

Mummification in egypt funerary beliefs and practices history essay



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Egyptians main aim was to attain immortality which came after death. This yearning can be used to explain the practice of preserving the bodies, mummification. During the Old Kingdom it was thought that only pharaohs and the ruling elite would make it to the after- life and hence only those persons were mummified. As the middle kingdom and New Kingdom emerged Egyptians belief changed in that eternal life was available to everyone.[1] Even though mummification never became general practice in Egypt it transcended kingdoms, procedures were developed and beliefs were associated with the practice.

“ Ancient Egyptian civilization was based on religion; their belief in the rebirth after death became their driving force behind their funeral practices. Death was simply a temporary interruption, rather than complete cessation, of life, and that eternal life could be ensured by means like piety to the gods, preservation of the physical form through mummification, and the provision of statuary and other funerary equipment”[2]. “ The Egyptians believed strongly that after they died, they continued to live on in a different world. This afterlife was a perfect version of life along the Nile River, with an abundance of water, fruit trees, animals to hunt, and especially crops”[3]. Keeping the body as life like as possible became important to the Egyptians with the passage of time. The reasons for preserving the body was related to the transfer to the afterlife in other words the religious beliefs that the Egyptians had about death. The belief centered around “ six important aspects that made up a human being: the physical body, shadow, name, ka (spirit), ba (personality), and the akh (immortality). Each one of these elements played an important role in the wellbeing of an individual. Each

was necessary to achieve rebirth into the afterlife”[4]. The Egyptians also placed focus on deities such as the god of the dead.

An intact body was an integral part of a person’s afterlife. Without a physical body there would exist none of the other five elements that is the shadow, name, ka, ba, and akh. By mummification, the Egyptians believed they assured themselves a successful rebirth into the afterlife. This is because Egyptians believed that the mummified body was the home for the soul or spirit. If the body was destroyed, the spirit might be lost[5]. In addition, a person’s shadow was always present. In order to exist the person needed the shadow likewise the shadow needed the person for its existence. A small black figure was use to depict the shadow.

“ A person’s name was given to them at birth and would live for as long as that name was spoken. This is why efforts were made to protect the name. A cartouche (magical rope) was used to surround the name and protect it for eternity”[6].

The ideology behind the ‘ spirit’ bore complexity in that there were three spirits namely the ka, ba, and akh. The ka was considered a “ double” of the person[7]. The ka and the physical body were created at the same time. Khnum, the ram-headed god, was the creator of the doubles which were made on a potter’s wheel. The ka was the section of the spirit that existed in the physical world and lived in the tomb. It had the same needs that the person had in life, so the Egyptians left offerings such as food and personal (worldly) possessions in tombs for the ka’s use[8]. The ba or “ soul” was free to fly out the tomb and also to return to it. Each ba was an individual like a

person's body. It would enter a person's body with the initial breath of life and likewise leave with the last breath of life in other words upon death. In addition, it could move freely between the underworld and the actual physical world. The last section was the akh which was that part of the spirit that moved through to the underworld to the Final Judgment and onto the entrance of the afterlife. " The akh was the aspect of a person that would join the gods in the underworld being immortal and unchangeable. It was created after death by the use of funerary text and spells, designed to bring forth an akh (spirit). Once this was achieved that individual was assured of not " dying a second time" a death that would mean the end of one's existence"[9].

In addition to the six aspects of the human body, the Egyptians placed great emphasis on deities. There were two gods of the dead. The first one was mentioned during the period of the Old Kingdom (2750-2250 B. C.). Anubis is the Greek name for a jackal-headed god and was associated with both mummification and the afterlife. During this time, Anubis was the most important god of the Dead. Anubis took on various titles in connection with his funerary role for example he who is upon his mountain, which underscores his importance as a protector of the deceased and their tombs. Anubis assumed different roles in various contexts, and he would march at the head of public procession in Egypt.

With the emergence of the Middle Kingdom gave rise to a new god of the dead, Osiris. Osiris became the god of the dead because of the legend told of his death and rebirth. The legend spoke of Osiris being a king of Egypt who was murdered by his brother Seth. His body was cut up and scattered
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throughout the land. Isis used her magic to put the pieces back together. This event prevented Osiris from being like other gods and hence he ruled the underworld. In Ancient Egyptian religion, when the body died, parts of its soul known as ka (body double) and the ba (personality) would go to the Kingdom of the Dead. While the soul dwelt in the Fields of Aaru, Osiris demanded work as payback for the protection he provided. Statues (shabits) were placed in the tombs to serve as substitutes to do work for the deceased[10]. Statue preparation took much time since hundreds or thousands were made. Building the tomb took time too especially those of the elites.

In pre-dynasty times the practice was to excavate shallow graves in the desert along with a few rocks to cover the ground after burial. This was done to protect the corpse from jackals. The tomb building took only a matter of hours which was performed close to the burial itself. This type of burial was satisfactory for majority of Egyptians.

However, the wealthier class who could afford it built more substantial tombs. The tomb was constructed underground and made of mud brick and stones. The structures were simple and contained one or two small rooms. In some instances persons who wanted a stylish after-life would purchase space in a neighbour's tomb.

As elaborate as the mud-brick tomb may seem, it still did not satisfy the elite. The tomb for the wealthiest group, pharaoh and his family, became deeper and the structure more massive resulting in pyramids. One such structure is the pyramid of Giza (4th dynasty of the Old Kingdom), burial

place of Khufu. Such tombs however required years of planning and execution which proved to be costly. Upon the era of the Middle Kingdom, the royals abandoned pyramids. Instead tombs were cut into the actual rock of the Upper Egyptian Mountains. These tombs contained several rooms and passage ways. The construction of such large tombs was for the accommodation of several family members[11]. Many of these tombs contained funerary arts that is paintings on the walls and coffins.

In prehistoric times burials in Egypt were simple but as time progressed, burial rituals changed and became more elaborate. The times of early Egypt has been divided into three kingdoms. Each period or kingdom had varying yet similar preservation practices. However during the pre-dynastic times there was little importance attached to the preservation of the corpse. “ The process of mummification, the form of embalming practiced by ancient Egyptians, changed over time from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2750-2250 B. C.), when it was available only to kings, to the New Kingdom (ca. 1539-1070 B. C.), when it was available to everyone”[12]

Within the old kingdom there seemed to have been a rise in the importance of preserving the shape of the deceased. It was in this kingdom that the profession of embalmer came into being. The process involved wrapping the bodies in linen which was sometimes soaked with natron and sometimes treated with resin which enabled the modeling of the form of the body. At times facial features were also modeled and painted. This was referred to as linen mummy. At times more emphasis was placed on preserving the bones (de-fleshing) over that of the entire body. The bones would then be covered in resin and wrapped in linen. There was also the practice of removing the

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entrails of the royals that were wrapped separately and occasionally buried in canopic jars.[13]

During the middle kingdom, the practice of preserving the dead became more widespread. It became popular not only among royals but also among 'well-to-do' women and officials had their bodies covered in resin and wrapped in linen. Some corpses were in pitch. Many times if the intestines were removed, the heart was left in place. Instead of adding facial features through modeling and painting, face masks called cartonnage (consisting of linen and plaster) were used. For the royals, the masks were made of gold and inlaid with precious stones. The most remarkable of these masks was the one worn by King Tutankhamun. The mask is 24 pounds of solid gold, inlaid lapis lazuli, carnelian, quartz, turquoise, obsidian, and colored glass. These masks were to provide the deceased with sense organs that is eyes to see, ears to hear with and a mouth to utter the necessary protective spells. This was facilitated through the Opening of the Mouth ceremony.[14]

The new kingdom is where embalming reached its peak. In this period, the practices were fully developed. It included the removal of the brain, intestines, the complete dehydration of the body and burials in dry places. The intention was to keep the body as lifelike as possible. This was done by stuffing it with sawdust and other materials. Again, the new kingdom embalmers used the canopic jars to preserve the viscera (intestines). During the late period of the New Kingdom (5th Century BCE), Herodotus reported that there were three different embalming treatments and the cheapest being affordable to most (except peasants). It was noted that in the second

half of the first millennium BCE and the first century CE had the greatest proportion of Egyptians were embalmed than ever before.[15]

The basic components or practices that surrounded the mummification (embalming) practices were similar among all three kingdoms. The entire process of mummifying the body took seventy days. It required the services of special priests who worked as embalmers. The most developed form involved three basic steps: removal of internal organs, drying out of the body, restoration of shape of body and the wrapping of the body.

The first step of the mummification process involved removing the internal organs except the heart. The heart was not removed since Egyptians believed it to be the seat of intelligence and emotions. The other organs were removed to prevent rapid decay since the organs were the first parts of the body to decompose.[16]The organs from the abdomen and chest were removed through a cut usually made to the left of the abdomen. The organs were dried and wrapped then placed in the body or in canopic jars. These jars were made of clay or stone and were closed with stoppers fashioned in the shape of four heads — human, baboon, falcon, and jackal – which represented the four protective spirits called the Four Sons of Horus[17]. Removal of the brain took place through the nostrils where a special hook instrument was inserted in order to pull out bits of the brain tissues.[18]

After the internal organs were removed it was time for the body to be dried out. This process involved packing and covering the body with natron and left to dry out for forty days.

Natron is made up of four salts: sodium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride, and sodium sulfate. The sodium carbonate works as a drying agent, drawing the water out of the body. At the same time the bicarbonate, when subjected to moisture, increases the pH that creates a hostile environment for bacteria. The Egyptian climate lent itself well to the mummification process, being both very hot and dry.[19]

Embalmers would remove the internal packets after forty days and also cleanse the body to remove the natron. The organs as well were cleanse and made to dry out. At this time the only thing remaining would be the hair, skin and bones since the natron would have absorbed all the body's liquid.

The body, after the drying phase, may become sunken in some areas. These cavities would be stuffed with resin, sawdust or linen in an attempt to restore the deceased's features. False eyes were also added. This step was just to make the mummy seem more life-like. The final step was to wrap the body (organs as well) which could take up to fifteen days. Wrapping the mummy required hundreds of yards of linen. The embalmer would carefully wrap long strips of linen around the body. Sometimes each point of the body is wrapped separately (toes and fingers) before wrapping the entire hand or foot. As the process of wrapping the body progressed, a coat of warm resin would be added and the wrapping resumed. Amulets or ornamental charms were wrapped between layers. Two of the most important amulets were the scarab beetle was placed over the heart and the wedjat eye which was the restored eye of Horus.

When the preparation of the body was complete then it meant that it was time for the procession and actual burial or funeral took place afterwards. The procession involved moving the body across the Nile and identifying the deceased with Osiris. The procession began with family and friends who marched through the town with the body to the Nile. The process of crossing the Nile to arrive in the West at the Land of the Dead was referred to as Necropolis and not everyone could afford it.[20]The procession began with family and friends who marched through the town with the body to the Nile. The process of crossing the Nile to arrive in the West at the Land of the Dead was referred to as Necropolis and not everyone could afford it.[21]After the mummy was complete, it would be placed in a coffin-a box, usually made of wood that holds a dead person. Egyptian coffins took on the image of people-they had faces, shoulders, and feet, and were decorated to look like the person did in real life. The coffin would be placed in a tomb-a special burial chamber, along with other personal belongings of the mummy. Egyptian beliefs played a vital role as to the actual events leading up to the burial.

It was customary for the deceased to be carried by nine bearers of which four of them represent the sons of Horus. Through this symbolic event the deceased was identified with the god of the dead, Osiris. There were two mourners, referred to as two kites (Dr. tj) in the boat who represent Osiris sisters, Isis and Nephthys. In addition professional mourners were hired. The thought behind additional mourners was that it meant that the deceased was well loved and would gain favour from the gods. "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony was very important and was performed at the tomb site after

which sealing of the tomb followed. Wealthy persons had shabits/ushabits (small, carved, mummy-like figurine that has a spell placed on it, ensuring that it will do any hard work for the entombed person). In addition to these statues, many items from everyday life were included in a tomb along with the mummy. These everyday items could include clothing, furniture, cooking equipment, and even food. If the mummified person was very wealthy, many of these items would be made out of gold, and other riches would be included in the tomb as well. King Tutankhamun's tomb for example, included not one but three elaborately decorated coffins, a special shrine to hold the canopic jars, a couch made of gold, a golden throne, and numerous pieces of finely crafted jewellery.[22]

After the tomb had been sealed off, the deceased is made to face Final Judgment. One important component was the weighing of the heart. Earlier it was mentioned that the heart was not removed from the body as it was the most powerful part of the person. At this point it is thought that the lord of the underworld removes the heart and weighed against a feather representing Ma'at to determine moral righteousness. It is considered the most important task to achieve immortality even though no one has actually witnessed this process. Maat, one of the deities, was the goddess of truth. The process involved Maat taking out her scale where the heart would be placed on one side and measured against the Feather of Truth which would be on the other side. The final judgement would be made by Anubis or Osiris (Middle Kingdom), the god of the underworld, made the final judgement, while inscriptions would be made by the scribe god Thoth. " If the heart balanced the feather, the soul of the mummy was granted immortality. If the

heart was heavier than the feather (if the sins outweighed the virtues), the soul was doomed to a horrible fate. The heart was thrown to a monster called Ammit, or Devourer of the Dead”[23].

Majority of the mummies today are just skeletal remains. Many of the corpses went through natural mummification when the body was placed in shallow graves in the hot desert sand. In the predynastic period (4500-3100 B. C.) it was noted that bodies were buried in the fetal position in rectangular or oval graves which were dug directly in the sand and away from profitable land.[24]The rich on the other hand had more elaborate ceremonies when being laid to rest. The body of the pharaoh for example would be taken to the funerary cortege. Family members and the priest would be present. [25]Before entering the tomb the priest performed special religious rites at the entrance of the tomb. The Opening of the Mouth ceremony took place next. The priest would touch various parts of the mummy with a special instrument to “ open” those parts of the body to the senses needed in the afterlife or enjoyed in life. The tomb was then sealed.

Mummification in ancient Egypt was not so much about preserving the body but for the purpose of reaching the afterlife and attaining immortality. It did not matter how elaborate the ceremony was as long as the entire body was intact. Each event like the flooding of the Nile carried significant meaning. The Egyptians funerary beliefs and customs was well rooted in their religion and the many deities they had. Practices of ancient Egyptians have left modern world with many fascinated as the stories that continue to unfold.