



## Tracing the Historical Evolution, Linguistic Roots, and Cultural Significance of the Colloquial Term “*Kotomoto*” within the Egyptian Cultural Heritage

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### ABSTRACT

Language functions as a profound lens through which the cultural, social, and historical narratives of a civilization are expressed and preserved. Accordingly, Egypt's rich linguistic heritage has developed over millennia, intertwining the legacies of its ancient pasts. Within this continuum, the colloquial expression *Kotomoto* stands as illustrative evidence of how individual lexical items accrue layered cultural resonance over time. This paper investigates the etymological and cultural evolution of the colloquial term *Kotomoto* within the Egyptian cultural heritage, tracing its origins from ancient Egyptian to contemporary usage. To accomplish this, the paper examines the linguistic connections between ancient Egyptian and Coptic contributions to modern Egyptian speech, emphasizing how *Kotomoto* has persisted through centuries of cultural exchange and adaptation. It also explores the phonetic and semantic transformations from the ancient Egyptian epithet “*k3 mwt.f*” (*Kamutef*) to its adaptation in the Coptic language, and ultimately into modern Egyptian Arabic. In addition, the paper analyzes the semantic shifts and phonological changes, including consonant weakening and expressive reduplication, that illustrate the language's dynamic nature over time. Furthermore, it demonstrates how *Kamutef* continues to resonate today as *Kotomoto* serving as a living testament to Egypt's deep linguistic heritage. Moreover, it highlights how terms originally imbued with sacred significance penetrate secular colloquial speech through phonetic simplification, semantic neutralization and expressive reduplication while simultaneously maintaining their fundamental ideological meaning.

### KEYWORDS

*Kotomoto*, linguistic, colloquial, semantic, phonetic.

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## تتبع التطور التاريخي والجذور اللغوية والأهمية الثقافية للمصطلح "كتوموتو" في التراث الثقافي المصري

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### الملخص

عَدَّ اللغة وسيطاً معرفياً عميقاً يُجسّد السرديات الثقافية والاجتماعية والتاريخية للحضارات ويحافظ عليها. وانطلاقاً من هذه الرؤية، تُشكّل التراث اللغوي المصري عبر آلاف السنين في إطار من التداخل مع الإرث الحضاري العريق لمصر. وفي هذا السياق، يمثّل المصطلح العامي "كتوموتو" نموذجاً دالاً على الكيفية التي تكتسب بها الوحدات المعجمية الفردية أبعاداً ثقافية عبر الزمن. يسعى هذا البحث إلى دراسة التطوّر اللغوي والثقافي للمصطلح العامي "كتوموتو" ضمن منظومة التراث المصري، متتبّعاً جذوره ابتداءً من اللغة المصرية القديمة، مروراً باللغة القبطية، وصولاً إلى الاستخدام المعاصر في اللغة العربية المصرية. ولتحقيق ذلك، يركّز البحث على الروابط اللغوية التي تعكس استمرارية الإسهامات المصرية القديمة والقبطية في الخطاب اللغوي الحديث، مؤكداً التبادل الثقافي والقدرة على التكيف. كما يبرز البحث التحولات الصوتية والدلالية التي صاحبت انتقال المصطلح من اللقب المصري القديم *k3-mwt.f* إلى صيغته القبطية، ثم إلى شكله في العامية المصرية المعاصرة. علاوة على ذلك، يتناول البحث تحليل الظواهر الصوتية والدلالية التي رافقت هذا التطور، مثل ضعف بعض الحروف الساكنة، واعتماد آليات التكرار التعبيري، بما يعكس الطبيعة الديناميكية للغة في سياقها التاريخي. ويبيّن كيف أنّ مصطلح *k3-mwt.f* لا يزال يُلقب بظلاله على مصطلح "كتوموتو" اليوم، بوصفه شاهداً حياً على استمرارية التراث اللغوي المصري. كما يوضح الكيفية التي انتقلت بها المصطلحات ذات الطبيعة المقدسة إلى الخطاب العامي، من خلال عمليات التبسيط الصوتي، مع المحافظة على جوهرها الأساسي.

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### الكلمات الدالة

كتوموتو، لغوي، اللغة العامية، دلالات الألفاظ، صوتيات.

## 1. Introduction

Language is integral to the cultural heritage of communities around the world. UNESCO delineates five principal domains of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which provide structural frameworks for understanding and safeguarding various cultural elements. Within this framework, oral traditions and expressions exemplify the tangible manifestation of the importance of language within intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Language is inherently linked to cultural identity, encapsulating a community's history, values, and traditions. For numerous indigenous and minority populations, language functions as a vital marker of both identity and social belonging. It is the primary tool for transmitting knowledge, stories, and traditions from one generation to the next. Oral traditions, such as myths, legends, proverbs, and songs, rely on language for their existence. These narratives frequently encompass moral lessons, historical accounts, and cultural practices that are essential components of the community's intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2024).

The Egyptian cultural heritage is a rich tapestry woven from millennia of history, showcasing a unique confluence of languages and influences that have shaped its identity. Among the most fascinating aspects of this cultural heritage is the lexicon of words that have emerged from various epochs, including Ancient Egyptian, Coptic, and modern periods. Each of these linguistic influences has contributed to the evolution of modern Egyptian Arabic, exemplifying the dynamic intercultural interactions that have characterized this historically significant region (Gadalla, 2013). The term *Kotomoto* or *Kottomoto* (كوتوموتو) in the Egyptian Arabic serves as an example of the myriad words that have been used in the Egyptian cultural heritage throughout history. It stands as a significant witness to the linguistic heritage of Egypt, embodying the interplay of ancient Egyptian, Coptic, and modern influences. Through this term, the remarkable journey of language can be traced as it adapts and evolves, all the while retaining its roots in the rich soil of Egypt's past (El-Said, 2017).

The word *Kotomoto* holds a special place in the Egyptian cultural heritage, particularly in the context of how children are cherished and pampered. It is often used to describe an endearing or affectionate way of addressing children, conveying a sense of tenderness and love. It also expresses the sentiments of affection, tenderness, and playfulness associated with children. The term embodies the nurturing spirit that is profoundly embedded within the fabric of Egyptian family life (Abdelrahman, 2019).

## 2. Historical Evolution

As Egypt transitioned through various historical periods from Pharaonic times to Greco-Roman influences, Byzantine, and later Arabic rule the affectionate terms used for children, including *Kotomoto*, evolved but maintained their essence. The term is likely adapted semantically, phonologically and contextually, reflecting changes in the language and societal structures while retaining its core meaning.

### 2.1. Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptian language, with its hieroglyphs and dialects, represents one of the earliest written forms of communication (Allen, 2010). It formed the foundation for a myriad of words and expressions that carried deep cultural significance, often tied to

religion, governance, and daily life. The origins of the Egyptian colloquial term *Kotomoto* can be traced back to ancient Egyptian civilization, where language and culture were deeply intertwined (Wilkinson, 2003). In the ancient Egyptian society, children were revered as blessings and symbols of hope for the future. The family constituted a primary social unit with children regarded as the continuation of the familial lineage. The affection shown to children was not only a matter of personal sentiment but also a cultural norm (Brochardt, 2010). Ancient Egyptians frequently employed affectionate terms and diminutives for their children, similar to how *Kotomoto* functions today (Pinch, 2002).

Linguists and folklorists have long observed that the modern Egyptian colloquial term *Kotomoto* exhibits phonetic and semantic similarities to words originating from the ancient Egyptian language, suggesting a continuity of linguistic heritage. For instance, in ancient Egypt, *k3-mwt.f*, which is interpreted as the “bull of his mother”, was a significant epithet associated with god Amun, particularly during the New Kingdom (Wilkinson, 2003). The phrase “bull of his mother” functions not as the proper name of a deity but rather as a descriptive epithet linked to a divine figure. This designation associates Amun with themes of self-generation and virility, portraying him as a son who impregnated his own mother (commonly identified with Hathor or the sky goddess) to become his father, thereby symbolizing a process of self-creation (Faulkner, 1969). This title emphasizes a powerful, protective, and nurturing aspect, linking the deity or symbol directly to maternal qualities and the concept of motherhood. The “mother” in this context is often associated with Hathor, the cow-headed goddess, or the sky goddess, who was seen as the source of all creation (Pinch, 2002).

In the ancient Egyptian mythology, Hathor is believed to be one of the most venerated deities, primarily recognized as the goddess of love, motherhood, joy, music, and fertility. She is frequently portrayed as a caring mother, exemplifying traits of tenderness, empathy, and maternal guardianship (Wilkinson, 2003). Hathor is also regarded as the divine mother of the kings, symbolizing the nurturing attributes essential for the sustenance and protection of the ruler. Her maternal aspect is central to her worship, as she is seen as a compassionate maternal figure who provides love and protection to her children—both divine and mortal (Kemp, 2006).

In many traditions, Hathor is regarded as the mother of Horus. She nurtured and protected him during his infancy, especially while his mother, Isis, was searching for the body of her slain husband, Osiris, and raising Horus in secret (Pinch, 2002). Moreover, after Seth's assault, it was Hathor who healed and revived Horus's injured eye. She employed her divine abilities of healing, compassion, and nurturing to restore Horus's lost eye, symbolizing the reestablishment of order and harmony (Faulkner, 1969). Within this framework, the epithet *Kamutef* could be poetically applied to Horus, emphasizing his divine strength and his status as the son protected and nurtured by Hathor. It emphasizes the concept of Horus as a potent descendant, referred to as “the bull” of his mother (Hathor), representing vitality, protection, and royal sovereignty (Hart, 1986).

Over centuries, the ancient Egyptian title may have evolved and softened through common speech into a term denoting love and protection (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Hassan, 1993). Phonetic continuity and semantic drift both point to a credible line of

development from the ancient Egyptian title *k3-mwt.f* (*Kamutef*) to the present-day colloquial *Kotomoto*. Phonologically, the consonant skeleton /k-m-t/ remains recognizable, while the original final /f/ is regularly elided in later Coptic and Arabic stages (Loprieno, 1995). Semantically, *Kamutef* originally meant “the bull of his mother,” a title that combined notions of exceptional strength with maternal protection (Faulkner, 1969). As the term transitioned into everyday language, its explicit religious or cultic significance diminished; however, the fundamental ideas of strength, affection, and a protective role remained intact. As a result, in modern usage, *Kotomoto* refers to a “special child,” “beloved,” or implicitly “powerful” individual within the context of family affection. Although its ritual or sacred associations have faded over time, the current term continues to embody the same intertwined themes of love and protection that were central to its ancient origins (Badawi and Hinds, 1986).

## 2.2. Early Christianity

As Egypt transitioned from the Hellenistic period into the Christian era, the Coptic language emerged as the final phase in the evolution of the ancient Egyptian language. It served as a direct descendant of the earlier language, embodying the beliefs and practices of an expanding Christian community while simultaneously preserving numerous linguistic features inherited from its ancient predecessor (Wisenthal, 2004). The Coptic language retained numerous lexical items from its ancestor, often assimilating new religious and societal concepts introduced during the Christian era. In addition, it incorporated a variety of terms and phrases that reflected the close bonds between parents and children. This nurturing attitude towards children was further reinforced by various myths and religious beliefs emphasizing the importance of family and the divine nature of childhood. Consequently, terms such as *Kotomoto* may find parallels in Coptic vocabulary, illustrating how lexical items have been preserved and transformed across generations (Loprieno, 1995).

During the Byzantine period, expressions like *κατα τημητηρ* (*Katamouty*), meaning “according to the mother” or “for the mother,” further illustrate how language encapsulated cultural values surrounding maternal care and intercession (Michaud, 2013). Notably, Coptic preserves two primary lexemes for “mother,” each representing distinct layers of linguistic influence: *τημητηρ* (*tēmētēr*), a Greek-derived term used mainly in liturgical contexts, reflecting the Hellenistic influence on religious registers, and *μααϣ* (*maaou*), which descends phonetically from the ancient Egyptian *mwt*, demonstrating the coexistence of Egyptian vocabulary within the bilingual framework of Coptic (Crum, 1939; Loprieno, 1995).

Additionally, the interaction of phonetics and semantic meaning is observable in the Coptic verb *κομοϣτε* (*komoty*), meaning ‘to pray or supplicate,’ particularly in the context of a mother’s earnest prayer for her child (2022, أباد). Phonetically, *komoty* closely resembles the colloquial Egyptian vocative form *Kotomoto*, thereby reinforcing the cultural link between maternal care and intercession. Collectively, these linguistic elements demonstrate how both borrowed and inherited vocabulary in Coptic converge around the cultural motif of the mother as nurturer, protector, and intercessor, highlighting the enduring significance of maternal roles within Egyptian linguistic and cultural continuity.

Furthermore, phonological similarities and semantic continuity indicate a plausible lineage from the ancient Egyptian epithet *k3-mwt.f* (*Kamutef*) to the Coptic term *Katamouty* (Loprieno, 1995). Phonologically, the consonant framework k-m-t/f has remained largely preserved: the ancient bilabial /m/ and dental /t/ sounds are retained in the Coptic form, while the final /f/ typically weakens (Peust, 1999). Semantically, the original expression “bull of his mother” conveyed two concepts—exceptional strength and maternal protection (Wilkinson, 2003; Kassis, 2015). These ideas continue to be reflected in the use of *Katamouty*, which in Coptic refers to a beloved or specially protected child by his mother or according to the mother.

During the initial week after birth, a newborn was typically not given a formal name; instead, he was referred to as *κατα τημητηρ*, which translates to "according to the mother" in the Coptic language (Dikra, 2017). This terminology underscores the profound connection between the mother and the child's identity from the very beginning of life. The phrase *Katamouty* also encapsulates the cultural and religious conviction that the mother plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's public status as well as their spiritual and communal identity. As in Judaism, where maternal ancestry frequently determines religious affiliation and community membership (Halperin, 2004), this notion emphasizes that a child's social and religious position is primarily inherited from the mother. Such a perspective aligns with the matrilineal descent, a system in which lineage, inheritance, and social standing are traced through the maternal rather than the paternal line (Weisberg, 2009).

In the context of Coptic society, referring to the newborn as "according to the mother" emphasizes the importance of maternal bonds and highlights the societal and religious significance attributed to motherhood in establishing a child's identity and social integration. It signifies that the child's primary social and spiritual affiliation is rooted in the mother's lineage and role within the community (Kamil, 2010).

According to Leviticus 12:2-8, a woman who gives birth to a male child is considered ritually unclean for seven days; on the eighth day, the newborn is circumcised, and the mother is thereby rendered ritually pure.

This ritual underscores the importance of circumcision, which signifies the covenant between God and the Jewish people, as a rite of passage, whereby the child is formally named and integrated into the religious community, aligning with the practice that all Jewish male infants are circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Glick, 2005).

It is important to note that circumcision serves as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, symbolizing both divine judgment and mercy. It functions as a physical marker through which individuals can align themselves with God's covenant and become part of His chosen community. According to biblical tradition, God promised Abraham that he would become the progenitor of numerous nations, that his name would be changed from Abram to Abraham, and that he would be granted the land of Canaan along with his descendants. The covenant's sign required that every male among Abraham's descendants be



**Fig. 1:** Circumcision of Christ - Menologion of Basil II, 10th century manuscript, Vatican. (©Digital Vatican). Library).



circumcised on the foreskin of the flesh. Abraham, at the age of ninety-nine, circumcised himself; subsequently, he circumcised his son Ishmael while still alive and his son Isaac when he was eight days old, in accordance with Genesis 17:9-26. Following this tradition, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, in adherence to Mosaic Law (Fig. 1), and was named Jesus by the angel prior to his conception, as described in Romans 2:17-29. Today, this observance is commemorated on the 6th of Tuba (14 January).

Historical records indicate that the Jews adopted circumcision from the ancient Egyptians for hygienic and ritual purposes, as observed by Herodotus (Fig. 2). Conversely, Celsus contended that the Jews deliberately differentiated their circumcision as a more sacred ritual, thereby elevating its religious significance beyond that of other cultures (Deutsch, 2012). Additionally, the Ethiopians and Phoenicians are believed to have learned the practice from the Egyptians (The Antiquities 8:262). In contrast, Greek and Roman perspectives regarded circumcision as a procedure that caused males to remain perpetually sexually stimulated, leading them to deem it immoral and lascivious (Sampley, 2016). Moreover, in the second century, Emperor Hadrian prohibited circumcision, reflecting the widespread Roman opposition to the practice (Zoob, 2016).



**Fig. 2:** Circumcision scene from the tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor Saqqara. (Morris, 2012).

According to the New Testament, circumcision is not regarded as a prerequisite for inclusion in God's covenant community. In fact, the text explicitly prohibits circumcision as a means of identification with God's people, exemplified by Paul's assertion that baptism in Christ constitutes the true circumcision—the circumcision "without hands"—and that the church itself embodies the true circumcision (Galatians 5:2; Philippians 3:3). This aspect implies that circumcision may potentially impede the continuous spiritual growth and the experiential dimension of faith among believers (Jonge, 2008). For Christians, faith in Christ supersedes the requirement of physical circumcision, as exemplified by the belief that Christ's crucifixion effectively "circumcised" all humanity's foreskin, rendering the physical act unnecessary (Deutsch, 2012). This theological shift enabled Christians to distance themselves from many Jewish laws and customs (Kaatz, 2013). Nonetheless, the rite of circumcision (*ἡ περιτομή*) continues to be practiced within the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Church, where it is performed on the eighth day after birth prior to baptism, primarily for health reasons (Louth, 2022).

### 2.3. Modern Egyptian

Over time, in Egyptian colloquial language, the term *Kotomoto* and its similar variations emerged as a playful or affectionate term used to describe children who are overly pampered, spoiled, or indulged. This slang likely developed from the idea of

the “bull of his mother” (*Kamutef*) symbolizing a child who is strongly cherished, protected, and perhaps indulged excessively—much like a beloved calf or young bull cared for intimately by its mother which can be interpreted in Arabic as (حبيب أمه) or (الحبيب لأمه) (Abu Al-Maaref, 2023).

In Egyptian Arabic folk culture, the colloquial term *Kotomoto* or *Kotmoti* is used in the daily life practices by mothers to refer to their kids or to call or to spoil them. The term is merely a baby-talk or playful term used when pampering, kissing or cuddling a child (Hassan, 2015). It is said in affectionate tones like: (Come here, my *Kotomoti*) "تعال يا كوتوموتي", it implies the child is precious, tender and worthy of love. *Kotomoto* sounds like a repetitive, tide-filled tonal language, a technique known in many cultures for baby language and coddling, similar to words like “cutie-pie” or “coochie-coo” in English (Hassan, 2004).

The modern Egyptian colloquial title *Kotomoto* exhibits both phonetic and semantic similarities to the original Egyptian form *k3-mwt.f*. Semantically, *Kotomoto* conveys meanings such as “special child,” “beloved,” or “cherished,” emphasizing a sense of being central, valued, or protected concepts that reflect the original divine and protective connotations of the ancient title. Phonetically, the resemblance between *Kamutef* and *Kotomoto* suggests a linguistic continuity that facilitated this semantic shift, allowing the term to retain its underlying notions of love, significance, and protection, even though it no longer carries the original religious or divine significance (Hassan, 1993).

Such slang terms are common in Egyptian culture, evolving within everyday speech, comedy, and popular media. For instance, the word *Kotomoto* gained wide popularity in Egyptian pop culture through the iconic comedic trio *Tholathy Adwa'a El Masrah* — George Sidhom, Samir Ghanem, and El Deif Ahmed — particularly in their lighthearted and humorous song “*Kotomoto Ya Helwa Ya Batta* كوتوموتو يا حلوة يا بطة”, meaning “*Kotmoto, oh sweet one, oh little duck*” (Kassem, 2014). This comedy song was produced in 1964 as part of a theatrical sketch from the famous movie “*Akher sha'awa*” during which George Sedhom played the role of a mother and Ahmed El-Deif played the role of her son *Kotomoto*. The song was written by the famous late poet Hussein Al-Sayed, and the lyrics go as follows:

"كوتو موتو يا حلوة يا بطة، نبي حارسك يا اختي يا قطة، يا صغني، بوسه لأمه، يا إخواني يسلم فمه" (منصور، 2021).

This classic piece of Egyptian humor profoundly reflects the affectionate manner in which mothers within Egyptian culture tend to address their children. The lyrics evoke sentiments of nurturing, endearment, and intimacy between mother and son. Notably, the term *Kotomoto* gained widespread popularity following the song performed by the renowned trio, subsequently becoming ingrained in Egyptian popular culture as a term associated with pampering or indulgence towards children (Shawky, 2018).

In modern Egyptian culture, *Kotomoto* persists as a term that evokes both nostalgia and cultural identity. The colloquial term continued to be used till nowadays by parents or grandparents among the different social segments of the Egyptian society to spoil or pamper young children. It is also used to refer to a child who is overly loved and indulged or someone who is being treated gently and sweetly, to the point of being babied. For example, in 2025, a video went viral of the Egyptian actress Rahma



Ahmed while acting on one of Ramdan TV series known as "80 Bako", showing her while singing to her son and pampering him using the colloquial terms of spoiling in the Egyptian heritage as:

(الواد الحلو صاصا...الواد الكوتوموتو), meaning "the sweet boy Sasa, the *Kotomoto* boy". The song quickly spread on TikTok and became a widespread trend among the public, as many followers and celebrities interacted with it (Ali, 2025).

### 3. Conclusions

The word *Kotomoto* provides a compelling example of linguistic continuity in Egypt, functioning as a testament to the country's rich cultural heritage. Tracing its evolution from ancient Egyptian times to modern Egyptian Arabic demonstrates how languages serve to preserve, adapt, and revitalize cultural values across millennia. Historical linguistic evidence shows that forms related to *Kotomoto* appear in hieroglyphic lexemes such as *Kamutef* and in child-focused expressions recorded in ancient Egyptian texts. These data reveal that the traditional emphasis on children as symbols of lineage and hope established both the semantic core and the affectionate functions that *Katamouty* and *Kotomoto* continue to fulfill.

Phonological and semantic evidence suggests a diachronic link from the ancient Egyptian epithet *kʾ mwt.f* through the Coptic endearment *κατα τημηθηρ Katamouty* to the modern Egyptian colloquial term *Kotomoto*. Phonetically, the consonantal frame k-m-t/f is largely conserved: the ancient bilabial /m/ and dental /t/ are retained in the Coptic form, while the final /f/ either weakens or disappears, a common outcome in Coptic and later Arabic sound change. Intervocalic vowels likewise shift from the back /u/ of *Kamutef* to the front /a/ in *Katamouty* and the rounded /o/ in *Kotomoto*, a trajectory consistent with documented vowel realignments between Late Egyptian, Coptic, and Egyptian Arabic.

Semantically, *Kamutef*, *Katamouty*, and *Kotomoto* share core themes rooted in notions of strength, protection, and maternal affection. *Kamutef*, meaning "the bull of his mother," encapsulates qualities of physical power combined with maternal indulgence, reflecting a dual role of strength and nurturing. The Coptic term *Katamouty* preserves this maternal framework, emphasizing the enduring association with maternal care and protective significance. Over time, as these terms transitioned into everyday language, their explicit religious or cultic connotations diminished; however, the underlying concepts of power and affection remained integral. In modern usage, *Kotomoto* refers to a favored or beloved child, often implying strength and spoiled behavior within familial contexts, and continues to be predominantly used by mothers or grandmothers, thus maintaining its connection to the mother-child relationship. Although its ritual or cultic significance has decreased, the contemporary term still embodies the themes of love, protection, and pampering that characterized its ancient origins. The phonetic similarities and parallel semantic developments among *Kamutef*, *Katamouty*, and *Kotomoto* strongly suggest a genealogical relationship, illustrating an ongoing cultural and linguistic continuity across different historical periods.

The continued use of the Egyptian colloquial term in everyday language reflects not only a connection to ancient practices but also highlights a sense of continuity and resilience within the Egyptian cultural heritage. Words like *Kotomoto* act as reminders

of the diverse sources that have contributed to shaping the Egyptian cultural landscape. Accordingly, the interdependence of language and culture reveals how such lexemes bear witness to the layered history of Egyptian identity. They embody the blending of ancient and modern influences, reflecting a persistent narrative that has influenced Egyptian society for millennia. Therefore, *Kotomoto* transcends its literal meaning related to the maternal bond; it functions as a cultural emblem that preserves the stories and traditions of a civilization that has endured and evolved across generations.

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