

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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### Abstract

This paper examined the historical and archaeological evidences of the impact of religious beliefs on ancient Egyptian society and culture. Religion had a pervasive influence in ancient Egypt. Ancient Egypt was a theocracy with Pharaoh as the God-king. Religious exigencies guided statecraft to the extent that social and public policies were dictated by religious considerations. Ancient Egyptians trusted the efficacy of indigenous beliefs and at times displayed belligerent courage in resisting any anti-religious influence in social and political terrain. Religion was not only a social phenomenon, but also the platform for attainment of immortality. The paper employed the historical analogy and documentary method to arrive its conclusion which included the fact that archaeological research has a strong relationship in the study of the ancient religions of Egypt.

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**Keywords:** Ancient Egyptian Religion, Egyptian Nile, Immortality in Ancient Egypt, Tourism

### Introduction

Archaeology is the field that studies the past through its material remains, using it as evidence to order, describe and explain the latent meaning. It involves the discovery, the recovery, preservation and analysis of the remains that is the archaeological record. Archaeology is also the exercise of creative imagination. Renfrew and Bahn (1996:11) give practical description of archaeology thus: “It is toiling in the sun on an excavation in the desert of Iraq; it is working with living Inuit in the snows of Alaska. It is diving down to Spanish wrecks off the coast of Florida, and it is investigating the sewers of Roman York”.

In non-literate societies, information about the past is often encapsulated in oral tradition that is, eye witness account, hearsay, or rumor, visions, dreams, hallucinations, reminiscence, tales, proverbs and common sayings, which are transmitted from one

generation to the next orally. Vansina (1985:27) has defined oral traditions as “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation”. Vansina emphasized that the message “must be oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only” (1985:27). Vansina spelt out the difference between oral traditions and written messages. “This definition also makes clear that all oral sources are not oral traditions. There must be transmission by word of mouth over at least nine generations” (1985:28).

Another reliable method of approach for archaeologists of religion is ethno-archaeology. Ethno-archaeology means ethnographic research done by archaeologists, which covers the study of artifacts, buildings and structures within living societies to interpret the past. The material remains are often partial, fragmentary and altered by the process of decay and may not directly tell us any aspect of the past. It is therefore through the process of inference that the past is reconstructed. The raw material for archaeological study and starting point for inferences is the archaeological data. Ashmore and Sharer (1988:30) write: “The material remains of past human activity, from the microscopic debris produced by chipping stone tools to the most massive architectural construction, become data when the archaeologist recognizes their significance as evidence...”

Archaeological data consist of first the artifacts, which are the remains of man's tools, weapons and containers. Artifacts also include structures built or excavated by man, such as buildings, monuments, simple storage or rubbish pit. Burial sites are the third major category of artifacts as they provide direct sources of information about the physical nature of human beings who lived in that society in the past with a clue to their religion (Whitehouse and Wilkins, 1986: 181).

Religion on the other hand, is a belief system that links man to the supernatural realm. It is through religion that man is connected to superhuman beings, or forces that transcend the material world. “In other words, superhuman beings are conceptualized by humans, and have a place in the shared cognitive map of the world” (Renfrew and Bahn, 1996: 388). Over the years, archaeologists have discovered that belief systems are not always given distinct and clear expression in material culture. Archaeological study of religion is therefore a difficult and complex academic exercise. Archaeologists of religion adopt oral tradition and ethno-archaeology as choice methods.

The Russian religious historian, Tokarey (1989:9), speculated - though without any empirical validation - that there were no knowledge of religious beliefs among our most ancient ancestors (pithecanthropus, sinanthropus), who lived several hundreds of thousands

of years ago. Tokarey's major premise for this rebuttable presumption is that: "... the most ancient representatives of human kind led such a primitive social existence; their consciousness was incapable of creating religious abstractions. It was the period of pre-religion". Tokarey (1989) then went further to debunk the presuppositions of some western scholars that religion was inherent in man. He posited that the period of pre-religion lasted for a long time, until the end of the early Paleolithic period.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to admit that there is any epoch in human history that could be classified as "pre-religion". Such classification is not borne by history. It is a subjective intellectual classification. It is a contradiction of history and human experience. It is resisted illumination and repudiation of archaeological findings. The history of religion is as old as the history of mankind. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (1959) says that "as far as scholars have discovered, there has never existed any people, anywhere, at any time, who were not in some sense "religious" (qtd. in Mankind's Search for God 1990: 19). Religion is therefore as old as man. Robert (1966: 9) argued that man in his complex evolution, did not evolve religion: "Religion was not invented, evolved, or discovered by man. From the day of his creation, man knew the one creator God who had made him.... Monotheism and the practice of animal sacrifice ... are clearly shown by the Bible to be the twin characteristics of original religion".

Religion is instinctual in man. Man was created a religious being. St. Augustine gives a clue in his famous prayer: "You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you" (qtd. in Nilson 1981: 402). The religious nature of man is innate. Leonard (1968) writes: "Religion i.e. the fundamental instinct - as we have seen, was in man, and he had already felt, and acutely felt his absolute helplessness and dependency on a power that was outside him and stronger than his own strength" (p.98).

### **Egypt - The Gift Of The Nile**

It was the famous Greek historian Herodotus who in the 5th century B.C, called Egypt the "gift of the Nile". While Mesopotamians dread their rivers; Egyptians had no fear for the Nile. Nile has influenced Egyptian life, society and history. The Nile was a natural fertilizer and soil renewer. Annually, around September, the Nile overflowed its bank, and transforms the valley into arable land ready for cultivation. When the water recedes in November, it leaves behind a fertile mud good for planting. In about 6000 B.C., climate changed grassy plains into desert and the only option left as the source of water was the Nile.

The Nile flooded in June, and recedes by October, and deposited layers of fertile black earth for winter planting of cereal crops. "The river flowed north, encouraging traffic in

that direction but the prevailing winds blew from north to south, helping ships to sail against the current” (Sherman and Salisbury 2001: 17). The good fortunes of Egyptians and the simplicity and success of their farm work led Herodotus to comment thus: “...when the river by itself inundates the fields and the water recedes, then each man having sown his field sends pig into it. When the pigs trample down the seed, he waits for the harvest. Then when the pigs thresh the grain, he gets his crop” (Mckay, Hill and Buckler 1987: 21). Fairservis (1975) has said that “the valley of the Nile inevitably invokes a sense of timelessness: the essential unity of past, present, and future; for Egypt reflects in its monuments, its villagers, and its land the fact of a present so rooted in a past that the future is apparently made secure” (p.13).

While the Tigris and Euphrates isolated Mesopotamia, the Nile was creative for unity in Egypt. The river was the most outstanding passage that promoted easy transport and communication. “As individual bands of settlers moved into the Nile valley, they created stable agricultural communities. By about 3100 B.C. there were some forty of these communities in constant contact with one another. This contact, encouraged and facilitated by the Nile, virtually ensured the early political unification of Egypt” (Mckay, Hill and Buckler 1987: 21).

Apart from the fortunes of a fertile soil, Egypt had a vast deposit of the stone, which facilitated architecture and sculpture. There were also abundant quantities of clay for pottery and gold for jewelry and ornaments. While Egypt lacked copper, it was very easy to obtain it from Sinai, and timber from Lebanon. Egypt had an insular lifestyle and was reasonably self-sufficient. Egypt was naturally favored by geography and isolated from the outside world. In the eastern and western flank of the Nile valley, Egypt is bounded by grim deserts.

In the southern boundary, the Nubian Desert and the cataract of the Nile hindered any form of forceful penetration, or invasion of Egypt. It was only in the northern boundary that the Mediterranean Sea exposed Egypt to some level of maritime insecurity, which the Egyptians were capable of surveillance. Geography protected Egypt from any territorial aggression and uncontrolled immigration. Favorable geographical location led Egyptians into many years of peace and development. “The Nile River in Egypt flows 4.000 miles, from central Africa north to the Mediterranean Sea” (Sherman and Salisbury 17).

### **The Quest For Immortality In Ancient Egypt**

Ninian Smith has described the pyramids as the best known symbol of ancient Egyptian quest for immortality. Since Egyptian world-view recognized man as an organic complex of body and spirit, survival involved the continuance of the body. The process of

mummification was perfected to achieve preservation of corpses. “The divine status of Pharaoh as intermediary between heaven and earth gave the notion of his immortality peculiar significance. He was the focus of the cosmic order. It was not only the good order of society that was at stake. The renewal of the crops and the continued prosperity of the land were contingent upon his existence” (Smart 1969: 290).

There is a consensus among scholars that Egyptians were preoccupied with preparation for the afterlife (Whitehouse and Wilkins 1986: 15; Benton and Diyanni 1998: 40, 41; Bishop 2005: 32; Matthews and Platt 2001: 16, 17; Stokstad 1999: 95, 96). With a comprehensive perversion of religious doctrines, the king did not only enjoy immortality, but was the source of immortality; Mcneil (1963) reported that in the time of the Old kingdom, Egyptians believed that ordinary people, not even the most righteous saint could attain immortality on personal merit: “ Survival after death depended on securing a place in the retinue of the departed king. For this reason, the officials of the Old kingdom took great pains to build their tombs as close to the royal sculpture as the divine ruler would graciously permit...” (p.74).

Since the sole hope of immortality rested on pharaoh's discretion and goodwill, patriotism and national consciousness received a boost. Penalties for incurring the wrath of the god-king were painful and irreversible. Ruling through draconian codes, Egyptian kings offered the reward of immortal life to loyal and patriotic citizens. Since the kings loyal supporters were few and reward for patriotism limited only to those who obey the king, the king and his household were elevated above the peasantry which was the source of rebellion and at times change of dynasty.

The age of the pyramid which lasted from 3000 B.C. to 2500 B.C., is regarded as the greatest period in Egyptian history after the merger of the two kingdoms. It was in the pyramid age that the art of building witnessed tremendous progress unprecedented in world history. Before the pyramid, it is reported that the Egyptians used sun-dried bricks for buildings and tombs, but in pyramid age they used limestone and granite. This was made possible because of the discovery of copper in Egypt some centuries back. Clement (1979) has described the pyramids as the “most famous buildings of ancient Egypt, and indeed, among the famous of all ancient civilizations. They were reckoned by the ancients as one of the Seven Wonders of the World” (p.49). In Northern Egypt alone, there are about thirty pyramids still standing as historical monument and tourist attraction.

The first pyramid was built at Saqqara, near Memphis by King Djoser (or Zoser) of the Third Dynasty who ruled from 2681 to 2662 B.C.E. The complex was designed by a man

named Imhotep, who served as the chief advisor to the Egyptian king in about 2650 B.C.E. Imhotep made a name as the first architect in world history. The complex that was called a “step pyramid” depicts the influence of the Mesopotamian Ziggurats. Initially, it was planned to be a single-story mastaba, but it was later enlarged into a stepped pyramid which consisted of “six mastabalike elements of decreasing size placed on top of each other” (Stokstad 1999: 99). The pyramids were constructed to link heaven and earth. An inscription in one of the pyramids says: “A staircase to heaven is laid for (the king) so that he may mount up to heaven thereby” (Sherman and Salisbury 2001: 19). Stokstad (1999) report that the adjacent funerary temple where the final ritual of mummification were performed, was used for “the continuing worship of the dead king” (p.99).

In the form of his ka statue, Djoser was able to observe these devotions through two peepholes bored through the wall between the serdab and funerary chapel. To the east of the pyramid were sham buildings-simple masonry shells filled with debris representing chapels, palaces with courtyards, and other structures (Stokstad 1999: 99). The purpose of this arrangement was to ensure that “the dead king could continue to observe the sed rituals that had ensured his long reign. His spirit could await the start of the ceremonies in a pavilion near the entrance to the complex in its southeast corner” (Stokstad 1999: 99-101).

Childe (1952) in his *What Happened in History* observes that monumental tombs were designed to preserve the physical remains of the god-king, to ensure the continuance of his services to the people, and that as the “population and wealth increased, the tombs were made ever grander and strong” (p.117). The best pyramid was built around 2900 B.C.E., as a tomb for Pharaoh Khufu at Giza known as the “Great Pyramid”, it was the oldest and largest of the Giza pyramids, and measured 755ft. on a side and rises to a height of 481ft., with 2,300,000 blocks each weighing on an average 2 1/2 tons (Childe 1952: 117).

Childe (1952) informs us that the blocks used in building the pyramid “were quarried on the east side of the valley, floated across during the inundation, and then dragged up an enormous stone ramp to a plateau, 100 ft. above the river, on which the pyramids stands” (p.117). It took twenty years to build the pyramid at Giza, and a compulsory labor force of 100,000.00 people. The three “Great Pyramids” at Giza were built by three kings Khufu (2601-2578 BCE), Khafre (2570-2544 BCE), and Menkaure (2533-2515 BCE). Ancient Egyptians described the three tombs variously as “Horizon of Khufu”, “Great is Khafre”, and “Divine is Menkaure” (Stokstad 1999: 103).

The three “Great Pyramids” at Giza near Cairo created deep impression on Greek historians and travelers such that even the word “pyramid” is a Greek term, and they were

numbered among the best awe-inspiring, world's architectural marvels The Seven Wonders of the World. The next, was the Hanging Gardens, built by King Nebuchadnezzar II around 600 BCE, to please one of his Persian concubines. The third was the statue of Zeus at Olympia, made of marble, ivory and gold, constructed by the sculptor Phidias about 430 BCE.

The fourth was the Colossus of Rhodes, which was erected by the sculptor Chares, as the statue of Apollo in about 280 BCE. The fifth wonder of the ancient world was the “Temple of Artemis”, erected by Ephesus about 350 BCE, and burnt by Goths in AD 262. The sixth is the “Tomb of Mausolus”, built by Queen Artemisia for her husband Mausolus who died in 353 BCE, located at Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, now part of south east Turkey. The seventh wonder of the world was the “The Pharos of Alexandria”. A marble watchtower and lighthouse that stood at the Island of Pharos near the harbour of Alexandria. Built around 270 BCE, during the reign of Ptolemy II, by the Greek architect Sostratos (The Hutchinson Factfinder 1994: 641).

There was no equality and fairness in the struggle for immortality. Benton and Diyanni (1998) have reported that “Members of the noble class were mummified and accompanied by their personal likeness; common people were merely buried in holes, though Egyptian religion does appear to have offered them the hope of the life in an afterworld” (p.41). Even though the right to immortality was opened to all Egyptians as the benevolence of the king, only the wealthy class could afford a befitting burial which is a ritual condition to the attainment of immortality.

The hoary sphinx and the pyramids is an encouragement that human beings could build edifice as enduring and fascinating as the Nile valley. Stokstad (1999) avers that: “Egyptian religious beliefs reflect the sense of an ordered cosmos. The movements of the heavenly bodies, the workings of the gods, and the humblest of human activities were all thought to be part of a grand design of balance and harmony” (pp.95, 96). He went further to assert that “Death was to be feared only by those who lived in such a way as to disrupt that harmony, upright souls could be confident that their spirits would live on eternally” (1999: 95, 96).

Hierakonpolis is the Greek name for ancient Nekhen, the seat of Narmer, one of the founding fathers of dynastic Egypt, it is presently renamed kom el Ahmar- the red mound, because of vast deposits and accumulation of reddish pottery and burnt earth. Egyptians believe that the god Horus is the patron god of all Egypt, son of Osiris and Isis, the divine parents, who represent the victory of life over death and source of immortality. Pharaoh as the son of the sun god, the living Horus, “bridge by his presence on earth the shadowy line

between mortal and immortal, joining Egypt so closely with its gods that they were one and the same” (Fairservis 1975: 17).

### **Burial Cults In Ancient Egypt**

Burial sites are important archaeological evidence and the basis for social interpretations. Burials do not only provide evidence for social organizations, but also conveys ideas on religious beliefs and age long practices. Belief in immortality was noticeable in the tomb paintings of Egypt's New Kingdom “which show the deceased nobles reaping bumper grain harvest, making wine, hunting, eating and drinking in style and generally enjoying all that was best of their life on earth” (Whitehouse and Wilkins 1986: 118, 119). Herodotus once described Egyptians as “the most religious people he had ever encountered” (Stokstad 1999: 95).

From the beginning of the First Dynasty, burial rituals changed because since the king was God incarnate, Egyptians built large and complex graves and tombs, with the shape of a stone mastaba, raised above the ground, a rectangular base and sloping sides to bury their kings. Normally, the pharaohs' corpse was embalmed and changed into a mummy. Egyptians believed strongly in afterlife. But it is appropriate to differentiate Egyptian concept of immortality, or life after death from other belief systems, especially Christianity. While Christianity conceives immortality as the continuous existence of the spirit and soul after the disintegration of the body, Egyptians were more concerned with the body. They actually knew that man had a soul, but their interest was in preserving the body after death.

The soul in ancient Egyptian religion was complex. The divine breath was known as Ka, while ba was the human consciousness. Akh or Ikhu was part of the soul that traveled out to the land of the blessed. Matthews (2005) writes: “The Ka was a spiritual form that mirrored the body. Its physical needs were met after death by food and drink left at the tomb. The ba was a spirit that flew as a bird to heaven. An akh or Ikhu was the ghost of a person who went to the land of the blessed. When the ka departed, the body died” (p.47). Egyptians believed that through mummification and funeral rites, a person who died could be recreated.

It was through mummification that the body of the deceased is kept together with his ka, the body was embalmed and preserved. Since the living can only survive with food, funerary meals were provided to sustain the dead person. Precious possession and assets of the deceased like boats were entombed to assist the dead travel to the land of paradise. “The preserved body, images, possessions, and food served the needs of the soul immediately after death, in the tombs and in the journey to the land of the blessed” (Mathews 2005: 48).



### **Evolution Of Cultural Tourism In Ancient Egypt**

Cultural tourism has to do with traveling to learn about the world-view and culturally related sites in a foreign land. Tourism is a viable platform for promotion of cultural relations and international cooperation. When priority is given to the development of historic cultural heritage in any country, visitors will be attracted. For a period of twenty years (1490-1469 BCE), Egypt was ruled by its only female Pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut, who came to power through a coup. Goeldner, Ritchie and McIntosh (2000) inform us that “the first journey ever made for purposes of peace and tourism was made by Queen Hatshepsut to the lands of Punt in 1480 BCE” (p.45).

The detail descriptions of this tour can be seen on the walls of the Temple of Deit El Bahari at Luxor. Adetoro (1982) has also reported that Queen Hatshepsut's fleets of ships were the first navy in the world (p.31). The building of monumental masonry structures in Egypt attracted large numbers of visitors as early as the New Kingdom from 1600 to 1200 B.C.E. Casson (1974) observes that “Each monument was a hallowed spot, so the visitors always spent some moments in prayers, yet their prime motivation was curiosity or disinterested enjoyment, not religion” (p.32). Herodotus has reported that the Egyptians celebrated several annual festivals which attracted their neighbours: “They go there on the river, men and women together; a big crowd of each boat. As they sail, some of the women keep clicking castanets and some men playing on the pipes, and the rest, both men and women, sing and beat time with their hands....”(Herodotus qtd. in Casson 1974: 31).

### **Conclusion**

In this work one great fact is the importance of archaeology in the study of religions of ancient Egypt. Ancient Egypt was the nucleus of Mediterranean civilization. Egyptian civilization was the most ancient in the Old World, and the most relevant for Western adaptation. The intellectual and artistic contributions of ancient Egypt to global civilization can be seen in the area of medicine and surgery, astronomy, geometry, philosophy, mathematics, science, literature and jurisprudence. Egypt taught the world many things. These could be seen in the archaeological discoveries so far enumerated. The study of the Religions of Egypt is actually a serious reflection on the archaeological discoveries so far without which it could not have been possible. This means that archaeology and religious studies, to a large extent is complementary. The favorable geographical location of the Nile aided Egyptians to achieve perfection in irrigation, engineering and the making of pottery, glass, and paper. Egyptians taught the world the concept of monotheism many years before the Hebrew prophets. Ancient Egyptians laid the foundation for cultural tourism which today

is an integral part of international tourism. The legacies of ancient Egyptian civilization to humanity are much; we are told that civilization started at Egypt. It is in the greatest interest of humanity for Egyptology to receive an international attention. A new emphasis in the study of ancient Egyptian civilization will open new vistas in global developmental stride.

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