

N.Y. / REGION

From Police Beat to Prayer Beads

Character Study

By COREY KILGANNON MARCH 2, 2012



PRIEST Baba Heru Semahj has studied ancient Egyptian culture. Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

FOR more than 20 years, he was Officer James Georges of the [New York Police Department](#). Now he goes by the ancient Egyptian name Baba Heru Semahj.

Mr. Semahj is the friendly pharaohlike fixture of Chinatown's jewelry district around Canal and Mott Streets. He walks the area as if he just took a 10,000-year leap out of the Nile Valley. He greets passers-by who squint at the eye symbols and circle-topped crosses on his clothing and jewelry.

Up in his fourth-floor space in a commercial building on Christie Street, Mr. Semahj keeps a shrine for worship and study of the ancient spirits of Kemet — the ancient name for Egypt. The space doubles as the longstanding showroom and studio for his Kemetic-themed jewelry.

Mr. Semahj has spent most of his life studying Kemetic culture and was ordained years ago as a Kemetic priest — the first in New York City, he says.

Simply stated, Mr. Semahj believes that the ancient Egyptians were black and that the culture was a Nubian one native to sub-Saharan Africa — despite the cover stories put forth by more recent, envious cultures. It is a viewpoint dismissed by many experts.

His outfits and jewelry are inspired by hieroglyphics and objects from the tombs of the pharaohs. Mr. Semahj wears a specific color for each day of the week, to match its corresponding ancient Egyptian deity. On Thursday, he had on a sharp suit of white Egyptian linen adorned with purple insignias of the eye of Heru. He wore a shallow cap on his head, a purple scarf and a long string of 108 amethyst prayer beads.

"I'm wearing purple because it is Thursday, the day for Ptah," an Egyptian god, he said.

Around his neck were heavy chains and pendants in the shape of a sacred falcon, and a medallion bearing the same sema-tawy symbol that adorned royal thrones. One of his big silver rings was in the shape of an ankh — the circle-topped cross commonly seen in images of Egyptian deities.

"It is a powerful symbol of life," he said. "When they dig up New York one day and find an ankh, they'll know someone was on to the truth."

This truth, he maintains, would let African-Americans reconnect with their rightful ancient Egyptian heritage and their ancestors' highly evolved principles and noble lineage.

Mr. Semahj takes groups of African-Americans to the pyramids and temples in Egypt and points out where in the ancient images he sees Nubian features.

"They always make you take a local guide who gives his version, but I interject on the spot, to tell them the real deal," said Mr. Semahj, whose formal name is Sn Ur Hru Anjh Ra Semahj Se Ptah.

He performs weddings, funeral services and Kemetic cosmological holiday services. He has bestowed his blessings and jewelry on the likes of the jazz bandleader Sun Ra, the controversial Judge Bruce Wright and celebrity clients like Wesley Snipes, Erykah Badu and Ben Vereen, he said.

Mr. Semahj had five children with his first wife. His second wife, Queen Afua, is a priestess, healer and midwife who runs a Kemetic-themed wellness consultancy and writes books.

Regarding his age, Mr. Semahj said, "I'm vintage — I go back thousands of years."

Or at least to a childhood on a farm in Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands, and to British-run schools and to a Christian preacher father who told his son to investigate ancient Egypt. Mr. Semahj moved to New York in his late teens and in 1964 joined the Police Department, he said, to "study the African-Americans around me."

He spent most of his career walking the beat "among the people" in the 75th Precinct in East New York, Brooklyn — "It was Dodge City" — and trying to spread the word. He said he wore an ankh pendant on his handcuffs holder and prayed before every tour of duty "that I'd never have to use the tool of the West, my gun, to subdue my brothers and sisters — that if they want me to carry this tool of death, I have to carry my tool of life, the ankh."

On Thursday, after making his rounds at the local jewelry shops, checking on orders of precious stones and jewelry parts and polishing jobs, Mr. Semahj returned to his Shrine of Ptah, with its fragrant oil smell, Egyptian-style murals and statues of brown-skinned deities.

Whether high priest or police officer, he said, "I've tried to challenge my people, to tell them they have a high culture and that if you realize you come from greatness, then you will be great again."

E-mail: character@nytimes.com