cantors excelled, among whom are "Dedymos Al Nahwy" and "Dedymos Al Valerony" who recorded the musical keys which were familiar at that time (the first century A.D.) And in the second century there was Claudius the Ptolemic who adopted the keys in his music.

These were succeeded by "Alekius of Alexandria" in the year 360 A.D., who laid down the musical signs, and Discorus in the fourth century, and valentinus and Brocolos. All of them lived in a Greek –Egyptian atmosphere and wrote on music.

However, after the dissension that happened in the Calcedonian Council in 451A.D. The Copts cut every relationship they ever had with the church of Byzantia and Rome. They preserved their traditions and melodies pure from the Byzantine influence. Nevertheless, in late centuries, some Patriarchs introduced a collection of Greek hymns with their full melodies into the Coptic Church. But the slow rhythm and Egyptian bar distances prevailed on performing these hymns. An example is "Ei Parthenos" hymn.

When the Byzantine Church persecuted the Copts of Egypt and deposed their patriarch, the Patriarch went to "Sheheit desert" where the monks of St. Macarius Monastery received him with Coptic hymns and songs, expressing their holding fast to the sound faith.

⁷ Dr. Michael B. Abdel Malek, a lecture at the Patristic Studies Center.

Furthermore, there are some common hymns between the Coptic and the Greek Churches. But due to the work of the Holy Spirit and the great impact of the Ancient Egyptian musical culture, the Coptic Church began to compose the music and modes of these hymns in a way that suits the Egyptian music basis.

There happened also a merger between the Coptic and the Syrian Churches, so some monks went to learn at the Syrian Church (near the Dead Sea) and quoted what is called "the hymn law"⁽²⁾.

It is said that there was a group in Alexandria called "Serapotia", which consisted of some desert hermits who were known for some musical pieces derived from old pharaoh sources.

5- The Holy Liturgy & its Hymns

The Holy Liturgy in Arabic “Koddas” is a Hebrew Syrian word introduced into Arabic in the tenth century through the translated Syrian works. The Syrian verb is “Kaddash” and in Arabic “Kaddas”. The plural of the Arabic word “Koddas” is “Kadadis” or “Kodasat”, and it is derived from the Syrian word “Koddasha”. The word means “sanctification” and refers to the prayers of the Holy Mass for sanctification of bread and wine. It refers also to the Lections and the Sacraments.

The Christian meaning of the word is participation in the Thanksgiving Service and in praising God with the heavenly host.

The word “Koddas” (Liturgy) is used not only in the Eucharist Offering (the Thanksgiving Sacrament, or the Offering of the Bread and Wine), but also in the Liturgy of Water and the Liturgy of Baptism.

The Lord of glory has founded this Sacrament and handed it down to His holy Apostles. This is evident from the words of St. Paul, *“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup ... ”* (1 Cor 11: 23-25)

This is not confined only to the Eucharist Sacrament but applies to all the other Sacraments as St. Clement who ministered side by side with the

apostles says: [The Lord handed down all the Sacraments orally to the apostles.] Eusebius of Caesarea also asserts the same, saying that he knew from the ancients that the Lord before His ascension handed down the apostles all the Sacraments in the Upper Room of Zion.

The Liturgy of St. Mark (known as the Liturgy of St. Cyril):

The first one to use the Liturgy in the Coptic Church is St. Mark the Evangelist (martyred on 30 Baramouda, 67 A.D.), one of the seventy apostles and the writer of the second Gospel carrying his name. The Liturgy he used precedes that of St. Basil (according to the Scholar Ibn Kebr), and it is addressed to the Father that of St. Basil.

This Liturgy has been written in Greek and translated into Coptic language. It differs from both the Liturgy of St. Basil and of St. Gregory in that the sanctification prayers come after all litanies.

This Liturgy continued to be handed orally up to the year 330 A.D. when Pope Athanasius the Apostolic, the 20th Patriarch wrote down and handed it to St. Fromentius the first Bishop of Ethiopia.

Pope Cyril the Great, the 24th Patriarch (412-444 A.D.) added many parts to it and rewrote it. That is why it was ascribed to him and carried his name since that time. The original Liturgy before the additions made by St. Cyril “the pillar of faith” has been discovered on some parchments, which are still kept in the Oxford University⁸.

⁸ Reverend Father Kyrillos Kyrillos: The Three Liturgies together

The Liturgy of St. Basil:

It is the Liturgy commonly used in our church due to the simplicity of its hymns and short prayers. It is used the whole year and addresses the Father, the same as the Liturgy of St. Mark.

This Liturgy differs from the Byzantine Liturgy that carries the same name with many additions. This Byzantine Liturgy is used only on the Lent Sundays and on some feasts because it is the longest Liturgy they have. Most of its prayers are said secretly.

The Liturgy of St. Gregory the Theologian:

It is less common than that of St. Basil. It is rarely used because of its long prayers and hymns. Often few parts only are used and is used on feasts. It is ascribed to St. Gregory the Theologian of Nazianz.

It is the only Liturgy in our Liturgies that address the Son. It is also known to the Church of Constantinople. There are other Liturgies addressing the Son used by Syrians and Ethiopians.

Both the Liturgies of St. Basil and of St. Gregory are ascribed to the Cappadocian Fathers, but those received their education in Egypt.

St. Basil the Great (330-389 A.D.) performed some ministry in the Bachomian Monasteries in Upper Egypt; then he moved to Cappadoc where he laid down the famous laws for monasticism and asceticism.

St. Gregory Nazianzen was a disciple to Dedyms the Blind in the 4th century at the School of Theology in Alexandria.

Liturgies of the Ethiopian Church: ^{9*}

Our Coptic Church prays only the three recognized Liturgies of SS Mark, Basil and Gregory. However, the Ethiopian Church ^{10**} recognizes fourteen Liturgies and say they have received them from our Coptic Church. These Liturgies are:

1. The Liturgy of the Apostles
2. The Liturgy of the Lord
3. The Liturgy of John the son of thunder
4. The Liturgy of St. Mary
5. The Liturgy of the three hundred
6. The Liturgy of St. Athanasius
7. The Liturgy of St. Basil
8. The Liturgy of Gregory
9. The Liturgy of St. Epiphanius
- 10.The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom
- 11.The Liturgy of St. Cyril
- 12.The Liturgy of St. Jacob Al Serougi (the Saddler)
- 13.The Liturgy of St. Discorus
- 14.The Liturgy of St. Gregory II

The Liturgy of St. Basil is completely similar to that of our church. The other two are completely different.

⁹ His Rev. Morkos Dawood: "Liturgies of the Ethiopian Church", Cairo, March 1959

¹⁰ Christianity entered Ethiopia in the 4th century in the days of Pope Athanasius the Apostolic, the 20th Patriarch.

Praising and Liturgy:

The Scholar Decks says:

[The introduction of the praise with the Cherubim hymn is considered a distinct development of the Thanksgiving Prayer with which the Mass prayers start.] But the fact is that it is a substitute rather than a development of that prayer. It is a Liturgy itself because it ends taking its place wherever it occurs. Not only this, but moreover its existence (as in the Liturgy of St. Jacob) removed the concept of Thanksgiving completely from the stanzas that follow it. For instead of expressing thanks to God after the praise, it says. "Holy You are" (This applies to the Liturgies of SS Basil and Gregory in Egypt). When we examine the Liturgy of St. Mark we notice the same thing in Alexandria where the praise ritual and the introduction.]

From these words of Decks, it is clear that St. Mark the Apostle, when composing the Divine Liturgy, was keen that praise be the spiritual atmosphere that overwhelms the prayers of the Mass. It is clear also that most of the melodies and hymns of the Divine Liturgy have been composed since the days of St. Mark the Apostle, and were handed down to us orally.