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## Unfair to Compare: Why assumptions shouldn't authorize discourse

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# Unfair to Compare

## An analysis of Egyptian and Indian architecture

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### Abstract

Since history has always been from a Euro-centric perspective, there's a lack of diverse discipline regarding history and geography. Unfortunately, this is especially true when it comes to countries located in minority areas—so much so that there is now a movement to fill the void, leading to written works such as *World Cities Beyond the West* (Gugler 2004). The lack of non-Euro-centric discussion has made it easier to assume that minority regions are closer and more similar than they truly are. For example, although located on two distinct continents, one may consider Egypt and India to be within the same general vicinity. This preconceived notion allows for unwarranted comparisons to occur, even when it comes to architecture. An illustration of this can be observed through exploring the Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram, and the Nubian pyramids at Meroe.

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Although the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram, India, and the Nubian pyramids of Meroe may be considered relatively close to one another, the surrounding civilizations are separate and, therefore, generate different architecture. It is for this reason that it is unfair to compare the two in conversation without understanding their respective cultures; otherwise, an unwarranted dialect may be fabricated. A survey was conducted to test the claim that since history has always been from a Eurocentric perspective, there's a lack of diverse discipline regarding history and geography. Students around Syracuse University were sent a link to a survey asking them to identify images containing the outlines of India and Egypt (Figures I and II), then to draw a relationship between the two countries. Nearly all of the participants were able to correctly label the countries. However, only a quarter of the students established that these countries were on separate continents—India being in Asia and Egypt being in Africa. In addition to this, four

contributors described them only as countries while three others pinpointed them as simply countries with ties to the west, the British Empire, and the United Nations. Then, three students could only determine that the images were maps outlining countries, with one elaborating on the possibility of development around important rivers. Finally, two scholars simply wrote that they didn't know.<sup>1</sup>

Luckily, there was some hope as a few responses brought up the wealth, power, and development of India and Egypt. The most detailed came from a student describing the two countries as “Ancient civilizations, on different continents, famous mythological systems, architecture wonders of the world—pyramids and Taj Mahal, they are in fact real places on this planet.” This individual not only provided geographical context but was also able to discuss some architectural significance of India and Egypt. Nonetheless, why were the other volunteers not able to yield the same results? How is it almost every participant was able to correctly identify the countries, but couldn't elaborate on them? The answer: history favors a Euro-centric perspective, so there's a lack of diverse discipline regarding history and geography of minority countries.

The Shore Temple is an eighth century structure of the Mamallapuram seaport by Rajasimha and the Somaskanda group. This cave temple is noted for its massive pillars, octagonal section in the middle, as well as a square bottom and top, all supported by corbels created by rolling a mold on the underside (Figure III) (Harle 1986). The design is meant to bring about contact between man and gods through architectural elements, sculptures, sacred mathematical schemes, and immense symbolism. In fact, to create a devagriham—house of God—a site must be ritually purified, and a plan must be established. This mandala plan represents the sacred geometric diagram of the essential structure of the

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<sup>1</sup> Information was taken from a survey on Syracuse University students' knowledge of the subject. See “Information Regarding Survey”

universe. Consequently, the Shore Temple is viewed as not only a place of worship, but an object of worship as well. Thus, intense rituals and ceremonies take place throughout the day where worshippers must move clockwise around the sacred person. This penetration inwards towards the center, typically along the east-west axis, is of great importance (Michell 1999). All of this demonstrates the rich significance of the Shore Temple, which can be overlooked in a simple comparison with the Nubian pyramids at Meroe.

Today, Meroe is considered present-day Karima, Sudan. Unfortunately, as it's not a Eurocentric country, there is a lack of discourse surrounding the architecture of Sudan. Therefore, it's necessary to refer to another origin place of the Nubian pyramids—Egypt. When Nubian territory was added to Egypt, the general prosperity of the country was reflected in the many architectural and engineering projects brought to fruition. This manufactured construction of elaborate fortresses along the Nile River in Nubia, such as religious mortuary and cult temples (Figure 4). These were brick structures endorsed by the active pharaohs to serve as religious architectural projects that could eventually become tombs reflecting their royal power. Consequently, one source reports that inscribed “on the stela of Sebekkhu at Abydos,” it states: “I have made for myself this splendid tomb; its place is inserted at the stairway of the great god, lord of life, presider over Abydos...” (Badawy 1966). The Nubian pyramids are more than just a resting place for mummies, they have substantial religious and cultural meaning.

From a rudimentary standpoint, several relationships can be made between the Shore Temple and Nubian temples. For instance, both analogical structures embody a sacred method of honoring others and connecting them to a higher power. Moreover, there are additional elements such as decorative art and accessories specific to the person of tribute. Then, the cultures responsible for the Shore Temple and Nubian pyramids incorporated methods of protecting the structures. However, although similar, there's a caution to comparing these forms of architecture as an unfair dialect can take form.

The Shore Temple can be viewed as complex with its intrinsic details and even more meticulous rituals (Figure III). When this is put up against the Nubian pyramids of Meroe (Figure 4), without any historical or cultural context, the pyramids will be viewed as vernacular

structures. This completely disregards the cultures' adherence to diverse objectives as the Shore temple is meant to be something of a shrine, while the Nubian pyramids resemble tombs. Hence, since architecture is subjective, context is extremely important and a lack of it can lead to unjust conclusions.

In his novel, Mario Gooden describes how society creates a sense of otherness by comparing two things while using one to uplift the other. This means that one is undermined and intentionally abstracted, so its counterpart is viewed as the standard (Gooden 2016). The juxtaposition of Shore Temple and the Nubian pyramids is no different. Simply looking at the images (Figures III and IV), it's objectively clear how one can be viewed as more complicated. Moreover, based on the survey, it's clear that the general population doesn't have a strong discipline when it comes to even the most basic information regarding minority countries. In fact, when unsure of how to compare the two, the survey participants made assumptions and created generalizations.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that it's dangerous to simply compare the Shore Temple and Nubian pyramids at Meroe without doing adequate research.

Architectural theory is about recognizing the importance of historical context and factors such as intention, cultural influence, religion, and more (Godlewski 2019). Therefore, one cannot simply look at the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram, India and the Nubian pyramids at Meroe and draw a fair conclusion without understanding the rich histories behind them. If only a quarter of students can identify that India and Egypt are on separate continents, an informed comparison shouldn't be expected to transpire.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For further information regarding the survey, see “Information Regarding Survey.”

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## Information Regarding Survey

As a way to provide evidence to a claim made in the thesis, a survey was conducted using Syracuse University students from a diverse background. It was found that these individuals represented twenty different areas across the world and came to Syracuse University to study thirteen different majors. When it came to their past education, 62% reported taking some form of American or European history, 52% had learned world history, and 29% studied geography. Surprisingly, this data was relatively split evenly between public and private high school education, so there was no clear indication of a specific education type offering more non-Euro-centric courses than the other. This made it so the data came down solely to the individual and their knowledge.

This study not only asked students about their backgrounds and historical or geographical knowledge, but also for consent to use their responses in the analytical paper. As such, the opening statement of the survey states: “Thank you for choosing to participate in this brief survey! To ensure the quality of this survey, please answer every question carefully and honestly; your answers will be anonymous so don’t worry about being correct. If you do not wish to answer, simply reply SKIP. Thanks again!” Additionally, the first question asks participants: “Do you consent to having your answers recorded as data and presented in an analytical paper? Please note: this will be completed anonymously so you will not be mentioned specifically.” All participants said yes to this question. Finally, as a way to completely ensure all students were comfortable, the last question says: “Once again, I consent to having my answers recorded as data and presented in an analytical paper. I understand this is all anonymous, so I will not be mentioned specifically.” Again, all participants said yes. Although the survey is no longer accepting responses, it can be accessed through the provided link.

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**Appendix**

Figure I: Outline of India

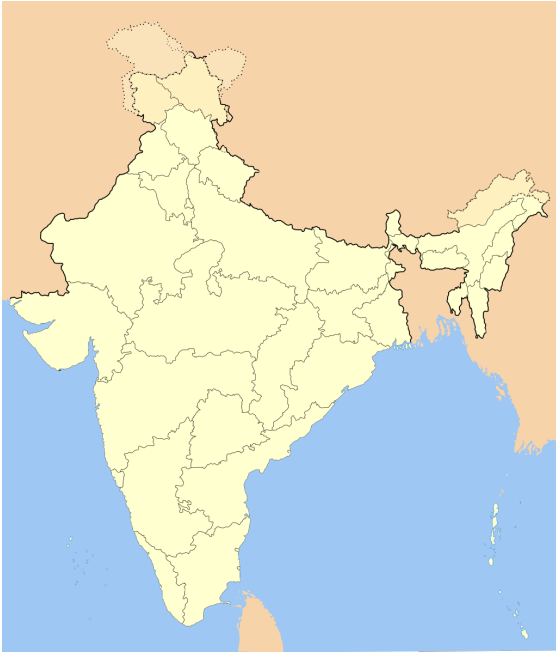


Figure II: Outline of Egypt

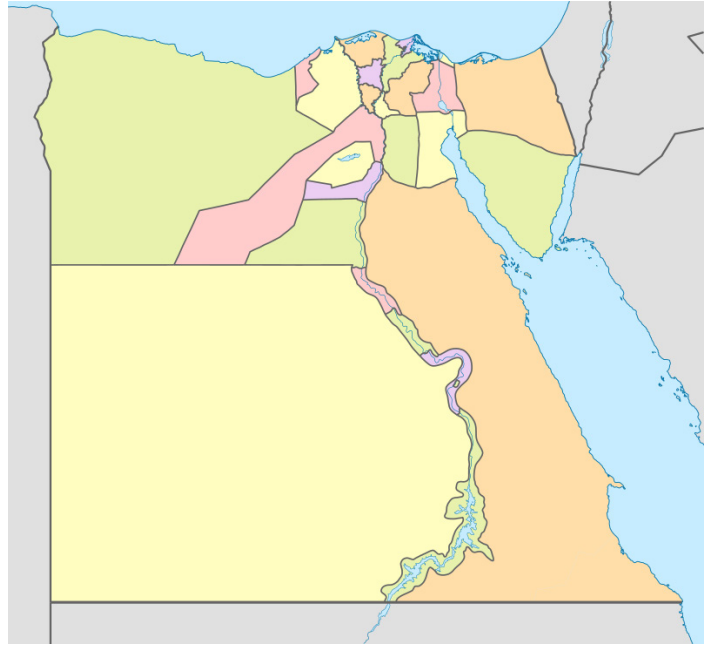


Figure III: Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram, India



Figure IV: The Nubian Pyramids at Meroe

