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Only the dead can tell us: on ancestor worship, law, social status, and gender norms in ancient Egypt

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1.Discussing methodology and terms

1.1 Methodology

The present thesis aims to analyse the role of ancestor worship in Ancient Egyptian society and the ways in which this core of beliefs affected social behaviours and the juridical sphere through time. Before delving into the topic, it is therefore necessary to provide an exact definition for specific concepts and terms and, above all, specific methodological observations.

The main goal of the research is the analysis of diverse written sources, but the texts have not been simply translated and commented upon. Rather, one of the main aims has been that of understanding and reconstructing the actual ritual practices behind them and how the latter changed and were adapted over time. To fulfil this objective a comparative method has played a crucial role but, in this regard, it is important to specify what is meant by comparative method within the context of the present thesis.

Comparativism has had a complex history within the academic study of religions. Several criticisms have been brought forward against it, which mainly pertained to the typology of phenomena taken into consideration and how they have been conceptualised.[37] Specifically, it has been pointed out how most of the categories adopted by scholars can be essentially considered as too ethnocentric; it means that they entail the risk of suppressing the insider perspective about religious facts and the on-the-ground strategies and disposition of the believers towards their beliefs and practices (the so-called *emic* perspective), in favour of the point of view of modern scholars (*etic* perspective).[38] Furthermore, the cross-cultural categories used within comparative studies have been often considered as universal rather than heuristic, an attitude that involved an excessive attention for vague similarities occurring in religions belonging to quite different historical and social contexts, often with the aim of reconstructing "pure", "original" or "archetypical" forms of religion or even "divine revelation", rather than analysing the value and the meaning that religious facts had within their specific historical and social contexts.[39]

[37] W.E. Paden 2004, 78.
[38] W.E. Paden 2004, 78.
[39] W.E. Paden 2004, 78.

Especially C. Geertz has stressed the importance of considering the terminology used by the insiders to describe their religious phenomena. [40] On the other hand, Geertz' approach involved the risk of closing the door to any kind of cross-cultural study in favour of "microscopic thick descriptions" pertaining to very specific social contexts.[41] This can indeed be problematic when a scholar has to deal with cultural practices and beliefs belonging to ancient cultures or has to attempt a diachronic study. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to interview the people involved about the analysed cultural facts, nor it is possible to practice so-called *participant observation*. Especially as regards the Ancient Near East it is important to stress that the sources at our disposal – both archaeological data and written texts – have to be considered as the tip of an iceberg which can give us only a partial vision of realities that were certainly much more complex.[42] Even our current knowledge of the ancient languages is certainly limited, and it is not uncommon to come across *hapax legomena*, or terms whose exact meaning is quite hard to understand.

The recent developments of the so-called ontological turn can suggest that a rethinking of the comparative method is possible as long as the categories adopted for the comparison are critically approached.[43] Particularly interesting in this regard is the inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France* of Ph. Descola, where it is highlighted that:

> *the construction of a category of comparable facts proceeds from a back-and-forth movement between a comprehensive approach – the appeal to context – and an extensive one – the identification of apparently multiple expressions of the same property of social life. Understood in this way, the comparative method is not an end in itself, but a form of controlled experimentation that allows us to verify or to invalidate hypotheses on what underpins and explains the diverse use systems of the world.*[44]

[40] C. Geertz 1973, 122-123.
[41] W.E. Paden 2004, 78.
[42] In this regard see: J. Baines 1987, 87.
[43] Ph. Descola 2013,
[44] Ph. Descola 2014, 21.

Therefore, in order to avoid biased approaches, in the present work the comparative method has been structured in the following way:

- The categories taken into consideration – "ancestor", "ancestor worship", "funerary and mortuary ritual", "necromancy" – are essentially considered here as heuristic tools. Also, aware of Geertz' lesson, the operative definition of these terms has been modelled and structured taking into account the *emic* perspective and language of the ancient Egyptians, and the specific terminology they used to describe certain religious phenomena.

- The comparison has been limited to a restricted range of cultural contexts. Above all, it focuses on the Ancient Egyptian culture itself and its different historical phases. Indeed, given that we are dealing with a culture that has been exceptionally long-lived, to identify specific categories and to analyse their occurrence over time turned out to be an optimal starting point to understanding how certain religious facts have evolved within Ancient Egyptian society. Yet, as mentioned above, the attempt to reconstruct the actual religious practices of human beings who disappeared millennia ago certainly poses some difficulties, since the individuals involved in these beliefs and practices cannot be directly interviewed or observed. In this regard, cross-cultural comparison proved to be a useful tool to better understand certain religious facts. However, following the path already opened by other scholars,[45] this cross-cultural analysis has been conducted by taking into consideration contexts which show significant common traits with Ancient Egyptian society, such as similar political organizations, or a framework in which the institution of the extended family plays a foremost role.

Finally, a further consideration is necessary. Especially with regard to the study of ancient cultures, comparativism has been often strictly intertwined with the concept of "survival" elaborated during the 19th century. Early anthropologists believed that traces of ancient practices may have somehow survived over time, often in a degraded form whose original meaning was not fully understood or even totally unknown to the subjects involved.[46] This kind of approach has been widely dismissed for several reasons. First, it is nowadays considered as biased by a strict ethnocentric vision, according to which human history can

[45] E. Montanari 2001, 49-55; W.E. Paden 2004, 88-90; M.G. Lancellotti 2006, 147-170; N. Cusumano 2013, 634-638; W.E. Paden 2016.
[46] E. Montanari 2001, 54 and ff.

be understood as a unique line which starts from a primitive stage and leads to civilised societies according to a precise evolutionary pattern.[47] Second, the "survival theory" decreases the value or even cancels not only the insider perspective on the analysed facts, but it also presupposes a perspective in which the subjects involved in the analysed cultural practices are paradoxically considered as passive, since they are not even able to recognise the "original" or the most "authentic function" of the cultural facts they are enacting.[48]

On the other hand, it is undeniable that certain cultural phenomena and practices can last over time. Especially for the specific case of the Ancient Egyptian culture, mythical or iconographic themes certainly persisted for millennia. Yet, at the same time, this does not mean that major transformations and shifts in functions and meanings related to certain symbols or rituals have not occurred. It is therefore useful to introduce the concept of "coherent reshaping". Unlike the survival theory, this concept shifts the focus onto the insider perspective. The starting point is that if a cultural or religious practice is enacted by a group of people, it is because it has (or had) a specific meaning for the individuals involved, even in those specific cases in which the phenomena under analysis might appear as "archaic living fossils" according to the *etic* perspective of the scholars.[49] The attention, thus, has to be shifted to the creative solutions and choices of the insiders through which certain beliefs, practices, figurative or mythical themes have been maintained, but also reformulated through times, by acquiring new meanings or functions.[50] Under this point of view, the heuristic categories identified for the aims of the present work will be useful not only for the identification of recurrent patterns, but also to appreciate those significant differences indispensable to outline the historical evolution of the religious beliefs and practices examined here.[51]

Finally, some of the sources taken into consideration for the present thesis – such as the so-called Letters to the Dead or the Coffin Text spells – involve specific methodological issues which will be discussed separately in later chapters.

[47] E. Montanari 2001, 54 and ff.
[48] E. Montanari 2001, 54 and ff.
[49] N. Cusumano 2013, 365.
[50] N. Cusumano 2013, 365.
[51] In this regard, see also W. E. Paden 2016, 133 and ff. (e-book version).

1.2 Defining terms and concepts

The identification of "operative categories" in order to circumscribe the object of a research concerning religious facts must be based on an *inductive method*, by observing and comparing diverse religious practices and beliefs, and, above all, in a way which is respectful of the categories and ideas attested in the language of the insiders. In other words, the definitions proposed here must be meant as a heuristic tool aimed at delimiting the object of a research.[52] To start, operative definitions of "ancestor" and "ancestor worship" have been provided; in this context, it was also necessary to develop a heuristic schematization of the main rituals pertaining to the death sphere – "funerary rituals", "mortuary rituals", "ancestralisation", "necromancy" – and provide an operational definition for each of these categories. The notion of "universality" has also been explored, since scholars, with regard to the kinds of religious phenomena examined here, have often used it in an inappropriate way. Finally, noteworthy is that most of the textual sources analysed in the present thesis - in particular the Opening of the Mouth Ritual scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker feast - have often been interpreted as survivals of archaic shamanic practices. Although, in the present work, such an interpretation has been rejected, the need to discuss the role played by the category "shamanism" in the context of the history of religions and how this concept filtered down into Egyptology has emerged. This issue has been addressed in chapter 2, where the previous studies relating to these religious facts were critically examined.

1.2.1 What is an ancestor?

In religions, the objects of beliefs and cults are countless and not limited to those we usually call "divinities".[53] Different kinds of supernatural entities, such as demons,[54] tricksters,[55] or impersonal powers can be invoked for help or be the object of various cultic actions.[56]

[52] W.E. Paden 2016, 133 and ff. (e-book version). See also: K. Teinz 2012, 242; W.E. Paden 2004, 87; A. Brelich 2006, 3.

[53] A. Brelich 2006, 23-25. See also the following consideration made by J. Baines "Here, I explore for earlier periods other forms of actions that are considered religious in the study of most societies but are not so centripetally organised and are minimised in the study of Egyptology". Remarkably, these forms of religious actions identified by J. Baines mainly concerns the beliefs and practices pertaining to the dead. J. Baines 1987, 80.

[54] K. Szpakowska 2009, 799-805; R. Lucarelli 2010.

[55] As J.F. Borghouts argued, in ancient Egyptian religion it is impossible to find deities with all the main traits of the widely accepted trickster-typology in comparative religion and anthropology (J.F. Borghouts 2008, 47-48; for related criticism, cf. H. Goedicke 1979.

[56] A. H. Gordon 1996.

Among these, deceased people played – and still play – a foremost role in a large number of cultural contexts.[57]

The ancient Egyptian society was no exception. The deification of the dead was a common phenomenon and numerous studies have shown how the deceased were perceived as supernatural beings which can be invoked to solve diverse kinds of problems.[58]

If the numinous status of the dead within ancient Egypt can no longer be questioned, there are other aspects to be taken into consideration, above all the perceived difference between a god and a supernatural dead. In this regard, some scholars have argued that the original meaning of the word *nṯr* – traditionally translated as "god" – might refer to the deceased or, more precisely, to the dead kings.[59] One of the main arguments focused on one of the signs used to write the word *nṯr*, the sign (R8). The hieroglyph probably depicts a flag or a staff wrapped with a cloth – and in this regard a parallel has been identified with certain traditions attested in Sudan and in North Africa, where the flags placed at the entrance to certain tombs are considered not just markers of holy ground, but concrete manifestations of the supernatural entity residing in that place.[60] Some early scholars have therefore seen in these conceptions the proof of a tradition going back several millennia, whose origins would date to the very dawn of the pharaonic civilization.[61]

On the other hand, it must be said that this kind of interpretation was biased by an approach typical of the 19th century, according to which beliefs concerning the spirits of the dead and their survival after death could be considered as the first manifestation of any form of religion. In this regard E. Hornung has pointed out that early dynastic sources "do not support the hypothesis of a general equivalence of *nṯr* with the deceased or with the dead king".[62]

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[57] Especially for the Ancient Near East, several data confirm this. The Hebrew Bible, on occasion, uses the term *ʾelōhīm,* literally 'gods' in order to denote the supernatural character of the dead (cf. 1 Sam 28:13) Ugaritic refers to the dead with the terms *mt* and *rpu*, but, occasionally, the terms *il* and *ilnym* are attested too. Similarly, Akkadian could use also *ilu*. K. Spronk 1995, 421-422.

[58] D. Wildung, 1977 B; A. von Lieven 2010.

[59] E. Hornung 1983, 42.

[60] E. Hornung 1983, 37.

[61] A.J. Arkell 1933.

[62] "The early dynastic sources, which consist of personal names and titles, do not support the hypothesis of a general equivalence of *nṯr* with the deceased or with the dead king". E. Hornung 1982, 45. See also H. Goedicke 1986 A, 57-62. With regard to the sign R8, compare: J. Baines 1991, 29-46.

A more grounded approach has been adopted by D. Meeks who has investigated the exact meaning of the word *nṯr* by analysing the main contexts in which this term occurs. The result of this investigation showed that the term *nṯr* has been used by the Egyptian to designate all the entities which undergo rituals, such as the kind of supernatural beings we are used to call "gods", but also the sovereigns, and above all the dead, both human and animal.[63]

This statement could be the right key to outline an operative definition of ancestor. Indeed, as several ethnographical parallels suggest, an ancestor is a deceased person who has achieved a special status[64] and the differences between this kind of supernatural being and a "simple" dead are often stressed by specific rites of passage, like the so-called *double burial*, studied by Hertz.[65]

In the Ancient Egyptian language, in addition to the term *mwt*, used to indicate the "dead" in the broadest sense, a specific terminology to remark the superhuman position of certain deceased is well attested. In this regard, the word *ꜣḫ*, traditionally translated as "blessed" or "effective" spirit, is one of the most recurrent terms in the written sources, often associated to adjectives like *ỉḳr* "excellent", *mnḫ* "equipped" or *ḫpr* "capable".[66] This term was not only used to highlight the special status of a deceased[67] but also as a divine epithet aimed at connoting the particular power possessed by a deity,[68] an element which confirms once again how the differences between a god and an ancestor, although existing, were rather nuanced. It is also possible to recognise different local traditions or relevant transformations through times. In the Midlle Kingdom, at Edfu, the sources related to the posthumous cult of the nomarch Izi show that he was called *nṯr ꜥnḫ* (living god);[69] Heqaib,

[63] "Le mot "nétjer" « dieu » appartient à une famille de mots dont le dénominateur commun est le rite. Est «dieu » tout ce qui a été introduit et/ou maintenu dans cet état par le rite". D. Meeks 1988, 429.
[64] A. Brelich 2006, 23-24.
[65] R. Hertz 1905-1906.
[66] R. Demarée 1983, 195-198.
[67] Although not strictly relevant to the research questions investigated in this study, it is interesting to note how the *ꜣḫ.w* are often mentioned in religious texts to identify what we might call a collective group of anonymous ancestors. According to N. Harrington, this could testify to a type of religious belief concerning a general community of ancestors whose post-mortem existence was based on a state of 'collective immortality'. Indeed, the distinction between the ancestors as an "anonymous collective", and specific recent 'ancestors' of a specific kin-group which usually are the main object of a special care is attested in several other cultures. N. Harrington 2013, pp. 29-30.
[68] R. Demarée 1983, 198-199.
[69] C. Böwe 2004.

instead, was worshipped at Qubbet el-Hawa as *ṯnỉ* "the elevated one".[70] During the Late Period terms such as *ḥrỉ* ("the high one") or *ḥsỉ* ("the praised one") are attested to define specific categories of supernatural dead,[71] and the expression *nṯr ꜥ3* (great god) became rather common among non-royal individuals.[72]

Moreover, the existence of a typology of rites denominated *s3ḫ.w* – a causative of the aforementioned term *3ḫ*, which literally means "to transform into an *3ḫ*" – clearly implies that a deceased was able to become a dead endowed with special power thanks to specific ritual actions.[73]

In light of these data, for the specific aim of the present study, the following definition of ancestors has been drawn up:

> *An ancestor is a dead person, who has reached a supernatural status thanks to specific rituals. The ancestor is believed to have special powers and is able to affect the everyday life of the living with both benevolent and malignant actions.*

Given that this definition of "ancestor" is essentially based on a contraposition between a generic class of dead and a special class of deceased, here called "ancestors", the main question is to understand which dead could became an ancestor and why. If one looks up the definition of "ancestor" in a modern English dictionary – for example, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* – the following definition is provided: "one from whom a person is descended and who is usually more remote in the line of descent than a grandparent".[74] Thus, in modern English, an ancestor cannot be a recently dead individual. This kind of definition is certainly valid for the modern term ancestor, but it cannot be useful when studying religious practices belonging to cultures rather distant in time and space.

[70] D. Raue 2014.
[71] M. el-Amir 1951, 81-85; J. Quaegebeur 1977, 129-143
[72] A. von Lieven 2010.
[73] R.J. Demarée 1983, 193; S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 90 and note n. 160.
[74] *Oxford Dictionary of English*, (2010) Oxford, 57.

Starting from the 80s of the last century several Egyptologists have shown the limits of this kind of definition,[75] by taking into consideration the studies by I. Kopytoff and other ethnologists.[76] This kind of approach has highlighted how the beliefs and practices labelled as "ancestor worship" within diverse anthropological and ethnographic works can include the recently dead as well. Indeed, although the concept of ancestor is undeniably linked with the models of "lineage" and "parentage", it must also be taken into account that within diverse cultural contexts, these concepts can be quite varied.[77] For example, a matrilineal or patrilineal system strongly influences which one among the deceased relatives can become the ancestor of a specific person.[78] In this regard, M. Fortes underlined that the selection of the dead who can become ancestors can be considered as "a representation or extension of the authority component in the jural relations of successive generations".[79] It means that the dead venerated as ancestors are the ones whose social positions in life justify the current position of the living descendants within the society.[80] A subsequent study by I. Kopytoff interprets this type of mechanism as a post-mortem continuation of the "eldership complex" characterising the Sukhu of South-Western Congo.[81] The study highlighted the absence of a clear separation between the world of the living and that of the dead: the deceased are indeed considered as active members of the same social system of the living and, above all, the dead are able to show a kind of power and authority which reflect the ones they had during their lifetime.[82] If these thoughts surely point in the right direction, we have to emphasise that, in Ancient Egypt, the status of old men was quite ambivalent. As R. Janssen argues, there is "no trace of a gerontocracy as in some African societies, nor are the wisdom and experience of the older people particularly expressed".[83] Thus, we have to assume that the substantial elements connected with the conception of authority were related to the typical mechanisms of power in a politically centralised society of the Ancient Near East.[84] A comparison with data from other cultures can be useful in this regard. Indeed, religious practices and beliefs focused on "ancestors" played a foremost role within

[75] R.J. Demarée 1983, 288 and note 40; J. Baines, 1987, 81 and note n. 9.
[76] I. Kopytoff 1971.
[77] T. Tatje and F.L K. Hsu 1969.
[78] T. Tatje and F. L.K. Hsu 1969, 153-172.
[79] "It is not the whole man, but only his jural status as the parent (or parental personage in matrilineal system) vested with authority and responsibility that is transmuted into ancestorhood". M. Fortes 1965, 133.
[80] M. Fortes 1965, 133.
[81] I. Kopytoff 1971, 140.
[82] I. Kopytoff 1971, 140.
[83] R. Janssen 2012, 4883.
[84] J. Baines 1987, 80.

classical Chou China,[85] and similar observations can be made for several ancient Mediterranean cultures.[86] A. Brelich claimed that in social contexts where a chief has a central function, his ancestors may have a "public" cult,[87] and D. Sheils theorised the concept of "superior ancestral religion", defining it as a politically oriented phenomenon that "strengthens the rule of a central state based on kinship over other kin groups by legitimising the superordinate position of the ruling kin group and thus provides a supportive mechanism that aids in the creation of political solidarity".[88] So, for the aim of the present work it can be theorised that:

> *Not all dead can become ancestors: the factors which determine which deceased person can be considered an ancestor depends on the social organisation of a specific cultural context. The supernatural authority attributed to the ancestor is a consequence, and a post-mortem continuation, of the social role the latter had in life.*

In light of this heuristic definition, one may wonder which were the factors specifically intrinsic to the Ancient Egyptian culture that determined the post-mortem status and the supernatural powers of a deceased. Textual sources clearly indicate that the concept of "knowledge" – *rḫ* – played a key role in Egyptian religious thought. In the sphere of royal ideology, for example, the so-called *Cult-Theological Treatise* clearly elucidates the kind of special knowledge required by the king in order to officiate as sun priest and guarantee the continuation of cosmic order.[89] Noteworthy is also that the concept of "knowledge" as a means to elevate human beings both in life and after death is a crucial, everlasting element within the history of Egyptian religion and it is possible to find a reformulation of this conception even in the context of Gnostic and Hermetic currents during the early centuries of the Common Era.[90]

[85] A.J. Chun 1990.
[86] H.I. Flower 2017.
[87] A. Brelich 2006, 24.
[88] D. Sheils 1980, 254. In this regard, see also, Y.M. el Shazly 2015, 4 and note 17.
[89] J. Assmann 1995, 17 and ff.
[90] J.P. Sørensen 2002, 137 and ff.

As for the specific topic and time frame of the present thesis, both archaeological and textual data unequivocally show how "knowledge" was a fundamental requirement for the transmutation of the deceased into an *ꜣḫ*, especially in the context of the elite self-presentation.[91] The connection between being an *ꜣḫ* and possessing a special "knowledge" is indeed a recurrent theme already in the Old Kingdom mastabas inscriptions.[92] Moreover, in several Coffin Texts spells, it is clearly stated that a special knowledge is a crucial requisite for becoming an *ꜣḫ*.[93]

This makes some considerations about the relationship between religions and societies necessary, considerations that become even more relevant if we remember that one of the main morphological elements that allows us to categorise a religious fact as an "ancestor cult" is the post-mortem survival of the social role of an individual. As mentioned above, in several African traditions until very recent times, one of the foremost sources of social authority was the "eldership complex", in other words the special social status held by the elderly official recognised as a source of legal and moral power.[94] On the other hand, it is obvious that the concept of "social authority" is something that varies according to the diverse social contexts; for example, the hero cult in Greece met the specific needs of a certain type of society where the sacrifice of young men in war was essential.[95]

In the specific case of Ancient Egypt, the main ideological model that acted as a cultural reference point was deeply rooted in the value of "knowledge". In the vast Egyptian documentation that has come down to us, there are celebrations of the virtue of the warrior, but it is indisputable that the model for life and the ideals were of another kind. Some extracts from scholastic miscellanies – such as the famous *Satire on the Trades* – are eloquent,[96] especially if we remember that these were the texts that formed the future elites of the country. The ancient Egyptian term *rḫ* – here translated as "knowledge" – covered thus a wide range of meanings. Above all, this concept was inextricably linked to the condition of being highly literate, in a context where the access to literacy was an almost exclusive prerogative of the elite,[97] and the main factor determining the social position of a

[91] R. Demarée 1983, pp. 193-194.
[92] R. Demarée 1983, pp. 207-208; D. Czerwik 2009, 37 and ff.
[93] G. Englund 1978, 108-109.
[94] I. Kopytoff 1971, 140.
[95] Y. Garlan 1997.
[96] W.K. Simpson 2003, 429-438.
[97] One has to keep in mind that, in Ancient Egypt, the access to literacy varied on the basis of the different historical and social contexts (such as urban or rural areas). The number of fully literate people was about the

person.[98] The ability of writing and reading was an essential requirement not only for the proper performance of rites[99] but also for the execution of the law.[100] One can therefore posit that the term *rḫ* indicated the essential source of the most relevant kinds of "social authority" within the ancient Egyptian society, which involved not only the possibility of being politically influential, but also the ability of executing the law and play a remarkable role within the religious sphere.

If ancestor worship is defined as "the post-mortem survival of the social role held by a person", one has also to assume that certain ancestors were somehow considered more powerful than others. We already mentioned that the ancestors of a chief or a king can be venerated by large sections of the community, and as for the specific case of Ancient Egypt, these kinds of religious phenomena are well attested and took diverse kind of specific forms based on diverse historical or regional contexts. [101] Most scholars agree in making a distinction between the special rites which were performed in order to eternalise the social status of the dead sovereign and his *kꜣ*, and the widespread popular devotion devoted to certain kings and deceased members of the royal family such as Amenhotep I and Ahmose Nefertari.[102]

As for the elite sphere, instead, it is certainly significant that a recent study dedicated to the apotheosis of non-royal individuals in Ancient Egypt during the Old and Middle Kingdom has shown that most of the deceased who became the object of a post-mortem cult that went beyond the family sphere – such as Ptahhotep, Hordjedef, Kagemni – were also considered "wise men" and authors of prestigious didactic texts.[103]

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one per cent, even lower during the First and the Second Intermediate Period. Later historical periods probably saw an increase, but access to literacy has always been the preserve of a small circle of people. (See: J. Baines, and C. Eyre 2007, 65-75. In some special environments, such as the village of Deir el-Medina, the level of literacy was certainly higher (See: L. H. Lesko 1994, 131-44).

[98] See, for example: M. Lichtheim 2006 B, Vol. II, 139-140.

[99] D. Czerwik 2003, 42-43.

[100] J. Baines and C. Eyre 2007, 75-78.

[101] J. Troche 2021, 76.

[102] "The special deification of individual kings and queens like Amenhotep I and Ahmose Nefertari is not to be confused with the general idea of a semi-divine status of the king or his ka as part of the royal ideology". A. Von Lieven 2010, 3. On the other hand, especially for the Old Kingdom data, the differences between mortuary cults and popular cults relating to the deceased kings is more complicated. Cf. A. Morales 2006; H. Vymazalová 2010. For general remarks about Ancient Egyptian divine kingship see also the recent publication by J. Troche: "In essence, the king's divinity was no different than that of the gods or deified dead and rather a manifestation expressed to a greater extreme along a shared spectrum of divine efficacy". J. Troche 2021, 53-54.

[103] J. Troche 2021, p. 80 and 100.

In sum, for the specific aims of the present thesis it can be stated that not all the dead can become ancestors, and the factors determining such a difference vary from context to context. As for the ancient Egyptian society and the specific time frame here taken into consideration, the cultural reference model officially proposed by the 'high' culture discourse is clear: the capable and competent scribe, the high official, the elite member at the head of the extended family *ꜣb.t* who – especially during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom – constituted the basic cell of Egyptian society.[104] These individuals didn't just represent the realization of a cultural model; their importance was substantial and effective: it was the chief of the powerful extended family to whom the lower social groups turned for help in the everyday life and, consequently, also in the post-mortem sphere.

Egyptian textual sources are quite explicit about the pact of mutual aid between the head of the extended family and the other household members, which did not include only actual relatives, but also servants and diverse kinds of dependants.[105] The most striking example can be identified in a passage from the so-called *Loyalistic Instruction* where it is stated that the mutual alliance and aid between the chief of the extended family and his dependants could be perpetuated even beyond death.[106] Specifically, the deceased head of the extended family is referred to as a deceased endowed with supernatural powers able to protect (*mkỉ*) the living and fight (*ḥꜣ*) on behalf of his people.[107]

It is also important to focus on the role played by women within ancient Egyptian ancestor worship. As will be detailed in chapter 5, their status within these religious practices and beliefs was ambivalent. On one side, the data show that both royal and non-royal women could become the object of a more or less widespread veneration, as for the case of Ahmose Nefertari.[108] Furthermore, a restricted number of *ꜣḫ ỉḳr n-Rˁ* stelae clearly show that women could be "ancestralised".[109] Yet, it is undeniable that the women venerated as ancestors were far fewer in number than men and, if one considers the specific features of the ancient Egyptian society this is not surprising element. First of all, women's status within the institution of the extended family was rather peculiar, since the *ꜣb.t***,** as a legal and economic

[104] M. Garcìa 2012; H. Willems 2015.
[105] H. Willems 2015.
[106] G. Posener 1976. Particular interesting the translation made by E. Bresciani. See: E. Bresciani 1999, 36.
[107] H.-W. Fischer-Elfert 1996, 105-108; R. Schiavo 2014, 156-157.
[108] G. Hollender 2009.
[109] R.J. Demarée1983, stelae: A6, A39, A40, A41, A44, A45, A51, A52.

institution, did not officially include the wife of the family chief.[110] Furthermore, even though women's social position was more emancipated than those of other ancient cultures, their access to literacy was certainly lower than men, and if we consider the importance of knowledge/*rḫ* in order to became a venerable ancestor this is not a secondary element.[111]

1.2.2 Ancestor worship and rituals pertaining to the death sphere

Once given a heuristic definition of ancestor, it is important to identify the conditions which permit the recognition of elaborate cult activities devoted to these types of supernatural beings, in other words, which kind of religious practices can be considered as "ancestor worship".

Even though there is no agreement among scholars about what ancestor worship is, and it is possible to distinguish several definitions based on rather diverse approaches,[112] a mandatory starting point can be identified in the concept of "rite of passage", first introduced by A. Van Gennep. This category highlights how the life of each individual is subject to significant transitions over time, which often concern a remarkable change in his social status within the community. In several societies, including the most secularised ones, these transitional phases can be ritualised and their performance not only ratifies the change in the social role of the person involved but also entails an "adjustment" of the community itself, since the validation of the passage implies a change in the composition of the social body.[113]

Because of their very nature, the rites of passage are often linked with the most critical phases of the life cycle, death included.[114] The demise of an individual can indeed entail a combination of different cultural actions – such as mourning, the preparation of the corpse, the burial, etc. – which aims to ratify the new status of that person as a "deceased" and the consequent transformations that this episode causes within the community.[115]

The concept of "rites of passage" is certainly useful for the purposes of the present work, since it is based on the connections between religious beliefs and society. On the other

[110] H. Willems 2015, 454–461.
[111] J. Baines and C. Eyre 2007, 83-89.
[112] K. Teinz 2012, 235-242.
[113] A. van Gennep 1960, 26-40.
[114] A. van Gennep 1960, 26-40.
[115] A. van Gennep 1960, 26-40.

hand, it is crucial to underline that just the presence of rites concerning the separation of a deceased from the community of the living and his inclusion among the ranks of the dead does not entail the belief in ancestor worship. Even though every ancestor is a deceased, not all the deceased persons can be considered ancestors. As stressed by the definition given above, an "ancestor" is a deceased able to affect the living (and their status within society) because of the post-mortem survival of his social role. To make this possible, it is necessary to bring the deceased back into the community of the living by re-establishing their role within it.

Several scholars have pointed out that in diverse cultural contexts it is possible to recognise some specific rites of passage – that can occur during the funerals or afterwards – which are performed with the specific aim of transforming a deceased into an ancestor.[116] It is therefore possible to affirm that the demise of an individual can involve different kinds of ritual actions, generically labelled here as "death rituals", which can be divided in different categories.

First of all, it is possible to identify the "funerary rituals", rites of passage strictly linked with the specific occasion of the death of an individual and aimed at ratifying the change in status from living member of a community to deceased. Within certain social contexts, however, the dead can be re-integrated within the realm of the living. The ritual actions pertaining to this passage have been here called "ancestralisation". The main aim of the "ancestralisation rituals" is that of transforming a deceased into an ancestor, turning him again into an active member of his community, albeit on another plane of existence.

Since the ancestors are perceived as an authoritative entity able to affect several aspects of everyday life, they are the object of diverse actions, which can be labelled as religious practices. In this regard, both historical and ethnographic studies have underlined that the interactions of a community with their ancestors have to be maintained according to specific rules of conduct, often structured as a pact of mutual aid: the living have to take care of their dead (for example, by perpetuating offerings for them), while the ancestors must guarantee supernatural protection and legitimation to their descendants.[117] It follows that it is within this wider framework of beliefs that ancestors are worshipped, invoked, manipulated or even menaced, so that they could act in a certain way. In the light of these

[116] R. Hertz 1905-1906; W. H. Newell 1976, 18-20; K. Teinz 2012, 239-242; M. Fitzenreiter 2018, 54.

[117] A. Roccati 1967; R.J. Demarée 1983, 283; A. Tsukimoto 1985, 229-233; N. Harrington 2013, 29-30.

observations, it is necessary to introduce another concept, that of "mortuary rituals", which can be defined as rituals aimed at celebrating periodically the ancestors and mainly focused on perpetuating the right interactions between the living and the dead. These rituals could be performed at the tombs, in specific cultic places, as well as in the context of the domestic cults.[118]

Given these premises, ancestor worship can be defined as:

> *The set of religious practices focusing on a special category of dead, the ancestors. Within this set of religious practices, it is possible to recognise specific ritual actions aimed at transforming the deceased into an ancestor (ancestralisation) and other religious practices aimed at periodically commemorating and appeasing the latter (mortuary rituals).*

Yet, it is important to stress that this distinction among different classes of rituals ("funerary", "ancestralisation", "mortuary") is eminently *etic*, since it reflects the point of view of a modern scholar. Therefore, they must be understood as a heuristic tool to identify and describe the functions of texts and ceremonies. The classification proposed here does not necessarily reflect the way in which the ancient inhabitants of the Near East used to categorise their rituals. For example, the same liturgy could be involved in both funerary and mortuary contexts; and, in several cases, the funerary rituals and the rites of ancestralisation occurred at the same time and were perceived as indistinguishable. Especially for the specific case of the ancient Egyptian culture, one of the main pieces of evidence to be taken into consideration is that of specific festivals celebrated to periodically commemorate the dead,[119] such as the Wag feast, [120] The Sokar-festival at Elephantine,[121] the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos,[122] or the Beautiful Festival of the Valley at Thebes.[123] Based on the aforementioned definitions, these festivals have to be labelled as "mortuary

[118] R.J. Demarée 1983, 279-290; H. Willems 2001, 254; L. Weiss 2015, 179-186.
[119] M. Fitzenreiter 2018, 57.
[120] H. Goedicke 1986 B, 1135-1140.
[121] D. Raue 2014, 12.
[122] M. Smith 2017, 232-234.
[123] N. Harrington 2013, 116.

rituals". On the other hand, it should be highlighted that these celebrations were often structured as a special kind of funerary ritual performed for a god – such as Osiris at Abydos, or a deified deceased identified with a god as in the case of Heqaib/Sokar at Elephantine. These festivals, therefore, could re-enact or reshape all the main phases of an elite funerary ritual[124] and it is therefore not surprising that the same liturgies adopted during the funerals were also used or re-adapted for the specific aims of these celebrations.

Another important term for the aim of the present study is that of necromancy. Also in this case, it is important to stress that there is no unanimous position among scholars.[125] Here, I propose the following heuristic definition:

> *A practice through which a living person can communicate with a deceased in order to obtain a response on a specific matter.*

This definition is not so dissimilar from that proposed by Bourgignon[126] and subsequently by R.K. Ritner,[127] Tropper, Schmidt and Hsieh.[128] However, contrary to Schmidt,[129] I do not consider the prediction of the future as a determining element, since any kind of divination can be focused also on gaining insights about the past and, above all, on obtaining a solution about problems perceived as critical in the immediate present.[130] Indeed, although the term "necromancy" has been barely used within Egyptology, it appears to be grounded within the ancient Egyptian *emic* perspective but, of course, this depends on what one means by "communication between the living and the dead".[131]

In the light of the available data, phenomena like that concerning the witch of En-dor (1 Sam 28), where a woman endowed with special skills is able to summon a spirit and make the latter speak to obtain significant information, is not attested.[132] On the other hand, both the Letters to the Dead and the oracular consultations of certain deceased kings undeniably

[124] M. Smith 2017, p. 232-233; D. Raue 2014, 12.
[125] E. Bourgignon 1987.
[126] E. Bourgignon 1987.
[127] R.K. Ritner 2002 A; R. K. Ritner 2002 B.
[128] J. Tropper 1989, 13-23; B. B. Schmidt 1996 A, 11-12; J. Hsieh 2022, 313-314.
[129] B.B. Schmidt 1996 A, 153 and note 100.
[130] E. Bourgignon 1987, 345; J. Černý 1941, 13-24; R. Parker 2016, 69-90.
[131] R.K. Ritner 2002 A and 2002 B; J. Hsieh 2022, 313-314.
[132] See also I. Finkel 2021, 199-200.

prove that a communication with the deceased could somehow be established, for example though oneiric experience, written messages, or by interpreting the movements of a sacred image during a procession.[133]

It is also important to stress that within cultures where the religion is characterised by the post-mortem survival of the social role, this kind of beliefs can certainly affect necromantic practices. It means that a dead can be consulted on a specific topic because of the social position he had during his life implied a special knowledge in that specific ambit. For example, in 1 Sam 28, Saul does not ask the witch of En-dor to generically consult the dead. The woman, rather, is asked to summon Samuel, a deceased prophet, so that his spirit can figure out the outcome of an imminent battle, advising the king as he used to do during his life.

Finally, some further considerations are needed. In several studies a difference between "ancestor worship", "ancestor veneration", "ancestor cults", "cult of the dead" and "veneration of the dead" has been stated. For example, B.B. Schmidt has posited a difference between "care of the dead", "veneration of the dead/ancestors", and "worship of the dead/ancestors".[134] Within Egyptology, instead, M. Fitzenreiter has distinguished between "cult of the dead", "ancestor cult", and "ancestor veneration".[135] Although these distinctions make perfect sense and are heuristically operative with the aims of the specific works for which they were meant, these definitions have not proved useful or practical

[133] J. Černý 1941, 13-24; yet, see: D. Farout 2004, 51.

[134] "The ancestor cult comprises beliefs and practices directed towards dead predecessors. The cult of the dead is directed toward the dead in general while the ancestor cult is a lineage cult. […] The veneration of the dead assumes the persistence of man after death. Moreover, it presupposes the belief that the dead can influence the high god(s) to act on behalf of the living. The dead obtained this power through their heroic acts or qualities exhibited while living, or thought to be living in the case of the mythic heroes. Not only do the living offer the dead their expressions of gratitude, but the dead receive various forms of inducements from the living. The dead do not appear to have the same degree or quality of divinity as the high god(s), nor can they act independently of the god(s). Therefore, they are not worthy of, and unlike the gods, they do not receive, worship. The same set of criteria applies in the case of the veneration of the ancestors. […] our use of ancestor worship will be restricted to those acts which reflect the belief that the power possessed by the ancestor is equivalent to that of a deity. […] Care for or feeding of the dead typically carries with it the implicit notion that the dead are weak; they have no power to affect the living in a beneficial way. In the case of the ancestors, the care for or feeding of the ancestors is motivated by the obligation to continue one's filial duties for immediate lineal predecessors after their death." B.B. Schmidt 1996 A, 8-13.

[135] "My approach uses the term 'Cult of the Dead' in order to summarize all ritual activities directed to an individual dead person, e.g. the preparation of the body, his interment, equipping with magical implements and all the further offerings in order to maintain his spiritual existence. In contrast, ritual activities directed to the enduring relationship between the living and the dead will be termed "Ancestor Cult". Furthermore, I prefer to speak of *ancestor veneration* in the more general sense of practices directed to the enduring relationship of the dead and the living, but of *ancestor cult* only in cases where a certain degree of formalization and structure into a perpetual and stable sign system has been established". Cf. M. Fitzenreiter 2018, 54.

within the purposes of the present thesis. Therefore, "cult", "veneration", "worship" and "care" have been used interchangeably.

1.2.3 "Universality"

If certain religious phenomena, such as the three main monotheistic religions, are clearly genetically connected to each other, conceptions about the spirits of the dead are found so frequently, and in such varied and distant contexts (both in time and space), that an explanation in terms of common origin and cultural diffusion is highly unsatisfactory. Starting with this fact, a study by L.B. Steadman, C.T. Palmer and C.F. Tilley has pointed out how ancestor worship – understood as a form of communication between the living and the deceased – may represent the real "heart" of every religion, and a useful tool with which to understand the "universality of religious belief".[136] However, this theory implies a series of problems that are rather difficult to solve. First, not all human beings currently believe in supernatural entities, or in certain kinds of existence after death.[137] Second, more or less sceptical views towards the dominant religious traditions – especially about ideas of post-mortem survival – are well-known and documented also in the past. This is the case of the position of a small number of philosophers, both from Eastern and Western traditions.[138] For example, the followers of Epicurus held that after death both the body and the soul ceased to exist; in particular, Lucretius claimed that the visions of ghosts seen during dreams or illness are caused by floating atoms (*simulacra*), which are emanated by the bodies of human beings and continued to wander in the air even after their death.[139]

Lucretius' interpretation – referring to universal experiences like dreams or possibly altered states – may suggest a possible explanation for these surprising cases of polygenesis. Even E.B. Tylor, father of cultural anthropology, hypothesised that seeing the dead in a dream may have suggested to "primitive" peoples the idea that "spirits" survived after death, attributing the origin of every religious experience to this phenomenon.[140] Although such a rigidly evolutionist interpretation is now considered unacceptable, several scholars argued that some of these intuitions may be in part valid.

[136] L.B. Steadman, C.T. Palmer and C.F. Tilley 1996, 65.
[137] J.M Smith 2013, 80-99.
[138] M. Poo 2009, 1.
[139] Book IV, vv. 757-761
[140] E.B. Tylor 1871, Vol. I, 377-453.

The cognitivist anthropologist S. Atran has stated that a certain number of factors (such as the tragic experience of mourning, but also the dream experiences that allow us to "see" the dead family members once more) could lie at the basis of the common presence of beliefs about the spirits of the dead, ghosts and ancestors in every cultural context.[141] Based on the theories of cognitive anthropology, the notable frequency of these phenomena could be explained by certain characteristics of the human mind, "programmed" to develop and remember certain types of supernatural representations more easily than others, both because of their conceptual structure, and for their "relevance" in many important social and environmental situations.[142] Therefore, because of this kind of mechanism, certain systems of belief were favoured by the processes of "cognitive selection" which play a role in cultural transmission and favoured supernatural conceptions with similar characteristics that developed autonomously in cultures distant both in time and in space.[143]

Although it is possible to recognise an innate factor to the biological and cognitive structures of human beings that may favour the development of these types of belief - without actually determining it in an obligatory way – the role of the diverse social, economic and cultural contexts has constituted, and constitutes, an important factor in determining the characteristics of particular representations of the spirits of the dead. M. Poo makes some fundamental observations in this respect:

> *How people imagine and deal with the ghosts is conditioned by the social and cultural context in which the conceptions of death and afterlife are nurtured. Thus the conceptions of ghosts can be examined as a social imaginary. Moreover the results of this social imaginary cannot be anything fixed. As Peter Berger and others have explained, culture, being man-made, and lacking the biological structure of the animal world, is inherently unstable. It follows that the idea of a ghost, being part of those cultural structures concerned with life and death, is necessarily highly variable. On the other hand, one also needs to take note of the*

[141] S. Atran 2002, 52-57.
[142] P. Boyer 1994, 263-314; P. Boyer 2020.
[143] P. Boyer 2020, 472.

> *influence of the idea of death and the afterlife on social behavior, religious beliefs and the collective imagination. There is therefore a reciprocal interaction between ideas and society, As Clifford Geertz points out, death and the rituals associated with it not only reflect social values but are an important force in shaping them.*[144]

Starting from this premise, the need for a systematic study of ancestor cults in the context of single cultures emerges forcefully, in order to gather the specific characteristics as well as the many shared ones. This sort of study, in the specific case of Ancient Egypt, could help to unravel various unclear aspects of the historic evolution of religious phenomena, bringing a better understanding of its phases and distinguishing more clearly the elements of continuity and the true innovations.

1.3 Limits of the research

The present thesis concerns the role played by a specific category of dead, the ancestors, in codifying and structuring the social behaviours, the power relations, the execution of law in ancient Egyptian society, with a special focus on the transfer of power and social role from father to son within the context of the elite extended family. Consequently, the topics addressed here are strongly centred on elites and their self-presentation and, above all, on adult men belonging to the upper social groups.

This however should not lead to the assumption that women did not play any role within this core of religious beliefs. Some observations concerning this aspect have been indeed deepened in chapter 5. Yet, it is important to underline that the research questions addressed in the present thesis and the kind of sources taken into consideration did not allow to fully deepen other aspects which probably existed but are quite difficult to identify through the currently available sources.

The documents examined here will hardly tell us the authentic experiences of the individuals for whom they were produced. Rather, they belong to an official discourse used by the elites to legitimise their social role. The object of the present investigation therefore

[144] M. Poo 2009, 4-5.

focuses on what Bourdieu called *habitus*, "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class".[145]

Finally, the present study is eminently focused on the historical evolution of certain ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices. The time window mainly analysed is that included between the Old Kingdom and the Ramesside Age (from the second half of third millennium to the first millennium BCE). However, some considerations are also made for the subsequent historical phases, especially for the specific case of the Tekenu ceremony and the Letters to the Dead.

[145] P. Bourdieu 1977, p. 86.