CATEGORISATION, CLASSIFICATION, AND SOCIAL REALITY: ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL AND INTERACTION WITH THE POPULATION

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Crucial to the study of any categorisation and classification is considering what in the social sciences is commonly termed as the ‘gap’ or ‘discrepancy’ between ideology and reality. Categorisation and classification of the people of a society by a central government is situated within an ideology. It, however, does not merely mirror that government’s biased, simplified view of a more complex social world, i.e. a construct of reality, but—like any perception, representation or ordering of society—itself contributes to reality. The process of the construction, as well as the use of the group definitions and designations, forms part of reality and reflects the interface between the government’s bureaucracy and its subjects—even if this reflection is partial—while the categories/classes and distinctions carry values and hence impact norms and social behaviour, which may in turn contribute to the construction of new and deconstruction of old entities. Moreover, genuine differences in local realities in various socio-economic and socio-ecological settings¹ may and indeed often do result in variances in the practicalities and effectiveness of state interference, while categorising and classifying the people under the same central rule entails the development of a more or less consistent scheme or set of schemes which, by simplifying and typifying relationships and identities, conceals but may just as well reveal elements of the complexity and diversity of social organisation. Therefore, the relationship between ideology and categorisation/classification on the one hand, and ‘reality’ on the

other, rather than treated as one of discrepancy, will be viewed here as a conflicting interplay.²

THE KING AS UNIQUE OFFICE-HOLDER

In Egyptian ideology, on the top of all human hierarchies stood the king who, by reason of his border position in the universe, was set apart as a unique socio-cosmic entity: while a human, he took on divine qualities as the son and sole agent of the sun-god, and yet he belonged to neither humans nor the gods, but was member of the community of Egypt’s kings, that is, all legitimate holders of the royal office.³ Kingship is sometimes described in Middle Kingdom texts as an excellent/efficacious (mnhḥt) or good (nfrt) office (iḥt).⁴ For iḥt was a common term to designate both administrative and temple offices, but also any occupation or trade held by men, an important characteristic of which was its ability to be passed on to heirs,⁵ these epithets associate the king with the general male role in society. On the other hand, by the


⁵ S. Quirke, “The Regular Titles of the Late Middle Kingdom”, RdE 37 (1986), 108; id., “Horn, Feather and Scale, and Ships: On Titles in the Middle Kingdom”,