The value of the 'Book of the Dead' for understanding identity in Ancient Egypt

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The Books of the Dead is the name given to a 'designation of a group of mortuary spells' (Hornung and Lorton, 1999:13). These constitute over 200 papyrus sheets of texts and vignettes on the walls of tombs and coffins (Faulkner, 1985:11). Translated literally as *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (Taylor, 2010:55), the funerary texts associated were generally used only from the beginning of the New Kingdom (1550 BCE) and replicates of early funerary texts such as the Pyramid Texts in the Old Kingdom and the Coffin Texts in the Middle Kingdom (Allen, 1974:2). The focus of this assessment will concern the Book of the Dead texts that existed during the New Kingdom and therefore the identity within this time period of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation. Using several anthropological frameworks of identity, it will be demonstrated that the texts found are crucial archaeological evidence that enable modern readers to understand a fluid concept of identity during this time.

Early interpretations of the Book of the Dead texts were often restricted by western perceptions of the soul and the afterlife. General belief saw the texts to be an equivalent of current religious books, for instance the Bible and Qur'an (Faulkner, 1994:13), before it was understood to be a funerary rite. As these texts, alongside other funerary objects and tombs, have survived the archaeological record, there is a commonly held belief that the Ancient Egyptians were 'obsessed' with the dead (Morales-Correa, 2015) rather than seeing its relevance as a means to understanding Egyptian beliefs about life, society, and identity. Ultimately, however, there exists a separate meaning and identity behind Egyptian beliefs of the afterlife that have increased the difficultly of understanding identity. Consequently, a detached approach to one's own beliefs and influences must be taken to most adequately understand the meaning behind the Book of the Dead texts.

What is Identity?

There are many different theories on what identity is and how it is constructed. However, it is necessary to apply theoretical frameworks to acquire an unbiased understanding. This complex notion of identity is not only hard to define, but it is particularly difficult to reconstruct past identities such as those in Ancient Egypt. Most widely accepted by theorists is that 'identity' is a clear social construct. In understanding identity, we are conceptualising societal beliefs.

The Archaeology of Identity has been developing alongside cognate disciplines (predominantly influenced by changing anthropological theory) over the latter half of the twentieth-century. Early archaeology concentrated particularly on culture rather than the individuals; seeing culture as a person in itself (Diaz-Andreu, 2005:3). Traditionally, identity was intrinsically linked with existing ethnic groups and simplified to homogenous groups with shared cultural practices (Lucy, 2005:86). Diaz-Andreu, (2005:2) argues that 'identities are constructed through interaction between people, and the process by which we acquire and maintain our identities requires choice and agency'; clearly a difficult area to reconstruct through archaeological evidence. However, anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) argue for an inherent link between societies and the individuals within them. Bourdieu presents a notion of social practices that are unspoken, yet important, contextual factors. His idea of habitus – 'a system of structure, structuring dispositions…which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions' (Scott and Marshall, 1998) - is that individuals are bound to act in ways that are socially determined. Consequently, it is important to understand identity as the relation that individuals have with the institutions and structures within their social culture rather than merely the unique personality and life history of individuals. Thus it is essential to assess the Book of the Dead texts on their relevance in understanding Ancient Egyptian societal structures and beliefs when considering identity.

Whose Identity?

Although many of the found texts of the Book of the Dead are personalised for individuals, notably the texts belonging to Ani, these follow much of the same spells and pathways found in other texts. As Faulkner (1985:11) states 'if the prospective owner…was wealthy and his death was not untimely he would commission an expert scribe to write the text for him and it would consist of his own personal choice of chapters'. Conversely, their personalisation for high-paying members of the elite is not specific enough in detail regarding the paying individual to show

personal identities - particularly as they were meant to emulate a certain societal expectation of the trials of the afterlife. The personalisation was more limited for lower status purchasers. The 'less fortunate had…a ready written text in which spaces [have] been left for the insertion of the name and titles of the buyer' (Faulkner, 1985:11). Many references found in tomb placements suggests that these Books of the Dead were a 'canon' like the Bible; everyone (in educated society) knew about them and accepted them as a part of the death process even though not all could afford to have one. Gee (2010) argues that the texts had a function of uniting this social group in a 'canon' of beliefs. The similarity to the language of texts in other religions appear to serve the same function cross-culturally. The aim appears to be consolatory, giving people hope that their life is meaningful in the face of the death.

With regards to shared identity, a concern is the extensive time period that Ancient Egypt stretched across (6000-300 BCE). This produces an analytical issue as identity is 'subject to persisting change' (Diaz-Andreu, 2005:2) rather than a static concept. Furthermore, the identity constructed through the texts are for the elites; although, it should be acknowledged that by the New Kingdom, passage to the afterlife extended beyond the pharaohs to anyone who could afford the high price of the texts. Therefore, despite little in-depth research into the social status of the owners of found texts, 'it is clear that most owners came from the upper strata of society' (Taylor, 2010:62). Of the found texts, the majority appear to been produced for male buyers; particularly prior to the third intermediate period (Taylor, 2010:63) and wives were sometimes depicted alongside their husbands in vignettes, such as Tutu's inclusion in Ani's Book of the Dead. Herein lies an insight into the identity of Egyptian women (an area of little importance in traditional archaeology) suggesting women were considered a husband's accessory rather than a being in their own right.

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage have remained a constant element in the construction of identity throughout the vast majority of societies. A common framework of a rite of passage was first expressed by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909). This contains three stages; severance where the individual is detached from their previous point, transition as the between the states and incorporation when the individual entering the new state.

The journey through the afterlife, as seen in the texts, clearly parallels this framework; death acting as severance, transition through the afterlife and finally incorporation into the world of immortality in the realm of Osiris (David, 2002:160-161). This idea of transitions may be influenced by the short lifespan found in Egypt, allowing for many states of being; childhood, young adult, adult and death. The stages of the Book enact the stages of crossover into the Afterlife. This seems to be a more strongly narrative version of human experience than simply having tomb depositions of belongings and tomb wall paintings; indicating the importance of this text-based evidence over the physical objects remaining. A papyrus scroll has the continuity of a narrative that is organised into stages according to the passage of time (which is the foundation of narrative literature as experiences over time) or according to movement from place to place, for example through walls, down to the Underworld and eventually to the river lands that represent a sort of paradise after life.

In having taken a rite of passage, individuals 'achieve' a state of being. This suggests that Egyptians saw the afterlife and those who became immortal as 'deserving' of their place rather than simply passing on after death.

Myth and Identity

The texts are clearly more developed in their details than earlier Pyramid and Coffin texts. These texts have a greater use of myths of Ra, the Sun God, Osiris and the Underworld. There are also supplementary sources that confirm from temple finds that this elite class did adopt these myths as part of their ritual practice. A myth is a much stronger way of making a group cultural identity than individual spells and rituals - rather than being an immediate spell to ward off danger, a myth provides a full explanation of what seems to be a random, unfair world and gives it a permanent, transcendent meaning.

The anthropologist Malinowski's functionalist idea of the social function of myth to justify the social order is a strong explanatory model for why the privileged Egyptians who served as priests and officials would be keen to align themselves with religious myths. Malinowski (1926) argues that myths exist to justify rituals by giving explanations to their origins; thus supporting religious elite's social order through the myth of how creation is ordered by Ra and death by Osiris and how the cosmos is a place in which the deceased elite official clearly deserved his good life on

Earth and an even better Afterlife Indeed, religion in Ancient Egypt has order been perceived as a 'powerful legitimation of king and elite in their task of preserving order' (Dorman, n.d.).

Communication

For many, the theory of identity is created through people's words and actions. Language is intrinsic to understanding these identity concepts. Identity within material archaeology is made evident through the use of a number of markers ranging from dress to behaviour to choice of space. The effects of which are dependent upon the recognition gained from other social beings. Language is another example of this marker. Through the Egyptian papyrus, there is direct evidence of how ancient people thought. Compared to archaeology of identity which is based on interpretations of objects in a burial tomb complex, this evidence appears much more inferential and weaker than the textual based. The detailed written evidence of the pictures and texts of the Book of the Dead, that were purchased deliberately and placed in with the dead person, provides a stronger body of evidence through the markers of language, dress, behaviour that is recognized by other social beings in that period in Egypt than any amount of artefacts in a tomb burial. The language enacted from the texts of the Book of the Dead can be analysed acutely and are strongly linked with the idea of control and empowerment.

In terms of discourse analysis, spells can be described as a type of performative utterance. Speech acts theory proposes performative utterances are not simply describing a given realty but are changing the described social reality (Urmson and Sbisa, 1975). For example, a particular formula can be used for enactment purposes such as verbs like 'I command' seen in spell 27 (Taylor, 2010:160) or heightened epithets, maybe to flatter a god 'Homage to you, Osiris, Lord of eternity, King of the gods' (Budge 1960). These persuasive devices are there to create a new better situation than the actual situation of death and decay- a triumph of word or 'spirit' over the everyday world of nature.

A key example of performance utterance is the many examples of spells meant to transform the deceased into alternate, animal forms. These forms are symbolic of 'liberation from human limitations'. The accompanying vignette can be perceived as a form of performance utterance in itself (Wyatt, 2001:298).

'I am a long-lived snake; I pass the night and am reborn every day. I am a snake which is in the limits of the earth; I pass the night and am reborn, renewed and rejuvenated every day' (Transformation spell into a snake citied in Faulkner, 1985)

Empowerment

This idea of empowerment is a recurring theme throughout the Book of the Dead. The texts that were procured by the individuals were meant to protect them from many of the unearthly and dangerous aspects in their journey through the afterlife. Without these texts, it was not certain that a person would be able to pass through unscathed. One failure would result in the end of a person's journey and they would not be able to pass onto the immortal world. Whether this failure was due to a 'magical' creature or to being devoured by Ammit through the heart's weighing in the Hall of Maat.

By procuring these texts, Egyptians were ensuring that they had admission to the afterlife. Egyptians did not, it appears, have to be good. They could simply use the texts to 'cheat' their way through. Egyptians believed that by stating these spells for transformation and protection purposes, they could defeat the fears of the dangers in the unknown. For example, the spells empowering individuals to breathe and drink such as Spell 59:

'O you sycomore of the sky, may there be given to me the air which is in it, for I am he who sought out that throne in the midst of Wenu [Hermopolis]. I have guarded this egg of the Great Cackler. If it grows, I grow; if it lives, I life; if it breathes air, I breathe air. (Taylor, 2010: 176*)*

One of the most notable spells to do this was Spell 27 'for not permitting a man's heart to be taken from him in the realm of the dead';

'Obey me, my heart, I am your lord, you are in my body, you do not oppose me, I command you to obey me in the god's domain' (Taylor, 2010:160)

The control of the heart can be interpreted as relation to the weighing against the feather. By using a spell on the heart, the individual almost 'tricks' the judgement by ensuring that their negative qualities are not revealed through the heart.

This idea of empowerment is extremely important to constructing identity. The relationship between power and identity is a well-developed concept in a range of social disciplines. Within

Ancient Egypt, this is integral to the elite's identity that they could purchase power in the form of acquiring texts for the afterlife. The elite could, through spells and incantations, neutralize their fear of death. They were in control of their afterlife, thus overcoming the terror of death and the sense of futility that their life comes to an end with no further meaning.

Judgement and Confession

A common aspect of many religious beliefs throughout the world is the concept of judgement in the afterlife in order to proceed. The Negative Confession involves Forty-two Assessors of the dead where the individual must deny having committed a specific sin to each (Faulkner, 1985:28). These denials are interpreted as relieving the deceased of their 'spiritual baggage' (Quirke, 1992:162). It can be compared with the Ten Commandments found in Judaeo-Christian scriptures and thus has often been seen as a 'confession' rather than a denial at surface value. For example:

Book of the Dead: "I have not committed adultery, I have not lain with men."
Exodus 20:14: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Book of the Dead: "I have not stolen."
Exodus 20:15: "Thou shalt not steal."

However, 'specific links to later Christian and Muslim beliefs remain uncertain' (Quirke, 2013:vii). Although there is no direct causal link, it can be argued that there is a relation to universal human psychology that societies try to suggest that social rules are transcendent and of eternal significance rather than just convenient rules for running a society.

Those who believe that this is a direct influence may then interpret the Negative Confessions as Ancient Egyptian beliefs on what is expected of a 'good' and moral individual. However, this perception relies on a modern influence of afterlife beliefs rather than taking an impartial approach. Nowhere in the Negative Confessions can we concretely conclude that this is the expectation of what was expected of Egyptians during this time period. Furthermore, it would rule out anyone who had committed the many mentioned sins.

The term 'confession' is very appropriate. Although these appear as statements of never committing the sin, it is more likely that this is a way of washing away previous sins committed.

This idea of a confession is strengthened by a following scene in the Hall of Two Maats in Spell 125, where the individual states that they are 'free of every sin' (Taylor, 2010:206) suggesting that they have cleansed themselves during the previous encounter.

In this sense, it could be argued that these are linked to Egyptian standards but allowed for individuals to still pass on without having to have been 'pure'. The weighing of the heart in which the Deceased is found to have a led a virtuous life, was actually a positive appraisal that the relatives had bought as a ready-to-wear accessory to go in the tomb and bore no necessary relation to the actuality of the Deceased life. This does not negate the possibility that the symbolic ritual of the weighing of the heart was a way of giving to this stratum of Egyptian society the positive value of soul-based religion described here as reason for religious beliefs in a soul.

Although this is not necessarily a true reflection of the individual, it is an insight into the way at least one part of Egyptian society began to think of cosmology – through having meaning for the individual life and possible forgiveness for mistakes through a ritual confession. This is not a sense of the interior soul and self-examination of Christianity but it is a far more complex idea of Selfhood than external public ritual.

Conclusion

The texts of the Book of the Dead may have some limitations aiding our conceptualisation of Ancient Egyptian identity through issues of interpretation and restrictions in the material record. However, many of the texts are extremely valuable to our understanding of Ancient Egyptian identity in the New Kingdom. Texts like these are an integral part of communicating identity and beliefs. The Book of the Dead texts are therefore an important written historical document that reveals an evidence-based insight into how the literate high-caste Egyptian society thought of themselves and their life experiences. Anthropological theory provides a critical framework that can be applied to these texts and other archaeological evidence, ensuring relevant and developed interpretations. Through this application, it can be seen that the texts are essential in aiding our conceptualization of Ancient Egyptian structures, religious institutions, and societal beliefs. It is these areas that are imperative to understanding identity. Subsequently the Book of the Dead texts are an instrumental asset to archaeology when reconstructing Ancient Egyptian identity.

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