

Abstract
Funerals, initiation and rituals of life in pharaonic Egypt

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Writing about Egyptian religion has typically focussed on what an ancient Egyptian believed, rather than what he did, tending to describe the history of Egyptian religion in terms of a cultural evolution of belief, and to stress the implicit theology of an official cult. The primary data for Egyptian religion is, however, largely ritual and performative, with text as glossing accompaniment to ritual action. Only in special cases do we have explicitly discursive or expository (didactic or proselytising) material.

From an opposite assumption, that ordinary people practiced religion at all periods, the framework of rites of passage poses questions about the ritual behaviour of individuals, in relation to their social integration into both visible and invisible worlds. Egyptian funeral liturgies widely exploit themes of initiation as well as re-birth. New Kingdom mortuary literature stresses that knowledge of the ritual text is valuable to the living, and also that the ritual is itself a million times effective from experience. These emphases can be taken to reflect the importance of life rituals, even though, outside the mortuary corpus, there is a lack of texts clearly formatted as rituals for the passage of the individual. Only in magico-medical texts does direct textual evidence survive for the specialist performance of ritual for private needs. In practice this unbalanced preservation of evidence from Egypt means that the search for individual ritual behaviour involves the weighing of fragments and of incidental evidence from a full range of sources and periods. Only in this way can rituals of life be sought; for birth, naming, coming of age, marriage, initiation, and succession.

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There is a distinction to be made between examining rites of passage simply as the ritual mediation of passage from one state to another, and Rites of Passage as a structuralist approach to ritual process in general. The first focusses on the efficacy of performance and the cultural importance of changes of personal state or status. The second exploits the classic frameworks of anthropological literature at a deeper more explicatory level for ritual itself: rites of passage as progression from a preliminary state, through a stage defined as liminary or separation and transition, to a state of re-integration.¹ Both approaches provide useful tools for directly addressing Egyptian ritual material. Motifs of passage—journeys, initiations, transformations of form and state—are central themes in the Egyptian ritual corpus, where the bias of the Egyptian record to the necropolis and the temple provides very good access to temple cult ritual, and to funerary rituals, but gives very little access to rituals of life.

Writing about Egyptian religion has typically focussed more on what an ancient Egyptian believed than what he did. From a modern viewpoint, dogma — categorised as belief — is expected to provide an underlying causal explanation of behaviour: belief seen either as rationalisation of action or behaviour as rational consequence of belief. There has then been a tradition of presenting Egyptian religion as a cultural evolution of belief, from more primitive and inchoate ideas to the dogmatic theology of monotheism.² This is the procrustean bed of modern scientific categorisation. However, the surviving record of Egyptian religion is strongly focussed on performance. The ritual corpus survives essentially in textual form, with focus on ritual as words: the “speaking of words”, which are themselves highly allusive in their explanation of myth to accompany the ritual action. The actions themselves, depicted in accompanying pictures, are always difficult to envisage in practice,³ but the integration of word and action is very deep.⁴ Pictorial and archaeological evidence provide a degree of context,⁵ but this is limited in a number of ways, and academic focus —as for magic— is more naturally on the content and the recitation of texts than on the actions.⁶ Ritual texts are mined as sources for myth, and the modern construction of an Egyptian belief structure is then rooted in the assumption that an implicit theology can be recovered from the highly contextualised metaphors of the myth, from the imagery of explanatory glosses, and from the accompaniments to ritual action: that ritual glossing explains action in the context of specific belief.

¹ VAN GENNEP 1960.

² E.g., FRANKFORT 1948, but this theme runs deeply through Assmann’s writing, as in ASSMANN 2001, structured as a narrative of development from implicit to explicit theology.

³ WILLEMS 1996, esp. 358-361 and 365-368; WILLEMS 2001; EYRE 2002.

⁴ EGBERTS 1998.

⁵ E.g., FITZENREITER 2001 for tomb walls; Lorand 2001 for a ritual papyrus with illustrations from the late Middle Kingdom group from the Ramesseum.

⁶ RITNER 1993; PINCH 1994.

The temple record⁷ seems to characterise Egyptian religion as one of official cult practice, to which a public was not admitted, and not one of regular, priestly mediated, congregational ritual.⁸ The daily ritual⁹ is focussed on the cult of the divine statue. The priest undergoes purification before he can officiate. He opens the shrine to reveal the god, cleans and dresses the statue, presents food, and then withdraws after cleaning the shrine of his presence. The primary ritual is rooted in the metaphor of personal daily service of the lord in his house, and is performed as the private service of the god. The ritual is not itself obviously liminal in a direct sense, but it involves preparation, separation in its performance, and then reintegration after it is performed. It is separated from the mass of people, whose own worship takes place outside the core sacred area. However the analysis of this ritual according to the structure of a rite of passage is obviously trivial, and not particularly informative.

The broader framework of rites of passage provides focus on moments and processes of transformation. The symbolic articulation of passage is then constrained by the physical and social ecology of ancient Egypt. This does not imply a geographically deterministic frame, but simply reflects a physical relationship with the world in which people existed. Particular themes are regularly articulated: passage between dynamic and repetitive, or linear and cyclical time;¹⁰ journey by water; life as a journey; taking a multiplicity of forms, with particular focus on a multiplicity of constituent parts making up the individual personality or identity;¹¹ and the reassembly and reintegration of the individual who has disintegrated at death.¹² These themes are equally applicable to both the human and the divine, and are rooted in access through knowledge. They characteristically include images of disintegration and re-integration, birth and death as cycles, desiccation and rehydration, the passing of gates. In the imagery and narrative of Egyptian ritual, this focus on complex and parallel passages through time, through space, mythological and cosmological, and from one form to another are central metaphors of passage from one state to another. Egyptian public rituals show, for instance, a great concern with the passage from the old to the new year.¹³ They are particularly associated with the Egyptian word *hpr*:¹⁴ birth, naming, coming of age (and age categories),¹⁵ inheritance—the funeral is a rite of passage for the son as well as the dead father—marriage, initiation, death, mummification, transfer to the tomb, disintegration into body and soul, and resurrection.

Ritual practice outside the temple and tomb has been generally underestimated, since the surviving material largely belongs to contexts classified as magic, which itself falls naturally into a negative modern category of superstition, not least because its real focus is practical result. Yet all ritual does something, so that it

⁷ CAUVILLE 2012 provides an extensive survey of the illustration of cult.

⁸ BARBASH 2011, 24 on ‘Introducing the multitude (‘šꜣt) on the last day of Tekh’.

⁹ DAVID 1973.

¹⁰ SERVJEAN 2007.

¹¹ ASSMANN 2005, 87-112; EYRE 2009.

¹² ASSMANN 2005, 23-38.

¹³ For examples attested in by the New Kingdom see BOMMAS 1999 and GOYON 2006.

¹⁴ BUCHBERGER 1993.

¹⁵ There is a clear contrast between social maturity, where passage is mediated by performing ritual for your dead father, against physical maturity, where passage is an age category (see below n. 47).

is helpful to focus in parallel on both expected outcome and dramatic performance, and there is a false dichotomy in the separation of cult and worship in Egypt. The apparent absence of regular and formal congregational ritual, and the absence of a pastoral priesthood, is not a real sign of the absence of individual involvement in religion, but rather an indication that such involvement, and the provision of ritual services, is not focussed on dogmas of belief, and needs to be sought according to different models.¹⁶ Behaviour does not always fall naturally into a modern distinctive category of organised or theologically based ‘religion’, as opposed to that of ‘sociology’ or ‘social practice’. The participation of the individual does not need to be formally organised. Ritual behaviour may be private and family, as well as group and communal, and sources of ritual expertise need not come from a particular formal hierarchy. Only in rare and special cases do we have explicitly discursive or expository, didactic or proselytising material from Egypt,¹⁷ and then it is encouragement to an individual, patron-client relationship with god.

An alternative approach to such material is to work on the basis that what an Egyptian believed is less interesting—less important—than what an Egyptian did: an explicit anthropology of performance,¹⁸ with an emphasis that rituals, and most especially rites of passage, were themselves functional, and did work.¹⁹ Any approach that tries to pose questions within an anthropological frame runs into the problem of informant bias, but the difference between living and dead informants is less than one might think. Informant bias is rooted partly in what informants may wish to articulate of themselves, and partly in how inappropriate the categories of modern questioning may be. Starting from the basis that Egyptians of all periods practiced religion, in a world populated by the supernatural, and where our separate categories of secular and religious are distinctly fuzzy, the theme of rites of passage gives focus to the involvement of the individual: questions about actions at key moments of change in life, that integrate the individual socially into both the visible and the invisible worlds, where the important issue is the social and emotional consequence of participation, and not a theology of explanation. Egyptian rituals—and I include magic in that—are typically explicit in the concerns they express about being found effective.

Professionalisation of ritual:

The history of priesthood in Egypt can be seen as one of gradual professionalisation, culminating in the Roman period, but with great question marks through most of the pharaonic period, where the role of priest, and its holder, is difficult to separate from other forms of office. The priest is presented as functionary rather than religious intermediary or theologian, although he is also marked by his ritual purity, iconographically presented as hairless. The role of temple personnel in the provision of ritual services to a public—clear in the Roman period—is painfully obscure in the pharaonic period.²⁰ The temple ritual was the duty of the king, as son of god, and in the New Kingdom daily ritual the priest explicitly asserts the propriety of his presence as substitute.

¹⁶ EYRE 2011, 610-612.

¹⁷ LUISELLI 2011, 231-236.

¹⁸ BAINES 2006; Cf. WILLEMS 1996, esp. 279-283.

¹⁹ Cf. SMITH 2009, 12, and in general cf. TURNER 1969, 1982, 1987; BELL 1992; RAPPAPORT 1991, esp. 37-50; and specifically for efficacy, TURNER *et al.*, 1992.

²⁰ FRANKFURTER 1998, esp. 198-210.

The provision of ritual services for individuals is best illustrated at earlier periods by the Middle Kingdom Ramesseum Papyri and the Ramesside Chester Beatty Papyri from Deir el Medina. These were both privately held collections, belonging to experts outside the temple hierarchy, but the contents of these two archives clearly imply that their owners were performers of literature for entertainment as well as core divine rituals, and a wide range of ritual and magical activities.²¹ One of the Ramesseum Papyri seems to be a burial ceremony,²² and this poses the question of who actually ran burial rituals. The eldest son was at the centre of the ritual: ‘his-beloved-son’ is the label for the primary ritualist, whose iconography includes the sidelock of youth.²³ This is the heir, who acts as the ka-priest. It is fair enough to assume the central role of the son in the burial ceremonies, but that poses the question of the repository of ritual expertise at the overlap between cult and magic, the formal and the informal. On the formal side are priesthood, professionalisation, organised religion, public religion, and in the Egyptian context that implies literacy. On the informal side is non-institutionalised, and indeed non-literate ritual expertise. For instance, isolated references to consultation of a ‘wise woman’, in Deir el Medina material,²⁴ give focus to this theme, as indeed do the vast majority of specifically women’s ritual needs. This means that posing questions about individual ritual behaviour depends very heavily on the fragmentary and incidental.

Mortuary literature as source

One of the striking features of Egyptian ritual texts is their portmanteau nature. Egyptian ritual texts are not exclusive and unique compositions to a particular ritual, but composite, and formulaic ritual, recycled in different contexts—it is like Homeric composition: formulaic and plagiarising²⁵—and a large ritual is characteristically made up of lots of fragments. The preserved ritual of mortuary and temple sources cannot be separated in practice from a larger and common ritual corpus.²⁶ Our—frequently unsuccessful—attempts to find narrative coherence in a ritual do not mean that an Egyptian user would have articulated the individual sections of the text as narrowly defined in purpose. The underlying problem is not straightforward.

The mortuary literature is what survives at earlier periods, but it is clear that large parts of that literature represent a ritual corpus that overlaps with other non-mortuary ritual, and it is far from clear whether it is funerary use which derives from cult and wider ritual practice, or the cult which borrows from the funerary. Themes of passage are, unsurprisingly, at their clearest in the tomb: in Pyramid and Coffin Texts, Books of the Dead, Underworld Books, passports to the afterlife. The surviving copies were clearly transcriptions for funerary deposit—whether they were inscribed on tomb walls, coffins or papyri—and not themselves copies for use in liturgical performance, but the corpus clearly includes and represents performed rituals. They

²¹ PARKINSON 1991, xi-xiii for survey of the Ramesseum papyri; PESTMAN 1982 for survey of the Chester Beatty papyri.

²² GARDINER 1955.

²³ WILLEMS 2001, 359, 368-369; ASSMANN 2005, 42-52.

²⁴ BORGHOUTS 1982, 24-27; FRANKFURTER 1998, 210-212; note the French *sage-femme* = midwife.

²⁵ KOENIG 2011, esp. 126-128.

²⁶ VON LIEVEN 2012; and cf. SMITH 2005, 33-41 on the individual and composite nature of an early Roman period papyrus involving a wide range of rituals by a father to his dead daughter, that is more than simply her burial ritual.

are not simply written, unperformed magic. And it is frequently repeated that the texts are useful to both the living and the dead, as well as a million times effective.²⁷

This means that the mortuary literature can be mined for ideas about rites that are not purely funerary, and which exploit a variety of metaphors of passage. For instance, the Middle Kingdom Book of Two Ways exploits the vision of an underworld topography—mapped out on the coffin base—to present a passage through place and linear time to reintegration in the new other world of Osiris.²⁸ The New Kingdom Amduat exploits the vision of the solar passage through day and night to present a passage through cyclical time towards reintegration into the society of Re in his daily cycle.²⁹ The two versions of another world, one rather like this and the other a cosmological vision that envelops this world between sky and underworld, run in parallel and overlap as the places of reintegration, in the core metaphorical narrative of Egyptian religion. But the mortuary literature, particularly in the New Kingdom Underworld Books, uses the image of the passage also as a dream world, in the passage between death and resurrection. The role of dreams in ritual—particularly private ritual—is probably underestimated³⁰ in a society where the theme of awakening is a core image of resurrection. Clear evidence for rituals of incubation as an oracle are not found before the post-Ramesside period, but dream interpretation is well attested.

Death as passage of place and state

Death is the archetype context in which long and complicated rituals mediating passage are attested in Egypt: from the separation of death itself, through rituals which pass the dead through liminal states or cosmic locations to the (re-)integration of the dead in an afterlife.³¹ This is envisaged as both a passage through time and space to another place, and a passage from one physical and spiritual state to another. These can be understood in modern terms as overlapping and contradictory rationalisations of the human uncertainty about afterlife,³² but it should be emphasised that the passage itself was mediated by the heir—in the role of eldest son—so that individual dead were reintegrated into a social relationship with their descendants, as recipients of cult and as supernatural intermediaries,³³ while the dead *en masse* represented a continuing supernatural danger.

²⁷ GEE 2006 collects relevant Book of the Dead material for humans performing, involvement, knowing. RITNER 2010 on the relationship between mortuary and magical texts. BARBASH 2011, 40-42, 54 on *sꜣḥw* and overlap of different types of ritual text. In contrast, WILLEMS 2001: 338-339, 361 surveys the issue in relation to the Coffin Texts, from a rather more sceptical standpoint about the non-funerary usefulness to the living.

²⁸ LESKO 1972; BACKES, B. 2005.

²⁹ ABT and HORNING 2003; SCHWEITZER 2010; ASSMANN 2005, *Death and Salvation*, 394-396; VON LIEVEN 2002, 49-50 stressing knowing on earth.

³⁰ SZPAKOWSKA 2003, esp. 142-151; QUACK 2011.

³¹ EYRE 2002, 148-150

³² ASSMANN 2005, provides a comprehensive overview of the complementary themes.

³³ WILLEMS 2001, 340-346 and 368-369 on the role of the son and ASSMANN 2005, 2-52.

The burial itself, as passage of the body to the tomb, is conflated with passage of the soul to other places: to the sky, to another world ruled by Osiris,³⁴ or to a continuous passage through night and day, like the cycle of life but in divine company. The conflation between rituals of life and death, between doing alive and doing dead, is however given focus by the inclusion of a pilgrimage as part of the funeral pictured on the tomb wall, as a ritual parallel to the Middle Kingdom participation in the annual mysteries of Osiris at Abydos: his annual death and burial as festival. These are related to the ritual texts referred to as the *Stundenwachen*:³⁵ a core ritual of the funeral where the dead god passes through the hours of the night and day to his resurrection.

Funerary rituals are categorised as *sꜣḥw*: “making *ꜣḥ*”,³⁶ which carries the sense of both a particular state of potency and functionality and of the particular manifestation as an *ꜣḥ*-ghost. The rather unsatisfactory terms ‘transfigured’ or ‘glorified’ (‘Verklärung’) are common as translation in the Egyptological literature. Funerary literature is, however, deeply concerned with the theme of the dead taking forms—forms as transformations—with considerable stress on the various *ḥprw* that a person/god takes, and the multiplicity of forms of ghosts, either autonomous or as constituent parts of the dead or the divine. The taking of forms is a consistent ritual motif in spells that describe or assert passage to new status in an afterlife.

Rebirth and birth

There remains the question of the extent to which the corpora of the Coffin Texts and of the Book of the Dead represent or include standard funerary ritual,³⁷ allowing reconstruction of a formal order of rites of passage at death, and at the same time the extent to which they reflect rituals of initiation and other ritual behaviour during life. The Egyptian material does not mean that Egyptians were peculiarly obsessed with death. In this respect Assmann’s argument that the Egyptian record exemplifies a quasi-universal principle, that “death is the origin and centre of culture”,³⁸ over-emphasises causality over the social normality of the integration of the dead with the living as part of the normal presence of the supernatural in the Egyptian world. The Egyptians are now all dead, and that just happens to be what their archaeological remains are best at informing us about. However the core themes of the mortuary literature, with focus on (re-)birth, physical, and social reintegration are precisely those of lifetime stages and crises associated with rites of passage.

Birth is the most literal primary transformation through passage, widely exploited in constructing the theme of passage in other contexts. The image of the goddess Nut, as the sky, giving birth to the sun each morning is associated directly with the resurrection of the dead by passage through the Island of Fire. The red of the

³⁴ FEDERN 1960, 249 on the expression of an identity with the divinity as the context of these spells; ASSMANN 2004, 165-174; 2005, 392-398 and SMITH 2009, 7 for the argument that becoming ‘Osiris’ in the afterlife meant becoming one of his ‘community of worshippers’ in the underworld, and not literal identity with the god: *unio liturgica* and not *unio mystica*.

³⁵ PRIES 2011, esp. 10-26.

³⁶ BARBASH 2011, 35-56 provides a state-of-the-art summary, and see pp. 36-39 on the literal meaning.

³⁷ See ASSMANN 2002, 13-68 for a discussion of performative genre and context, and FRANSEN 2001, 50-51 for problems of performative category.

³⁸ ASSMANN 2005, 1-3.

morning and the evening is symbolically passage through both fire and birth blood.³⁹ Rituals, and ritual actions, then parallel physical and metaphysical passage. Coffin Text Spell 770 has the title: ‘Causing a child to breathe’.⁴⁰ What follows is a short spell concerned with the revivification of the corpse and with the dead moving, standing, breathing properly, the right way up.⁴¹ Whatever the specific occasion or content of performance may have been, the spell exploits the manipulation of the newborn in a recitation that invokes a passage through initiation as well as a magical transformation. In the core ritual of the Opening of the Mouth⁴² the body of the dead, or a statue, is brought to life using a series of rather odd-looking instruments. Key elements of this ritual mimic the treatment of the new-born child, opening and cleaning the mouth and the airways.⁴³

The very act of giving birth is itself a sort of rite of passage for the mother, and its consequence is a significant change in her status, to full adult personality. Behaviour around birth does in fact conform superficially to the core pattern of rites of passage for the woman, involving a withdrawal and separation, manipulation both physical and ritual, and a period of ritual separation before formal social reintegration, although these are entirely female contexts, so that the details are obscured. The amulets, votive and magical objects, magico-medical spells associated with childbirth cannot be placed into a direct ritual narrative,⁴⁴ any more than the so-called birth-bowers in Deir el Medina houses — brick podia with pictures of the nursing mother. Their function, ritual or practical, is obscure, but they emphasise strongly the socially integrative importance of birth as a motif.⁴⁵

These underlying themes are hinted at in the narrative of Papyrus Westcar.⁴⁶ The wife is having a difficult birth: the husband is found, ‘standing, (with) his *dziw*-garment upside-down’: possibly a symbolic gesture of reversal, as accompaniment to the (specifically difficult?) birth. The goddesses come to help, taking the form of *hnrt*, ‘performers’, on their way to participate in a festival. They present the husband with their necklace-counterweights — a gesture of appeasement — and he asks their help. They shut themselves away with the woman, and there follows a description of how they physically support the woman as she gives birth:

Then Isis said: “ You are not to be strong (*wsr*) in her belly, in this your name of Useret.” Then this child came out on her arms as a child of one cubit; his bones were robust, and the covering of his limbs was in gold and his head-covering in real lapis.

The passage plays between the physical appearance of the newborn and the physical appearance of a god.

³⁹ EYRE 2002, 87.

⁴⁰ CT VI 405a (FAULKNER 1977, 301): *ssnt hrd*.

⁴¹ See FRANDBEN 2011, discussing ‘reversal’ spells, concerned with an afterlife that is properly ordered, and which include initiation-like interrogations, although taking a rather negative view of their nature as performable rituals.

⁴² OTTO 1960; ASSMANN 2005, 108, 310-329.

⁴³ ROTH 1992; ROTH and ROEHRIG 2002; QUACK 2006, 148-150 is very critical of Roth.

⁴⁴ SZPAKOWSKA 2008, 23-44.

⁴⁵ WEISS 2009 for the latest survey, but with rather unsatisfactory conclusions.

⁴⁶ P. Westcar 9, 27 - 11, 9; PARKINSON 1997, 116-119

Then they washed him, his umbilical cord was cut, and (he) was put on a cloth with a brick(?).⁴⁷ Then Meskhent presented herself to him, and she said, “A king, who will carry out kingship in this entire land.”

Transposed to real life, we see the physical description of the birth procedures: a connection between expertise as mid-wife and a particular ritual/magical knowledge; an emphasis on the importance of the name, and suggestion that it is given immediately on birth;⁴⁸ and the formal prediction of the child’s fate. Then 14 days ‘purification’ of the mother are followed by a party, reintegrating the woman into society.⁴⁹ But the name, as definition of identity, and the motif of the name surviving after death, are so stressed in Egyptian sources that the process of naming should be seen as significant.

Coming of age

is not obviously visible in mortuary literature, but a small number of autobiographical texts refer to a ceremony of ‘tying the filet’ as a youth, followed by a first appointment to office.⁵⁰ The Middle Kingdom stela of a certain Samontu records:⁵¹

I was born in the time of the Majesty of King of U. and L. Egypt Sehetpibre, true of voice. I was a child who tied the filet under his Majesty, King Kheperkare, living for ever.⁵² His Majesty appointed me as scribe of the Enclosure of Hearing (*hnrt n sdm*), and he favoured me over it very greatly.

The meaning of this phrase is obscure. The ‘filet’ hieroglyph seems simply to represent a headband, with knot and hanging strands.

Egyptian vocabulary seems to distinguish age categories, although it is not possible to define close technical meaning.⁵³ For example, Coffin Text spell 290 carries the title:⁵⁴

hpr m wdḥ N pn hpr m wdḥ ddw mwt=f irw ʿ=f n=f im < m > hpry nb, Becoming a child: This N is become a child, whose mother says “His authorisation (? ʿ) has been made for him thereby <as> every (divine form).”

The word *wdḥ* used here for ‘child’ may come from a root meaning ‘wean’, and not refer specifically to a new-born, but to a stage of particular dependency:⁵⁵ a potential

⁴⁷ ROTH and ROEHRIG 2002; for convenient picture of the painted birth brick from Abydos, with illustration related to that of the birth bowers at DeM, cf. SZPAKOWSKA 2008, 24.

⁴⁸ POSENER 1970; DERCHAIN 2011, 17 on argument that naming was done by mother; ASSMANN, J. 2001, 83-87 on naming formulae; ASSMANN 2005, 39-41.

⁴⁹ P. Westcar 11, 18-19; PARKINSON 1997, 118.

⁵⁰ FEUCHT 1995, 238-245; WILLEMS 1996, 171-172 for collection of references.

⁵¹ BM 145 [828] = BRITISH MUSEUM 1912, pl. 21. ‘child’ simply written with ideogram.

⁵² *ink ts mdḥ hr hm=f sdzm ḥtp (sdz m ḥtp ?) nsw bity hpr-k3-r ʿnh dt*: the orthography of the text is very abbreviated, and reading obscure in a number of places.

⁵³ LUSTIG 1997, 43-65 includes discussion of kin terms, age as a status matter.

⁵⁴ CT IV, 42 a-c; FAULKNER 1973, 217. DEMARÉE and VALBELLE 2011, 99, comparing also CT VI, 308k-309a, Spell 682 (FAULKNER 1977, 247) argue implausibly for reference to a formal registration of birth, although note BAGNALL and FRIER 1994, 27 on declarations to keep the Roman population lists up to date between the 14 yearly formal census.

⁵⁵ FEUCHT 1995: 518-520.

word for an age category, with weaning marking a social passage into an increased level of personhood, but for which no particular ceremony can be identified. The term *nḥn* is that normally used to refer to the stage before office holding,⁵⁶ although it is not easy to see any very clear distinction in use from the term *ḥwn* for pre-adult status.⁵⁷ *dꜣmw* seems then to indicate an age category at which young men were liable as a group to conscription for labour: kings formulaically claim to *šḥpr dꜣmw*, ‘bring *dꜣmw* into being’.

The early 19th Dynasty autobiography of Nefersesheru talks of spending 10 years with his father, learning to write, before his appointment to office.⁵⁸ The child acting as shadow and assistant to his father may be quite young,⁵⁹ and there are difficult questions about the age at which formal appointments to office were made, and the degree to which they might be associated with ceremonies of coming of age. There is no precise evidence for a specific age at which a child might have become adult. In the Roman period the age of 14 was that at which the boy became liable to taxation,⁶⁰ but such clear evidence is lacking for earlier periods. A late Ptolemaic set of cult-guild regulations established by the Theban *choachytes*—the community who managed the local mortuary cults—begin by defining the age of participation in their cult guild.⁶¹

Every citizen who will reach 10 years among the *choachytes* (*wꜣḥ-mw*), then they will bring him to the association of Amon of Opet; every citizen who will reach 16 years among the *choachytes*, and he will not come to the association of Amon of Opet, then they will not drink or eat with him and people of his house until he will come to the place and those of the association shall decide punishment towards him.

These mutual self-help associations provided very strong social and religious community, so that here the change from the permitted admission of the adolescent to the full obligation of the adult is seen.

Association of adult status with function is clear. The *Satire on the Trades* puts this in a degree of context:⁶²

I will cause you to love writing more than your mother; I will cause its beauty to enter in front of you. But it is greater than any job! There is nothing like it in the land. When he has begun to grow (*wꜣd*)—he is (still) a child (*ḥrd*)—(but) he is (formally) greeted. He is sent to carry out missions (*wꜣwt*); before he returns, he has dressed himself in a *dꜣiw*-garment.

There are, then, clear social differences expressed in iconography: the child is (iconographically) naked, and the adult is clothed.⁶³ The child is shown with shaven head with long sidelock of youth, while the adult is shown with short hair. This raises the question of circumcision. In the Roman Period a priest was required to be circumcised. Herodotus implies that in the Saite Period circumcision was normal,

⁵⁶ FEUCHT 1995, 527-534. See also p. 239 and 248 for argument that this is the age status before tying the file, and before circumcision.

⁵⁷ FEUCHT 1995, 531-534.

⁵⁸ FROOD 2007, 143.

⁵⁹ Cf. also the inscription of Bakenkhonsu, FROOD 2007, 41 and 43.

⁶⁰ BAGNALL and FRIER 1994, 27-28.

⁶¹ P. Berlin 3115, A 2-4: DE CENIVAL 1972, 103.

⁶² P. Sallier II, 4, 5-6; LICHTHEIM 1975, 185-186; HELCK 1970, 28-34.

⁶³ EYRE 2011a, esp. 179-185

stressing purity.⁶⁴ At earlier periods it is deeply unclear how normal or widespread circumcision might have been. Examining bodies, or taking a magnifying glass to the carving of statuary and relief to test the physical evidence, does not really provide a clear answer,⁶⁵ and the small number of scenes that seem to represent circumcision do not provide a very clear contexts. The scene in the Fifth Dynasty Tomb of the Two Brothers at Saqqara seems to put circumcision into the context of barbering — the context is at the margins of a market — but then the barber is an appropriate person to circumcise.⁶⁶ A pedantic interpretation can, however, argue that the scenes can just as well be interpreted as depictions of full body shaving and depilation. In particular the slightly earlier scene in the tomb of Ankhmahor can be taken to depict the purification of the mortuary priests just as well as a circumcision: neither is a normal theme in tomb decoration, and anyway circumcision itself may represent an extreme form of purification and not necessarily a cultural norm.⁶⁷

Within Old Kingdom iconography, Fitzenreiter⁶⁸ has drawn a distinction between naked statues of the tomb owner which are iconographically children, marked most clearly by their hair-style, and naked statues that are not iconographically children. He claims that in these statues a distinction between the circumcised and the not-circumcised can be taken as an iconographic distinction between the status of the depiction as adult or child: that circumcision is a sign of being adult. One particular text, from a stela of the 1st Intermediate Period, seems to indicate a mass circumcision as a public ceremony. This stela, of a certain Uha,⁶⁹ lines 4-5:

iw(=i) s^cb-k(w) ḥn^c s 120 nn sh^c im nn sh^cw im nn ʒh^c im nn ʒh^cw im, I was circumcised(?) together with 120 men; there was none who *sh^c*-ed there, and there was none who was *sh^c*-ed there; there was none who *ʒh^c*-ed there, and none who was *ʒh^c*-ed there.

The vocabulary is far from clear. *s^cb*, determined with a knife, is the word assumed to mean ‘circumcise’; *sh^c* and *ʒh^c* are normally taken to mean something like ‘strike’ and ‘scratch’. If the passage really refers to a circumcision ceremony, they probably refer to inappropriate behaviour by those participating or unintended consequences of the operation, but translation here is really a matter of guesswork. The evidence however suggests adolescent and not infant circumcision, when it could be associated with other markers of adulthood in dress.

Fitting these themes into a coming of age rite is slippery, although one may feel reasonably confident that coming of age for boys was marked by significant actions. For girls this is even more so. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever about female circumcision.⁷⁰ Reaching marriageable maturity is obviously significant for the girl, occasionally referred to for that reason, but I suspect that one should class marriage, of itself, as the coming-of-age rite for the girl: marriage as a rite of passage into full status.

Marriage

⁶⁴ II, 36-37.

⁶⁵ DE WIT 1972; FEUCHT 1995, 245-251; WESTENDORF 1975; PILLET 1952.

⁶⁶ MOUSSA and ALTENMÜLLER 1977, Taf. 24 and Abb. 10.

⁶⁷ See GRUNERT 2002.

⁶⁸ FITZENREITER 2006, I, 222-223.

⁶⁹ DUNHAM 1937, 102-4 and pl XXXII; TEETER 2003, 33-34.

⁷⁰ FEUCHT 2003, esp. 91-92, noting the first clear references in 2nd C. BC, and associating with reaching marriageable age.

There is something deeply odd about the way in which standard Egyptological literature can focus on the absence of evidence for a religious ceremony of marriage to imply that marriage in pharaonic Egypt somehow did not fit the modern category.⁷¹ Particular Western formalisations are absent: there is no sign of formal priestly management, or formal congregational ceremony, or formal legal registration, or written marriage contracts. Yet the recognisable institution of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are clearly central to Egyptian sociology.

Marriage consists of the man ‘founding (*grg*) a house’, ‘making (*iri*) a wife’; and for the woman, ‘entering’ (*ḥk*) the house of the man, and ‘living’ (*ḥmsi*) there, bringing her property with her. This is not some sort of hole-in-the-wall arrangement, but a public display. So in the Demotic Setna story, the seductress Tabubu refuses the offer of money (and privacy) in return for her favours, and insists on publicity and a written (marriage) contract.⁷² And also in the Setna story, the king’s daughter tells how:⁷³

I was taken as a wife to the house of Naneferkaptah [that night, and Pharaoh] sent me a present of silver and gold, and all Pharaoh’s household sent me presents. Naneferkaptah made holiday with me, and he entertained all Pharaoh’s household. He slept with me that night

When my time of purification came, I made no more purification. It was reported to Pharaoh, and his heart was very happy. Pharaoh had many things taken [...] and sent me presents of silver, gold and royal linen, all very beautiful. When my time of bearing came, I bore this boy who is before you, who was named Merib. He was entered in the register (*šc*) of the House of Life’.

Attempts to interpret love poetry as a specific part of a marriage ceremony, in the sense of *epithalamos*, are not convincing,⁷⁴ but we see conception as an occasion for present giving, as well as marriage itself as a major and public occasion.

We do not have rituals for building or inaugurating a private house (though we do, of course, very complex foundation rituals for a god’s house); nor do we have rituals for a wife’s procession to her new house (though we do, of course, for processions of goddess to her consort’s temple as a divine marriage. The journey of Hathor of Dendara to the temple of Horus of Edfu,⁷⁵ for the sacred marriage of the deities, is one of the great annual festivals of later periods, while the Festival of Opet, with its great procession from Karnak to Luxor, perhaps involving a sacred marriage, and the New Kingdom rituals of the God’s Wife of Amon, whatever these may have consisted of.

In his autobiography, from the beginning of the 18th Dynasty,⁷⁶ Ahmose son of Abana talks of beginning his military service, as replacement for his father; then, obscurely

I was a child (*šri*) who had not married (*iri ḥmt*); I slept in *smt šnw*; (then) when I had founded a household,

then of returning to service at a higher(?) level. There is an implication of a break; of a period for consummation. We do not find an emphasis on virginity in the textual data, although in a society where early marriage was encouraged for men, copulation

⁷¹ For an attempt to address structural variety, cf. GOODY 1983, esp. 6-33.

⁷² Setna I, 5.19-20; LICHTHEIM 1980, 135.

⁷³ Setna I, 3.6-8; translation after LICHTHEIM 1980, 128.

⁷⁴ FOX 1985, T230-233; LANDGRAFOVÁ and NAVRATILOVÁ 2009, 69-73.

⁷⁵ CAUVILLE 2002, 65-66, 108-121.

⁷⁶ SETHE 1906-1909, 2, 12-17.

for a male serves as a marker of adulthood: a scribal instruction urges the pupil “You are a person fit for writing, though you have not yet copulated.”⁷⁷

The point here is that we have evidence for actions, focus on the actions of marriage, but not the words or narrative of a ritual, where the general problem in the corpus of temple and tomb texts is that we have words, but much more difficulty in describing the actions. With birth, coming of age, marriage we have one sort of passage, and with death another, even if we assume parallels and interrelations between themes and performance.

Initiation

is then the area where the mortuary literature very clearly points to parallel non-mortuary rituals.⁷⁸ The clearest image of passage is seen in rituals where the dead obtain access by answering questions correctly at a series of doors: the ritual is one in which passage targets admission. The motif of ‘opening the doors of heaven’ is central both to access to the divine statue for daily cult and to passage to the other world after death,⁷⁹ from which—despite the use of the rubric “going out by day” as a sort of title of the Book of the Dead—there was explicitly no return for humans. The relationship between the question and answer spells of the Book of the Dead and priestly initiations was put into real focus by Merkelbach,⁸⁰ but the wider implications of this remain relatively unexplored.⁸¹

To say ‘priestly initiations’ is itself not entirely straightforward, since there is a distinction to be made between becoming a professional priest, about which there is late material, and required, at least purification, rituals for active participation in ritual. I mean here at least becoming a *wab*-priest, which involves ritual cleanliness, including depilation. The Ramesside Turin Indictment Papyrus accuses a *wab*-priest of the offence of ‘entering under the god’ when he had not spent enough days ‘drinking natron’.⁸² he had performed 7 days, leaving him 3 days short (10 days is the length of the Egyptian week). *wab*-priests were those who carried the god’s statue, including for oracles, and natron—a salt—was used for cleansing and purification. Ordinary workmen are shown acting as *wab*-priests, carrying the statue of the local god in weekly procession, for oracles, at Ramesside Deir el Medina. They are shown acting as priests.

A full investigation of the requirements and performance of what is meant by the Egyptian root *bsi*, ‘introduce’, ‘initiate’, ‘secret’ would be interesting, however thin the circumstantial detail.⁸³ Very high levels of physical and ritual purity were

⁷⁷ P. Lansing 2, 9; LICHTHEIM 1976, 169.

⁷⁸ WENTE 1982; FEDERN 1960, esp. 245, arguing (after Lepsius) that the Book of the Dead was, ‘in its essential character a book of practical instruction. Its aim was to inform the individual, intent on his spiritual welfare, a out what already on earth should be *known* and *prepared* by him for his death’, and p. 246 and 250 on the non-funerary nature of large sections of the Coffin Texts. His arguments do, however, go far beyond the explicitly initiatory nature of the material. For a survey of the interpretative problems see BAINES 1990, esp. 1-6.

⁷⁹ EYRE 2002, 60, 151.

⁸⁰ MERKELBACH 1968 and 1987.

⁸¹ VON LIEVEN 2012, 264. On interrogations for access see ASSMANN 2005, 128-134.

⁸² P.Turin 1887, rt. 1, 9-11; VERNUS 2003, 104-105.

⁸³ QUACK 2002, 96-98, 105.

required for participation in Egyptian cult,⁸⁴ marked by hieroglyphic inscriptions on temple doorways declaring that only the pure might pass into the cult areas behind. The wider theme of access is, however, a general one. Middle and New Kingdom court officials emphasise their free access to the palace, where normal introduction to the royal presence is described by the verb *stꜣ*, ‘drag’. The right to pass doorways and enter (*ꜥk*) is the mark of belonging, either socially⁸⁵ or ritually.⁸⁶ Passage to the next life can then be presented as a matter of access through a series of doorways. For instance, the Book of the Dead Spells 144-147⁸⁷ describe this passage to Osiris, requiring an esoteric knowledge of the guardian(s) of gates, for which the rubric of Spell 144 gives ritual instructions that essentially initiate the dead: it is to be recited over his image as well as written; offerings are to be made at each gate; and then it is erased for each gate after performance; the written roll is to be used unseen by anybody else; and the spell allows the movement of the dead in sky, earth and the other world. The rubric seems to describe a funerary recital, but in the following spells the deceased himself declares his knowledge of the necessary names. As so frequently, the format of the mortuary literature switches between a sort of initiation performed by the ritualist, as drama for the dead, and an initiation through knowledge performed by the dead himself.

In the most extreme examples such rituals takes the form of a sequence of questions and answers—as in the Coffin Text Spell 398⁸⁸ evoking esoteric mythological knowledge in the naming of the parts of the ferry-boat—which seem to imply parallels between craft guild initiations and cult initiation.⁸⁹ The interrogation invokes esoteric knowledge of a formal nature, implying formal preparation, and so potentially a withdrawal followed by performance to reintegration, structurally defining a rite of passage.⁹⁰ The most familiar initiatory spell in the Book of the Dead is then Chapter 125: the Judgement of the Dead, with its accompanying negative confession—list of denials of actions that appear more to be of a ritual or symbolic than moral content—and question and answer session of esoteric nature to allow passage:⁹¹

The correct procedure in this hall of Justice. One shall utter this spell pure and clean and clad in white garments and sandals, painted with black eye-paint and anointed with myrrh. There shall be offered to him meat and poultry, incense, bread, beer, and herbs when you have put this written procedure on a clean floor of ochre overlaid with earth upon which no swine or small cattle have trodden. As for him who makes this writing, he shall flourish and his children shall flourish, he shall not be in need, he shall be in the confidence of the king and his entourage, and there shall be given to him a *shens*-cake, a jug of beer, a *persen*-cake and a portion of meat from upon the altar of the Great God; he shall not be turned back from any gateway of the West, but shall be ushered in with the Kings

⁸⁴ QUACK 2005, esp. 64-5 and 72 on passages defining impurities that prevented admission to cult.

⁸⁵ QUIRKE 1990, 36-38, including servants.

⁸⁶ VON LIEVEN 2002, 52.

⁸⁷ ALLEN 1974, 120-139.

⁸⁸ WILLEMS 1996, 157-177 discusses the problem of locating this in a ritual performance.

⁸⁹ Cf. VON LIEVEN 2007.

⁹⁰ ASSMANN 2005, 131-134, 191, 352-355.

⁹¹ Translation quoted after FAULKNER 1985, 33-34. Cf. ALLEN 1974, 100-101.

of Upper Egypt and the Kings of Lower Egypt, and he shall be in the suite of Osiris. A matter a million times true.

Assmann⁹² examines death as itself a form of initiation, in which burial practices, mediated by knowledge and ritual, are presented in the form of passage to the forms and places of the other world through an initiatory model, corresponding to initiatory practice in this life, where initiation in this life is presented as a passage through death and rebirth. He stresses⁹³ a close relationship between ‘the mystery of death and the mystery of cult and the holy’, and emphasises a specific relationship to what is known of priestly initiation, although it might be more accurate to describe this as a wider relationship with participation in cult. Willems, in contrast, has taken a more skeptical view, emphasizing the element of ritual drama in key ritual, rather than that of initiation proper.⁹⁴ The two central themes in such ritual are, however, those of the physical and spiritual purity of the participant,⁹⁵ and of his ritual knowledge.

The relationship between specialist education and initiation into priestly knowledge seems clear in the demotic Book of Thoth, surviving only in copies of the Roman Period,⁹⁶ as part of what Assmann has described as a Late Period ‘codification of knowledge’.⁹⁷ That book takes the format of a discourse—questions and answers both ways—between a *mr-rh* ‘overseer of knowledge’ and a deity. It involves extensive knowledge about the underworld, and Jasnow and Zauzich stress the interaction between knowledge of this life and the other is for the advantage of the living, and the vision of rebirth is ‘a tool of the living’ as characteristic of initiation.⁹⁸

At a more ordinary level, however, the early Ramesside Maxims of Ani make clear reference to participation in cult, in a way that implies communal and group participation:⁹⁹

Perform the festival of your god,
and repeat it at its time.
God is angry when he is neglected.
Put up witnesses after you have offered,
on the first occasion of doing it.
One comes to seek your contribution(?),
Give it, to cause that you go down in the roll.
When the time has come, one seeks your receipt,
in order to extol his (the god’s) power.
Song, dance and incense are his foods.
Receiving adoration is his wealth.
The god does it to magnify his name,
but man it the one who is who is inebriated.

⁹² ASSMANN 1983 re-presented in ASSMANN 2004, 135-156; ASSMANN 2005, esp. 155-158, 200-208, 400-401; QUACK, 2002; VON LIEVEN 2002.

⁹³ 2005, 206.

⁹⁴ WILLEMS 1996, 279-283.

⁹⁵ GEE 1998; QUACK, 2002.

⁹⁶ JASNOW and ZAUZICH 2005, 54-56 (19. Initiation and Mysticism) and 61-65 (20. Knowledge), and 54, n. 157 for a survey of previous survey of secondary literature

⁹⁷ ASSMANN 1992, 12-13.

⁹⁸ JASNOW and ZAUZICH 2005, 59, arguing that post-Ramesside initiation texts from Karnak imply initiation in order to Mysteries of Mut and Khonsu and then Amon.

⁹⁹ Ani 3, 3-9 = P. Boulaq IV, 16, 3-9 = QUACK 1994, 90-91, and cf. also 7, about 12-18 = P. Boulaq IV, 20, 12-18 = QUACK 1994, 108-109.

Ramesside Deir el Medina (like Amarna) has numerous small cult chapels, apparently the focus of individual groups of worshippers and celebrants, and not the community as a whole. The context is the same as similar to that seen in the later regulations of cult guilds quoted above, characterised by professional association and mutual self-help, focussed on regular cult performance on the festival days of the god, including the bringing (and recording) of contributions for the 'drinking' sessions. This is the context where one can look initiation as a rite of passage into religious and craft societies.

Conclusion

Behind the analysis of a ritual as a rite of practice lies at least the implicit assumption that the performance itself is an effective mediator of a change of status, even if is more participatory than specifically causal. In the Egyptian material, performance—both recitation and dramatic—takes precedence over any form of dogma, in a mobilisation of the metaphysical world in which the modern categories of religion and magic are wholly integrated. There is no distinction between religion and magic in their practice; their techniques are not distinctive, their rituals have the same formats, and their performance is regularly and explicitly found effective in practice. The contents of individual rituals clearly follow the practice of *bricolage*, and not systematic ordering by defined category, but the performance structure of a rite of passage provides a common frame for the ritual ordering.

These themes are clear in the mass of mortuary and temple-based ritual that survives from Egypt. There is less clarity about rituals for the mediation of key lifetime passage of status—the rituals of life—where direct evidence is very limited. The problem then lies in the extent to which in particular the mortuary rituals can be taken as evidence for parallel lifetime rituals. The argument lies very largely in the view taken of the extent of integration or separation between the secular and the religious at different periods of Egyptian history. The clearest suggestion that one should assume the integration was in practice very deep lies in the evident integration between religion and magic in general, and the depth of penetration of magic into ordinary life. The view taken here is that one can take a strongly positive view of the potential of funerary and temple-based rituals as an indication of the nature of more common lifetime practices that lie outside the normal corpus of what survives in the textual record.

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