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Significance of identity, individuality & ideology in Old Kingdom tomb iconography

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Summary

This thesis examines Egypt's Old Kingdom Elite Tomb Iconography with a view to finding the essential common cultural features which are present therein. The analysis is contained in the first three parts of this four-part thesis including the introductory remarks.

The introduction describes the different approaches to interpreting ancient Egyptian funerary art especially in the context of the living and the aspirations of the dead.

Part 1

Chapter 1 deals with issues of methodology, examines the emic (elites' expression of their culture) and etic (modern methods of cultural understanding) meanings revealed in the iconography, particularly using the methods of Wittgenstein as extended by Van Walsem. Wittgenstein acknowledges the problems of intention and proposes language games to understand meaning in a particular context. Van Walsem supports this approach but he concentrates on the issues of the literal/symbolic meanings of an artifact and objectively questions if there is a single central meaning to elite Old Kingdom iconography. These two methods are extended with research assumptions about human behaviour in a funeral context.

Ancient Egyptian Iconography is characterized by the abundance of accumulated yet piecemeal knowledge, which complicates a comprehensive understanding of universal cultural features; chapters 2 to 4 explore ways of avoiding this problem by looking for underlying and recurring common cultural features - the core elements of the iconography.

Chapter 2 examines the effect on elite tomb iconography of tangible features, e.g. location, shape, size, architectural progression as well as spatial context, and the influence of the possible role/interactions of both the tomb-owners and the (anonymous) tomb artists.

Chapter 3 examines intangible cultural issues pertaining to the organizational and behavioural aspects of ancient Egyptian culture. However at the outset, it is recognised that culture is never static, the iconography proves this point: despite an initial impression of consistency, all tomb decoration is different. Society tends to embrace scenarios involving merely gradual change because of human inertia and ability to cope - small and measured adjustment to the riggings are constantly being made which in the grand scheme of things are easily lost, and this is why apparent consistency is a mirage. Change then is endemic in culture and an explanation is called for.

Cultural change might be explained by theories about chaos and thermodynamic entropy, where energy states are always changing and subject to decline without additional external energy, leading to unpredictable results. In entropy we can notice the breaking of rules and the disruption of order. In this sense entropy becomes the synonym of change. This is the reason why entropy has a lot in common with cultural change as envisaged in ancient Egyptian iconography. Entropy, after all, is nothing but the constant departure from schemes, the leaving behind of conventions, the search for originality, and the destruction of stereotypes - which is an indicator of why and how things change. Accordingly the spread of aesthetic values and the expansion of art's domain open a vista onto the new aspects of the reality of cultural change, which can be on a grand level, adopted by society in general or at an individualistic idiosyncratic level.

The various ways of transmitting cultural meaning and the necessity for decoration are then explored, a crucial element of which is that the cultural meanings communicated by tomb art reflect the identity and ideology of the Old Kingdom elite. This transmission also involves the study of symbols as elements of communicative behaviour which demands an audience, to whom a specific presentation of the tomb-owner can be communicated via image, making the monumental tomb itself the equivalent of a cultural symbol. The meaning(s) of the iconography (partially indicated by its inscribed text) were investigated using modern academic methods for symbol and language analysis, both in terms of the situational context and the relationships between the speaker and the spoken to. The question as to what drives this communicative behaviour is then tied to the need for posthumous remembrance as an essential aspect of eliteness and recourse is made to the different methods used (biographical inscriptions, appeals to the living, and threat formulae). However this necessitates the cooperation of the living, which cooperation can only be on the basis of mutual welfare. The extent to which the two primary religious concepts of Ka and Ma'at impinge on this notion of mutual welfare are also looked at.

Chapter 4 is concerned with characterizing those universal cultural features which are now apparent- those based on the dictates of practical life as determined by nature and those determined by the relevant social and moral laws, as observed in the communication between the living and the past generations, in terms of the iconography, reflecting domination and shared fundamental values. The resulting features are termed the cultural generics, these being identity, individuality, and ideology based on the need for commemoration of the dead. Each of these is explored in depth with many Old Kingdom egyptological examples.

Part 2

Contains three case studies, which prove the generics' influence.

Chapter 5 describes the selection criteria for the three case study motifs. Evidence for the ancient Egyptian's lives and beliefs is mostly based on funerary remains. The tombs' cult chapels depict religious funerary rituals and their participants, who play relatively fixed choreographed roles. The other (non-cult chapel) walls show secular activities during the entire human lifespan and less religious restrictions allow more individual self-expression in behaviour. Themes for revealing their mindset included:

1. The tomb-owner's social rank and the number/composition of persons with duty relationships towards him.
2. Active/passive participation by the tomb-owner in communal acts.
3. Members of his family and community in commemoration activities.
4. Inclusion of many worldly elevated status goods required in the hereafter.
5. Indications of influences like identity, ideology, and individuality.

Such considerations lead to case studies of the following three motifs:

- Carrying-Chair
- Officials' Records (Taking Account)
- Mourning

Chapter 6 examines the Carrying-Chair motifs.

Wood easily perishes and no complete carrying-chair has survived (although Hetepheres's chair's remains provide some details), plus only a small unrepresentative number of the original carrying-chair motifs may be known today: resulting in some uncertainty about them.

Our grandparents and modern societies have different mindsets, e.g. about morals, obligations, class, etc. Therefore even if a modern person can accurately translate the text and identify objects/actions of the ancient Egyptians, the ancient and modern perceptions and meaning(s) may differ.

Status in the form of age veneration (e.g. village elders' experience), kinship structure as in feudal aristocracies and wealth as with modern social classes, is common to most societies and is often expressed in material objects. The possession of an independent means of transport (requiring scarce and valuable resources like wood) suggests comfort, wealth and elite status, and possibly the carrying-chair's main meaning for the ancient Egyptians.

Depicting a carrying-chair in a funerary motif is thus a pointer to the cultural generics and may be an implied hope for an equivalent status in the afterlife.

Chapter 7 examines the Officials' Records (Taking Account) motifs.

The "taking account" motif directly relates to the society's developing culture and how its members communicate with each other, at a time of changing from primary oral to written modes due to the increasing societal complexity, e.g. organization and administration needs for the stability and unity of society. Depiction of the communication of document records also reflects the

elite's broader concerns, e.g. for their material possessions which by their very extensive nature are a pointer to the cultural generics. This concern achieves maximum societal impact as part of the monumental culture and ceremonies as shown in the care given to their various displays in elite tombs. The taking account motif illustrates a continuing belief in the elite's religious and cultural concepts, including as already mentioned the influence of the ideological generic.

Chapter 8 examines the Mourning motifs.

Human death, grief, and mourning occur in all societies. The associated literature is wide ranging but this chapter is limited to the following:

- Identifying immediate cultural responses to problems created by death.
- Understanding the ancient Egyptians' attempt to release emotional ties to their dead.
- Analyzing the depiction of mourning in elite Old Kingdom tombs.

In all societies, the bereavement culture is adapted for the deceased and bereaved persons. Death's stoppage of all body functions and cleaving of social bonds, needed reconciling with traditions about mortality by 'denying death' and 'achieving' immortality by religious rituals. Mourning was an integral part of ancient funeral ceremonies especially of the Egyptian elite, concerning both the individual's and the community's past plus future and would leave a powerful impression on the bereaved. Mourning is influenced by the senses and their integration with the theoretical foundations of the host culture and is again a valuable pointer to the cultural generics.

However investigating sensory perception requires the use of other disciplines like psychology and biology, to enable more insights into Old Kingdom society and culture than has been possible with mainstream Egyptology techniques.

There are only three mourning motif tombs for the bureaucratic elite (Idu, Ankhmahor & Mereruka from Dynasty 6) but they show sufficient consistency to demonstrate the influence of the generics.

Part 3 contains the Conclusion, Appendices, Glossary, and Bibliography.

The Conclusion asserts that the use of the cultural generics (identity, individuality, and ideology) affords an intimate revelation of Egypt's Old Kingdom society's mind-set, **and can be applied to all societies where influential elite commemorative art is used as a constituent dominant paradigm of the ideology of society.** It is extraordinary how funerary iconography in diverse cultures ranging from China, the Indus Valley, Mayan Mesopotamian and Roman/Greek) resembles each other in the universality of certain basic cultural generics. These attest to the unity of the experience of funerary culture based on the idea of a collective memory.

Part 4 is a separate volume of pictures of the case studies.