From Pyramid to Coffin Texts

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As difficult as it is to interpret modern religions, and try to grasp the nuances and ambiguities that are inherent within sacred symbols and texts, it is almost impossible to truly understand ancient religions. Even the fragments that have been discovered are simply the traces that remain of an invisible feature of a civilization. In Ancient Egypt, religion was hardly an aspect of society, inasmuch as it was the backbone of every element of the culture. Temples and tombs were the largest pieces of monumental architecture, the king was ruler based on his own divinity, and the economy of the state centered on him and his temples. To ‘be religious’ is a concept that the Egyptians would have been unable to grasp. The world they lived in was imbued with gods on every level. They did not even have a word for religion, so inherent was the concept. The written traces that do remain are largely in the form of tombs and temples. Once funerary texts come into play, we can begin to see the practices and myths they believed in, even if we cannot truly grasp their importance. These texts begin in the Old Kingdom pyramids, eventually becoming widely used in the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom in the form of the Coffin Texts. The texts, their context, the characters themselves, and their shift in form from period to period reveal a great deal about the people who engraved them, and the changes that occurred in their world, radically altering their ideology.

Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts, as we shall see, are very different in their social and political sphere, but their primary purpose is the same. These texts were the ‘spells’ for “the precise phrasing by which a dead person could be made into an eternally rejuvenated being” (Forman and Quirke 1996, p.7). Without these spells, almost certainly spoken in previous periods for which no texts are recorded, the soul would not be prepared to enter the heavens.
The Egyptian concept of death and the spirit is fairly complicated. The soul, as we would think of it, was split into two parts. One part was the ‘ka’, a kind of ‘life force’, without which a being was devoid of life – as oppose to simply being dead. The ‘ba’ was the personality. At death, the two were split, and in order to have an afterlife, the two must be rejoined. One major element of the texts was to provide instruction for the joining of the two after death. These aspects became to be imbued with the personalities of Osiris and Horus: the lord of the underworld that must be reborn, and the king of the day, the personality of the sun. In the texts the deceased strive to become the reborn Osiris (Allen 2005, pp. 7-8). Life and death were part of the cyclical nature of the world, the ‘cosmos’ that framed the entire Egyptian civilization. It was these rites that guaranteed the deceased’s entrance into this cycle. The ‘exact mimesis’ of ritual was a large part of Egyptian belief (Assman 2002, p. 72). The fact that the texts are recorded provides the permanency and assurance that they cannot be lost or forgotten, and the cycle will continue. This idea is also probably behind the reason for why Middle Egyptian is continued as the religious language throughout the history of Egypt, while the spoken and bureaucratic language continues to change (Assman 2002, p. 70). It is apparent that part of the ‘magic’ of the texts was the very characters with which they were written, what they referred to as the ‘the words of the gods’: hieroglyphs (Wilson 2003, p. 63).

Hieroglyphs were the sacred text in Egypt, reserved for temples and tombs, while hieratic, a more common, cursive text, was used for secular purposes. The Ancient Egyptians regarded these words as having a life force of their own, and were able to “embody the essence of their object” (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 10). The texts are activated by ritual to the point of having the ‘opening of the mouth’ ceremony performed on each sign and image. With this they are able to resurrect the deceased (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 21). Images and words that spell
out protection for the body were actually believed to come alive and defend the dead; lists of offerings of food were able to provide the actual nourishment (Wilson 2003, p. 63). The signs themselves, not only the context of what they represented were magic and infused with the force of the gods. This idea even frightened the Egyptians to a certain extent, and in the pyramids of the Fifth Dynasty rulers, such as in that of Pepi I, some of the signs have been mutilated, their throats cut or their legs missing, for fear that they might actually harm the dead (Wilson 2003, p. 71). This idea continued, and can also be seen in the coffin of the priest Sesenebnef, where the hieroglyphs are not only mutilated, but placed on the outside of the coffin, keeping them away from the body (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 102). The hieroglyphs permanence in stone, no matter what occurred outside with the living, was all that immortality required, and this may be one of the reasons that Pyramid Texts began in the first place.

Pyramid Texts first arose in the pyramid of the Pharaoh Unas in the Fifth Dynasty during the period referred to as the ‘Old Kingdom’. Though none of the pyramids include exactly the same text, the themes and general purpose remain the same (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 52;63). How or why these texts emerged is a mystery, though Quirke brings up an interesting point. The texts of Unas appear about two-hundred years after the great pyramids of Giza, and “perhaps the experience of witnessing the decline of even the most substantial cult complexes provided one among the many factors that led to the new practice of recording funerary texts for eternity” (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 57). In the Old Kingdom, the cult of the king was the primary focus of all life, and for a few generations at least, there would be a thriving pyramid economy to provide for him. Inevitably, however, the population would have to move on to a new king, and so Unas devised a method of continuing the cult after all those who remembered him had died. In
this manner, his texts provide us with information about the rites and ceremonies that took place at the mummification and burial, as they would be magically repeated for all time.

Allen explains that there are three main genres of Pyramid Texts: “the Offering and Insignia Rituals, the Resurrection Ritual, and the Morning Ritual” (Allen 2005, p. 5). Many of these rites focus on the myth of Osiris, Horus and Seth, and according to Malek, it is this doctrine that is the most important aspect of the Pyramid Texts (Malek 2003, p. 102). In the Offering Ritual, the offer is often referred to as ‘Horus’s eye’, a reference to the tearing out of Horus’ eye by Seth, which was later restored. Not only does this bring up the image of the sun setting and rising, but also implies that the offering will be refreshed for all time (Allen 2005, p. 6). In the Resurrection Ritual, Unas becomes an Osiris:

Horus, this Osiris here is your father, whom you have made revive and live:
He will live and this Unis will live, he will not die and this Unis will not die,
He will not perish and this Unis will not perish.

(PT 152 in Allen 2005, p. 36)

The connection of the king with Osiris and Horus constantly refers to the image of the sun. The sun sets and rises, and as the dead is connected with Horus, he is passed to the sun, to be carried into the afterlife as Osiris, where he will rise again. This reinforces the cyclical ideology inherent in Egyptian religion. In connecting the dead to Osiris and Horus, not only is the dead connected to resurrection, but also to the idea of unification – the basis on which the idea of kingship at this time is based.

The beginning of the Old Kingdom is marked by the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, united as the ‘Two Lands’. It is at this time that Lower Egypt becomes the dominant land, and Egypt comes under the rule of a single king with a capital at Memphis (Kamil 1996, p. 36).
The myth of Osiris and Horus versus Seth may be a reflection of this history. This argument is made stronger by the fact that the most famous representation of the unification is that of the ‘Narmer Palette’, in which the king is joined by Horus, the victor over Seth - the murderer of Osiris (Kamil 1996, p. 28). A great king of order is slain by chaos, but is eventually also overthrown by the son who steps up to become the new king. To conclude this myth, Osiris is brought back to life, and Geb makes Horus the ruler of the two lands, showing that unification was established by the gods (Assman 2002, p. 42). In this manner, order over chaos is congruous to life after death, but neither could exist without the other. This may also explain the ideology of the kingship of the Old Kingdom. The king is the representation of order, the embodiment of the god Horus who will rise after death to join the gods as Osiris. The unification and order of the rule of Egypt must be maintained in order for the state religion to remain. Towards the end of the Old Kingdom, however, this form of state begins to break down, and with this breakdown, so does the purely royal aspect of the Pyramid Texts.

Towards the end of the Sixth Dynasty, the nomarchs, provincial governors, began taking up residence in their provinces. They are apparently no longer content living within the capital near the residence of the king. It was at this time that the centralized state broke down. The Lower Egypt capital was moved to Thebes, while an entirely new group of rulers emerged at Herakleopolis (Seidlmayer 2003, p. 109). The unrest at this time is made apparent in the King-Lists, where it is stated that seventy kings ruled for seventy days in the Seventh Dynasty – simply a play on words to show how they are unable to tell who was king (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 81). This is also clear in the tomb of nomarchs such as Ankhtifi, who claims to be a “hero without peer”, no longer respecting the domination of the king (Seidlmayer 2003, p. 119). Throughout the Old Kingdom the general population believed that upon their death their spirits
would live on in the ‘Beautiful West’, while the king alone was raised to immortality.\(^1\) As the unification of the state breaks up however, and more than one ruler is able to exist, the grant of immortality is no longer reserved for a single person. Rulers that were not related to each other by blood, men who were never considered to be the lineal descendant of Horus, took power. As the population saw these men step up and claim eternal life, the idea began to spread, the ideology of the royal Pyramid Texts became public – or at least open to those who could afford to have the spells and formulae once reserved for the king recorded in what would come to be known as the ‘Coffin Texts’.

For the most part, as has already been discussed, the Coffin Texts were a continuation of the Pyramid Texts, but with personal additions (Hornung 1999, p. 9). For instance, a coffin of a man named Ima includes excerpts from the pyramids of Unas and Pepy II, with a personal liturgy about his own rise as Osiris (Forman and Quirke 1996, pp. 76-77). However, other changes were also required to deal with personal and individual concerns – in itself a fundamental shift in ideology. Protective texts against earthly demons of chaos became common. These were almost certainly a reaction to the upheavals and disorder present in the First Intermediate Period (Assman 2002, p. 168). Judgment of the dead to decide if they are worthy begins to come into play in this period, continuing to develop until its height in the New Kingdom Book of Coming Forth by Day. This idea that seems to have developed out of a trial between Osiris, Horus and Seth, and each person must now also find “vindication after death to follow Osiris into the realm of immortality” (Assman 2002, p.159). This can be seen as illustrated in ‘Spell 9’ of the Coffin Texts:

Hail to you, magistrates of the gods! N is vindicated before you on this day,

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\(^1\) This idea seems to have begun very early on in the history of Egypt, and can be seen in the position of bodies in the burials at Badari and Naqada as they face towards the Western Horizon (Kamil 1996; 31-32).
Even as Horus was vindicated against his foes on that day of accession.

(In Faulkner 2004, p. 4)

The public cannot hope to enter the afterlife based on their divine right, and now must prove their worth.

The very fact that the coffin is the new medium says a lot about the period. Moving from monumental architecture to a more affordable burial often made of wood, makes such rites much more accessible (Forman and Quirke 1996, p. 67). New texts inserted into the formulae, often added in red in a script that more people could read, explain aspects of the texts making the rites more comprehensible to the deceased, who would not have had lector priests to attend their tombs each day to perform the rituals (Assman 2002, p. 89). The texts referred to as the ‘Book of Two Ways’ have the same purpose of making the afterlife accessible to everybody, offering a guide and map for the layout of the underworld (Hornung 1999, p. 11). Finally, now that they are all able to rise, there are even spells for reconnecting friends and families in the afterlife, as seen in ‘spell 146’:

See, N goes down into the sky, he goes down into the earth, he goes down into the waters seeking his family, seeking his father and mother, seeking his children and brethren, seeking his loved ones, seeking his friends, seeking his associates and his servants who worked for N on earth.

(Faulkner 2004, p. 123)

This illustrates the strengthening of family bonds and an ideology centered on household and personal concerns rather than the state and the king’s eternal identity. Notice, for instance, that he does not seek his lord or his king. The entire concept of the state religion is not only fundamentally altered, but ignored.
In looking only at the most basic concepts within these two aspects of Egyptian religion, Pyramid and Coffin Texts, it is obvious that the Egyptian beliefs have only been brushed upon. Every feature of these texts provides insight into an incredible, otherwise invisible world, where everything is significant. The lives of the Ancient Egyptians and the ideology of their religion were entwined. The political system would not have survived without the population’s deep seated belief that they were working towards their king’s ascension. This is made clear by the vast changes that occur once this belief becomes unstable. The cyclical nature of life and all the processes that occur within it, and a need for balance and order, are also all illustrated within these texts. The texts shift according to historical events, and with it comes a peoples struggle to make sense of the chaos in their lives. The texts provide a window into the minds of the Egyptians, and as such are a crucial part of our understanding – yet they are still only fragments of a larger picture that will always remain in shadow.
Bibliography


