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

Citation

Schiavo, R. (2024, July 3). *Only the dead can tell us: on ancestor worship, law, social status, and gender norms in ancient Egypt*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3766117

2. On the incorrect use of the label "shamanism" in Egyptology: rethinking Egyptian funerary and mortuary rituals[146]

2.1. The status of ancestor worship in Egyptology

The attention paid to the preservation of the corpses and the importance given to burials are just two of several elements that would seem to suggest a prominent role of the dead within ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. Yet, one of the most eminent Egyptologists of the twentieth century, A.H. Gardiner, stated that the Egyptian never practiced ancestor worship:

> *Sir James Frazer has produced testimony from all quarters of the globe to show how prevalent is the fear of the dead, and how great an influence that fear has exerted upon early customs and behavior. To his question whether the same fear was much in evidence in Ancient Egypt I replied with an unequivocal negative. [...]. At the outset it must be realized that to fear death and to fear the dead are two very different things, though of course they are by no means incompatible, and when combined may very well lead to ancestor-worship, as has happened in China. But of a cult of the ancestor in the Chinese sense there is very little trace in Egypt.[147]*

This was not an isolated case. Even in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie,* under the heading "Ahnenkult", D. Wildung assumed a rather similar position:

> *Einen ausgeprägten Ahnenkult hat es im Rahmen des äg. Totenkults nie gegeben. Die Familiengemeinschaft bleibt zwar über den Tod hinaus erhalten, wird jedoch primär aus Pietät, nicht aus dem*

---

[146] This chapter is an is an extended version of R. Schiavo 2018.
[147] A. H. Gardiner 1935, 7-8.

Gefühl einer Verpflichtung heraus aufrechterhalten und reicht selten weiter als eine oder zwei Generationen zurück. [148]

According to the aforementioned entry of the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* there would be only a few sources pertinent to the interactions between the living and the dead, such as the data related to the domestic cult at Deir el-Medina, the custom of keeping the mummies of the deceased relatives within the houses attested in Greco-Roman Egypt, or certain festivals to celebrate the dead. Moreover, the latter have been often considered as evidence of a marginal phenomenon of the ancient Egyptian religion,[149] or the results of external cultural contaminations.[150]

The denial of the Egyptian ancestor worship has to be explained in the light of multiple factors related with each other. According to J. Lustig, this "resistance stems from an apprehension that Egyptian beliefs will be incorrectly reduced to a 'lower form' of religion, or that the culture will be interpreted as too closely related to Black Africa".[151] One has also to take into consideration that a markedly ethnocentric definition of "ancestor" led to a strict distinction between the labels "cult of the dead" (Totenkult) and "ancestor worship" (Ahnenkult). Indeed, within Egyptology the term "ancestor" has been for a long time intended in a very narrow sense to exclusively indicate "forebears dead for more than two generations".[152] Consequently, several Egyptian sources were not considered as an expression of this kind of belief, only because they mainly pertain to the bond between the deceased father and his living eldest son. In this regard, traditional Egyptological studies have identified a recurrent theme in a number of religious texts, the so-called "Konstellation von Vater und Sohn" concerning a core of beliefs according to which the bond between

---

[148] "There has never been a distinctive ancestral cult in the context of the Egyptian death cult. The family community survives beyond death, but is maintained primarily out of piety, not out of a sense of obligation, and rarely goes back beyond a generation or two". D. Wildung 1975, 111-112.

[149] In this regard see the aforementiond entry of the Lexikon der Ägyptologie: *Ansatzpunkte zu einem Ahnenkult liegen in den Briefen an Tote, im Gespensterglauben, in der Aufstellung von Mumien in Wohnhäusern - und den evtl. als Vorläufer anzusehenden Büsten aus Deir el-Medineh - sowie in den Totenfesten vor, ohne daß sich spezielle Rituale des Ahnenkult herausgebildet hätten.* [Incipient traits of a cult of the ancestors are found within the Letters to the Dead, the beliefs concerning the ghosts and the custom of keeping the mummies inside residential houses – and the busts from Deir el-Medina, which may be considered as precursors of such a custom – and also certain festivals for the dead, without this implying that fully developed ancestral rituals occurred."]. D. Wildung 1975, 111-112.

[150] J. Assmann 2005, 15-16.
[151] J. Lustig 1993, 32.
[152] D. Wildung 1975, 111-112; see also: A. R. Schulman 1986, 312 and note 43.

father and son transcended death.[153] J. Assmann, in this regard, distinguishes two different archetypal models, the so-called "Horus-Konstellation", which pertains to the role of the son as a successor and revenger of his father, and the "Kamutef-Konstellation", which concerns the continuation of the lineage – to be identified with the vital force, the Ka – transmitted from father to son through generations.[154] These latter studies, eminently based on a phenomenological approach, had indeed the merit of identifying a connection between the rites pertaining to the death sphere and the ways in which the social order was maintained and regulated on an ideal level. On the other hand, they were more focused on reconstructing the "archetype of the father" within the ancient Egyptian culture,[155] or exploring the concepts of death as "social isolation" and post-mortem survival as "reintegration into the social sphere" rather than exploring the sociological aspects of ancient Egyptian ancestor worship.[156]

It can be stated that the rise of studies on Egyptian ancestor worship is greatly connected to a fresh definition of "ancestor", indebted to some extent to ethnographic works.[157] To this regard especially an article by I. Kopytoff provided a fresh perspective. In his article. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa", ancestor worship is regarded as a post-mortem continuation of the prominent social structures characterising a society, such as the eldership system among the Sukhu in the specific case he studied.[158] This approach, as a matter of a fact, implied a rethinking of the concept of "ancestor" which allowed Egyptologists to include also the recent dead within the category.[159]

Another factor to be taken into consideration is that Egyptologists used to attach more importance to certain religious phenomena still crucial in the monotheistic traditions – above all the positive hereafter characterising and the rise of personal piety – at the expense of other phenomena, like the ones involving the interactions between the living and the dead.[160] It follows that most works concerning Egyptian ancestor worship were mainly focused on house-cults, while little attention has been given to funerary and mortuary

---

[153] J. Assmann 1976, 12-49; J. Holaubek 1986), 913-915.
[154] J. Assmann 1976, 32-33.
[155] J. Assmann 1976, 32-33.
[156] J. Assmann 1986, 659-664; J. Assmann 1976, 12-49 and 155-162; . Assmann 2005, 39-63.
[157] Above all: I. Kopytoff 1971, 129-142; M. Fortes 1966, 122-144. J.C. Calhoun 1980, 304-319.
[158] I. Kopytoff 1971.
[159]Notably, the aforementioned paper by Kopytoff, has been cited in all the first Egyptological works focused on Egyptian ancestor worship. Cf. R.J. Demarée 1983, 288 and note 40; J. Baines 1987, 81 and note 8; Lustig 1993, 30-44.
[160] Similar considerations have been made by Nyord 2018, 73-87.

liturgies, probably because there was a certain tendency in highlighting their function within the post-mortem rebirth into a new existence in the celestial hereafter, rather than considering them as a rite of passage aimed at transforming a dead into an ancestor.[161].

2.2. Egyptian "shamanism" or "dramatic" and "collective rituals"?

While the label "ancestor worship" has been viewed as problematic, especially with regard to certain funerary and mortuary liturgies, there was – and still is – some debate about the existence of an "ancient Egyptian shamanism". As stressed by H. Willems, these "shamanic" interpretations are mostly rooted in the fact that Egyptology has been characterised by a certain tendency to understand religious texts which do not explicitly mention divine names as being more archaic than other similar sources containing explicit mythological references, a kind of approach stemming from a passive absorption of earlier anthropological views.[162]

Indeed, a number of scholars have used the label "shamanism" to describe certain Egyptian religious practices, above all the Opening of the Mouth Ritual scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker feast. Within these studies, the use of the label shamanism appears inextricably linked to an historical reconstruction aimed at explaining the aforementioned rituals in terms of "living fossils" of archaic practices, which have been often identified with some hypothetical aspects of the predynastic and protodynastic religion.

Such an interpretative framework is debatable from several points of view. First, it is clearly an expression of the so-called "survival theory", typical of the 19th century unilineal evolutionistic approach, which is currently considered obsolete and dismissed as ethnocentric.[163] Furthermore, the use of the word "shamanism" *per se* is still the object of heated and controversial debates within both Anthropology and history of religions. It is necessary, thus, to spent a few words on the term "shamanism" and the different meanings it has assumed within academic religious studies.

The criticisms pertaining to the use of the label "shamanism" involves several intricate issues – such as the legacy of Mircea Eliade's works[164] and the scientific status of the

---

[161] Remarkable exceptions: R. J. Demarée 1983, 190-276; H. Willems 2001, 369; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 90; J. Lustig 1993, 33-44; N. Harrington 2013, 28-33. R. Nyord 2018, 78; C. Riggs 2014, 89.
[162] H. Willems 2013.
[163] H. Willems 2013; W. Paden 2004, 72-92.
[164] For a wider overview on this topic see: L. Ambasciano 2014.

comparative method,[165] the rise of new religious movements[166] and the question of cultural appropriation[167] – some of which go well beyond the focus of the present dissertation.[168] Yet, some essential explanations are needed in order to define the object and the aims of the present chapter.

Simplifying the current state of the art, the label "shamanism" has been used in the scientific literature with a wide range of meanings, among which it is possible to recognise two main uses.[169] The first one is a "broad definition", which, heavily in debt to Mircea Eliade's works, considers "shamanism" as the "archaic technique of ecstasy".[170] The terms "ecstasy", or "trance", indicates a *modus operandi* adopted by certain ritualists – the "shamans" – which are able to achieve an altered state of consciousness, often (but not necessarily) through the use of music, dancing or psychoactive substances; achieving this special condition would allow the shaman to interact with the superhuman sphere and manipulate the spirits to perform several kinds of ceremonies, included healing rituals.[171] Within the broad definition, the technique of ecstasy is usually considered "archaic" because it would coincide with one of the most ancient stages of any form of religion. According to Eliade, shamanism would have characterised the whole humanity during the Paleolithic and, consequently, vestiges of it, or spurious forms of it, could be identified in any cultural context, without admitting geographic or historical limits.[172] A second

---

[165] W. Paden 2004; P. Xella 2003.

[166] H. Rydving 2011.

[167] Especially on this issue, see: A.B. Kehoe 2000.

[168] For an overview on this topic, see: H.-P. Francfort, R. Hamayon and P. G. Bahn 1997.

[169] H. Rydving 2011.

[170] "Une première définition de ce phénomène complexe, et peut-être la moins hasardeuse, sera : chamanisme = technique de l'extase." [A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = technique of ecstasy]. M. Eliade 1968, 22.

[171] M. Eliade 1968, 154-156.

[172] To be precise, the idea of ecstasy as the original form of religion is not fully expressed in the first edition of *Chamanisme* (although clearly latent), but this is strengthened more and more in Elidian thought through time. It is indeed fully formulated within the subsequent editions of the volume. See for example M. Eliade 1968, p. 391: « Ce qui semble certain, c'est l'ancienneté de rituels et de symboles « chamaniques ». Il faudra encore déterminer si les documents mis à jour par les découvertes préhistoriques représentent les premières expressions d'un chamanisme *in statu nascendi* ou s'ils sont uniquement les premiers documents dont nous disposions aujourd'hui et concernant un complexe religieux plus ancien qui n'a, cependant, pas trouvé de manifestations « plastiques » (dessins, objets rituels, etc.) avant la période de Lascaux. ». [What is certain is that the rituals and the symbols of "shamanism" are quite ancient. It will still be necessary to determine whether the documents brought to light by prehistoric discoveries represent the first expressions of a shamanism *in statu nascendi* or if they are only the first documents that we have today concerning an older religious complex which, however, did not find any "plastic" manifestations (drawings, ritual objects, etc.) before the Lascaux period."]. Also, in the same edition, Eliade underlines that it is impossible to identify pure, authentic forms of shamanism in historical times. (Ibid. pp. 27-28). According to him, the "less degraded" attestation would be recognizable within the North and Central Asia, while other kinds of shamanism recognizable in other geographical context would represent "more deteriorated form" of this original archaic religion. It is clear, at this point, that Eliade postulates the existence of an archaic form of religion to be

definition, instead, employs the term in a more restricted sense, by considering shamans and their techniques as a regional phenomenon typical of Siberia and North Eurasia[173] and, according to some scholars, to be historically linked with some traditional practices attested in both North and South America.[174]

As a matter of a fact, both the broad and the narrow use of the term have been object of criticisms. Especially the historical paradigm strictly intertwined with the broad definition has been considered misleading, since it risks reducing complex religious phenomena attested within diverse cultural contexts just as mere "survivals" of a presumed archaic religion rather than as specific expressions of the societies in which they occur. The restricted use of the term has been considered misleading too, since several specialists have pointed out how even within restricted geographical contexts the diverse religious facts labelled as "shamanism" could be rather different to each other, thus adopting the term "shamanism" could entail the risk of oversimplifications. As stressed by Rydving:

> *Les concepts de « chamane » et de « chamanisme » ont créé une illusion d'homogénéité (régionale ou mondiale). Ils nous laissent croire que nous comprenons les phénomènes que nous prétendons étudier, alors qu'en réalité le risque est qu'ils nous empêchent de bien les comprendre. Concluons que le temps est venu d'abandonner ces termes comme concepts comparatifs ».[175]*

In this regard, it has been proposed (but it is not a solution unanimously accepted) to limit the use of the term to those contexts in which the words "shamanism" or "shaman" are consciously used by practitioners to define themselves, thus the Evenks of North West Asia (from whose language the term "shaman" derives), but also modern religious phaenomena typical of the contemporary globalised world, such as New Age and Neo-pagan

---

identified with an unattested form of shamanism. For a detailed analysis of the evolution of Elidian thought concerning this aspect, see: L. Ambasciano 2014, 69-73.

[173] H. Rydving 2011.

[174] See, for example, Ph. Descola 2013, 22-24.

[175] "The concepts of "shaman" and "shamanism" have created an illusion of homogeneity (regional or global). They let us believe that we understand the phenomena that we pretend to study, when in reality the risk is that they prevent us from understanding them well. Let us conclude that the time has come to abandon these terms as comparative concepts". H. Rydving 2011, p. 28.

movements, or syncretic religious phenomena, which, paradoxically, have been somewhat developed from the popularity gained by the works of M. Eliade and other scholars in pop culture.[176]

Finally, it is necessary to briefly consider a vibrant debate within the cognitive science of religions. A recent work by M. Singh has reshaped the broad definition of shamanism in light of evolutionary psychology. Here the shamans are described as specialists able of providing services to their community – such as healing practices, or divination – by controlling superhuman agents and the ways they affect human life through a special knowledge (initiation) and techniques (such as the trance) which finds their foundation in what Singh defines as "the drama of strangeness".[177] The latter is explained in the following way:

> *I propose that many features of shamanism, including trance, peculiarity, initiation practices, and self-denial, are selectively retained because they serve to transform the practitioner. By violating folk intuitions for how a human should behave, practitioners convince onlookers of their heightened supernatural powers or experiences. This hypothesis does not necessitate that trance states have the same neurological and physiological correlates across societies, although similar triggers (e.g., hallucinogens and music) likely produce analogous experiences. The theatrical nature of trance does not mean that an individual engaged in it is faking. In fact, cultural selection should favor interventions that convince both the client and the shaman of the shaman's ability, as long as the client's perception of successful treatment is influenced by the shaman's faith.[178]*

According to Singh, shamanic practices and beliefs are rather "resilient" and religious facts characterised by the so-called "drama of strangeness" can be identified in diverse cultural

---

[176] H. Rydving 2011, 28-29.
[177] M. Singh 2018.
[178] M. Singh 2018, 7.

and historical contexts because these are a kind of belief able to "hack" some universal cognitive dispositions characterising the human mind, especially in social contexts where information and control of unpredictable events are needed.[179]

Singh's work elicited a number of reactions but also in this case there was no lack of criticism. P. Boyer, for example, stressed that, although Singh's model "needs to be supplemented at several crucial points, in terms of anthropological evidence, psychological processes, and cultural transmission", it is however possible to recognise a recurrent pattern of beliefs which occurs within several human cultures, and which, roughly speaking, coincides with what M. Singh has labelled as "shamanism". Yet, even though Boyer is partially inclined to recognise the existence of a group of religious phenomena, which show a certain familiarity with each other, and he also states that it would be possible to adopt the label "shamanism" as a heuristic operative term to study them,[180] at the same time, he is very clear in underlining that this pattern of beliefs is so common that such a wide cross-cultural diffusion cannot be explained exclusively in term of historical transmission from an original, archaic form. Rather, he underlines that "this combination of assumptions was reinvented probably many times in human cultures" because it is something "easy" to think and believe.[181]

Another criticism of foremost importance for the topic treated in this thesis has been provided by R. Kapitány and C. Kavanagh. According to these two scholars, it is hard to distinguish between the pattern of beliefs identified by Singh as "shamanism" and other kinds of ritualistic or performative actions. Especially the element chosen by Singh as a distinctive trait of shamanic practices, "the drama of strangeness" is not enough well determined to demarcate a difference between the latter and any other kind of "dramatic ritual". This term indicates any kind of ritual aimed at causing a certain effect on an individual or on an entire community, which is enacted in the form of a dramatic performance and could involve a more or less large audience:

> *Rituals, in general, do much of the other work of the shaman: they*
> *can manage uncertain outcomes effectively, alleviate anxiety*

---

[179] M. Singh 2018, 17.
[180] P. Boyer 2018, 22.
[181] P. Boyer 2018, 22; see also: P. Boyer 2020.

associated with a lack of control, and imbue objects with special significance, all while serving as markers of identity and commitment. Singh acknowledges that the possession of physical oddities and the performance of initiations and ascetic practices also serve as potent indicators of transformation. This leaves us with the question, though: what then separates such actions from the trance category in Singh's model? Is it just another name for dramatic rituals?[182]

It could be stated, thus, that although the label shamanism is still used in certain scientific contexts to indicate a common pattern of beliefs – whose distinctive features are anyway hardly distinguishable from other phenomena – the interpretative scheme that identifies shamanism as the primordial religion, whose spurious traces can be identified in all human contexts, has been dismissed in the scientific literature, since it entails misleading historical interpretations. On the other hand, the category of "dramatic rituals" highlighted by R. Kapitánya and C. Kavanagh can turn out to be a useful heuristic tool to better understand the ancient Egyptian rituals here taken into consideration. Dramatic rituals are indeed characterised by the presence and the participation of an audience which can be more or less large. The heuristic label of "dramatic rituals" can therefore overlap that of "collective ritual" when the latter involves the participation of a larger audience, such as whole kin-groups, if not the whole community.

To investigate the ancient Egyptian rituals erroneously labelled as "shamanic" in the light of the categories herein identified as "dramatic" and "collective ritual" is certainly useful to answering the research questions of the present thesis. Indeed, law scholars have strongly emphasised how these kinds of religious performances could play a foremost role in the administration of justice. The presence of a large audience, and thus of a large number of people which can testify to what the ritual aims to sanction, but also the authority provided by shared religious beliefs, can indeed create the perfect occasion to control the behaviours of the community "by assigning social roles and influencing the ritual subject, as well as

---

[182] R. Kapitánya and C. Kavanagh, 2018, 29.

others in the society, to accept the roles so assigned as a natural and appropriate part of the subject's identity".[183]

2.3 Aims and methodology

The present chapter has two main purposes. On one hand, it aims to prove – as already stated by H. Willems[184] – whether the previous studies concerning the so-called "Egyptian shamanism" can constitute an example of an over-simplified comparative method, which involves a misleading interpretation of certain Egyptian rituals – the scenes 9 and 10 of the Opening of the Mouth ritual, the Tekenu ritual, the Haker feast – and their historical formation and evolution. The main aim is that of reconsidering the aforementioned rituals within the specific framework of ancient Egyptian culture, by interpreting them as "dramatic rituals" related to the cult of the ancestors.

In order to pursue these objectives, the chapter has been articulated in three main parts:

- An overview of the previous studies concerning the main Egyptian rituals that have been interpreted as survivals of "archaic shamanic practices": the Opening of the Mouth Ritual (OMR), the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker festival.

- A critical review of the studies concerning the so-called Egyptian shamanism in order to evaluate the manner in which this concept influenced the field of Egyptology, often in implicit or uncritical ways.

- An analysis of the actual textual and iconographic data in order to verify whether it is possible to refute the main arguments used to sustain the existence of an archaic shamanic substratum surviving in the funerary and mortuary rituals here considered.

---

[183] G. P. Miller 2005, 1226.
[184] H. Willems 2013.

2.4 Overview of the main Egyptian rituals that have been interpreted as survivals of "archaic shamanic practices"

2.4.a The Opening of the Mouth Ritual

The modern label "Opening of the Mouth" derives from the literal translation of the names that the Egyptians themselves gave to an articulated series of ritual actions: *wp.t-rˁ* (more common), or *wn-rˁ*. Both expressions can be translated as "opening of the mouth", but the verbs *wpi* (Wb 1, 298.7301.12) and *wn* (Wb 1, 311.2-312.11) are not exactly synonyms: the first one indicates the idea of "opening by separating or dividing"; the second, instead, entails the meaning of "opening up to make something accessible".[185]

Such terminological issues make it clear how complex the topic is. The OMR – or it would be better to say, the collection of ritual liturgies and vignettes currently known under this label – was performed on a wide range of "objects": cultic statues portraying deceased or gods, corpses of both human beings and sacred animals, amulets and even buildings.

To identify the occasions during which the OMR was enacted is another intricate subject. Indeed, the OMR was performed on corpses of both human beings and sacred animals, but it is necessary to make a distinction. A ritualised forced opening of the oral cavity certainly occurred during the embalming process;[186] according to ancient Egyptian written sources, it was practised after the evisceration and dehydration of the corpse, but before the wrapping of the mummy.[187] At the same time, it is well attested that the OMR was performed also after the completion of the mummification, during the funerary rituals on both mummified corpses or coffins. Another important context of the OMR concerns the cultic statues portraying kings, deceased persons or gods. It is proven that part of the ritual – notably the one frequently interpreted as "shamanic" – was specifically meant for the creation of cultic statues.[188] Moreover, the OMR was certainly performed on the statues of the deceased during the mortuary rituals. Likewise, it was also enacted within the daily temple ritual on cultic statues of deified dead and gods. Finally, certain sources testify that the OMR could be performed even for the consecration of whole cultic buildings.[189]

---

[185] A.M. Roth 2001.
[186] R. Seiler and F. Rühli 2015.
[187] Although we do not have information about the embalming procedures performed on human bodies, P. Vindob 3873 provides a detailed description of this procedure for the embalming rituals of the sacred Apis Bulls. Cf. R.L. Vos 1993, 62-63 and 92-93. According to several scholars it is highly likely that the procedure performed on human remains was rather similar. Cf. A. Dodson 2009.
[188] The scientific literature concerning this topic is treated in the following paragraphs.
[189] A.M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman 1942, 75-91; J.F. Quack 2015.

The OMR was indeed one of the most prominent Egyptian religious ceremonies and it is attested throughout the whole Egyptian history from the Old Kingdom to late antiquity.[190] The first attestation of the term *wp.t-rˁ* occurs within the tomb of an elite member, Metjen, a high official who lived between the 3rd and the 4th dynasties. Specifically, the term appears here twice, and it is associated with both the *sꜣḥ.w*-rituals and the censing (*snṯr*) ceremony. Moreover, it is also said that the ceremony is performed by an embalmer (*wti*), so it has been hypothesised that the OMR, here, is to be connected to the funerary rites.[191] Among the oldest attestations concerning the rite there is also a passage from the so-called Palermo Stone, which instead refers to temple cultic activities concerning a statue of the god Ihy; here, it is said that the artifact was "fashioned" (the verb used is "*mst*", so, literally "born") and, once the OMR was performed on it, the sculpture was carried in procession to the temple of Hathor.[192]

Even though the attestations related to this ceremony can be found already during the most ancient phases of Egyptian history, the first most detailed information dates back to the New Kingdom, when vignettes accompanied by captions concerning this rite began to be reproduced with a certain frequency in tombs, monuments, stelae or other artifacts. There is not a single tomb, monument or object, in which the OMR is entirely represented. All the scenes currently known were collected, numbered and analysed for the first time by E. Otto in 1960,[193] and much of our knowledge about the OMR for the historical phases preceding the New Kingdom strongly depends on his work.

In the light of all these data, it is no wonder that the exact function of the rite is still not fully understood. The ceremony was certainly reformulated more than once and the context in which the OMR originated (embalming procedure, funerary rituals, mortuary rituals, or temple cultic practices) is still debated. One has also to take into consideration that what the Egyptian labelled as *wp.t-rˁ* or *wn-rˁ* in historical times, appears to be an amalgamation of different ceremonies likely originally meant for diverse purposes and reshaped within a large number of contexts already in Old Kingdom sources. According to E. Otto, in a

---

[190] I.S. Moyer and J. Dieleman 2003; M. Smith 1993.
[191] O. Zorn and D. Bisping-Isermann 2011, 59-60.
[192] T.A.H. Wilkinson 2000, 172-175.
[193] E. Otto 1960.

completely theoretical perspective, it would be possible to identify six main typologies of ceremonies that, at some point in Egyptian history, merged into what we call OMR[194]:

- Statue ritual

- Sacrificial ritual

- Embalming ritual

- Funeral ritual

- Battle ritual

Yet, it is practically impossible to reconstruct the whole historical evolution of the OMR, although several antecedents of the New Kingdom scenes collected by Otto can be identified already in the Pyramid Texts.[195]

The origin of the diverse parts of the ceremony is still debated. For example, A. M. Roth has sustained that the parts of the OMR involving specific tools, such as the *psš-kf* blade or the "little finger" would have originated in certain funerary rituals which mimicked the birth and maturation of the infant to grant new life for the deceased.[196] According to R. van Walsem, instead, the OMR scenes involving the *psš-kf* blade would have developed from archaic embalming procedures, and the Pyramid Texts spells, in which this tool occurs would testify that the original function of this part of the ritual was already reshaped during the Old Kingdom and reintegrated within an offering ceremony.[197]

As regards the main topic of the present section, it must be highlighted that some scenes of the OMR often lack explicit mention of divine names. Being the ritual actions described in such scenes also known from other sources which provides a "mythologised version" of the same ritual actions, several scholars interpreted these passages from the OMR as more ancient than the other ritual texts.[198] This is particular true for the scenes 9 and 10, which concerns the preliminary phases of the statue ritual, with a special focus on the first stages of its construction. These scenes were described by E. Otto as "archaic" and by several other scholars as a survival of ancient shamanic practices. In particular the presumed

[194] E. Otto 1960, Vol. II, p. 2.
[195] E. Otto 1960, Vol. II, 4-7; R. van Walsem 1978-1979; H. Altenmüller 2009, 10.
[196] A. M. Roth 1992; A. M. Roth 1993.
[197] R. van Walsem 1978-1979.
[198] E. Otto 1950, Vol. I, 168-170.

shamanic traits of OMR scenes 9 and 10 have been recognised in the description of a peculiar a ritual sleep (*sḏr*) with involve a kind of oneiric vision performed by the *sem* priest.[199]

2.4.b The Tekenu ritual

The Tekenu ritual is known only thanks to wall depictions in elite tombs and the related captions[200] Unlike the OMR, previous studies have not been able to identify references to this ceremony within Egyptian religious literature, such as Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts etc, with the consequence that the available information is few and difficult to interpret.[201]

Some scholars have claimed to have identified depictions of the Tekenu in some predynastic and proto-dynastic artifacts. However, the lack of explicit captions and the very elusive nature of the sources make this hypothesis inconsistent.[202] The first undoubted depiction currently known is a relief representation in a late 5th dynasty tomb, while the last occurrences date to the Saite Period. However, it must be underlined that only a few sources belong to the Old and the Middle Kingdoms and most of attestations date to the 18th and, partially, to the 19th dynasty.[203]

As the name indicates, the ceremony revolves around the Tekenu, but what the latter might be is still debated. Its iconographic representations are quite varied, as well as the ritual actions in which the Tekenu is involved. Based on the shape, four main typologies can be distinguished (Fig. 1):[204]

1) a shapeless sack dragged on a sledge;

2) an anthropomorphic figure, wrapped in a piece of leather (denominated *msk3* in some captions), crouching or lying on a sledge;

3) an anthropomorphic figure crouched on a bed and wrapped in the *msk3*-skin;

4) a standing anthropomorphic figure portrayed while holding the *msk3*-skin.

---

[199] See chapter 2, section 2.5.

[200] Only a depiction of the Tekenu is attested on a Sarcophagus, see section 3.2 table 2 document 39. For the analysis of all the captions concerning the Tekenu, see chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b.

[201] C. Theis 2011, 138; G. West 2019, 6.

[202] G. West 2019, 239 -246.

[203] See chapter 3, section 3.2, tables 1, 2 and 3.

[204] For the iconographic classification, I slightly followed the categorization established by G. West 2019, 25-26.
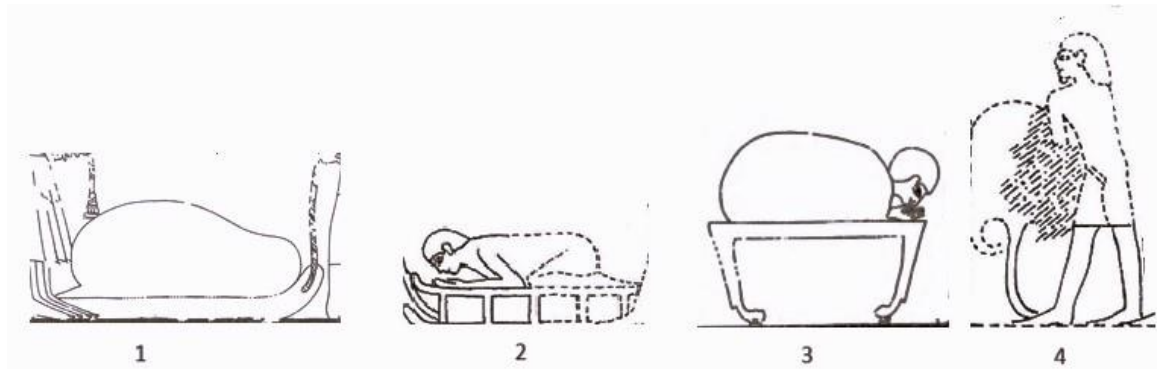
Figure 1 Different typologies of Tekenu

Even the etymology of the Egyptian word *tkn/tknw/tiknw* is obscure.[205] Given the lack of a determinative, E. Lefébure has hypothesised that it could be a non-Egyptian term, perhaps la loan word to indicate a foreign ethnic group.[206] Others, instead, connected the word with the verb *tkn* (Wb 5, 333.10-335), usually flanked by the D54 sign (two legs), which literally means "to be near", "to draw near", "to approach". Following this interpretation, a translation "neighbour" or "the one who approaches" has been suggested.[207] Especially Gerard van der Leeuw proposed as a possible meaning "the one who is near" and, thus "familiar", "close".[208]

The scenes representing the Tekenu and the captions related to them provide some information, but not enough to fully understand the ceremony. As a consequence, the scientific literature on the topic provides a number of interpretations often conflicting with each other. Since the representations of the Tekenu on tomb walls are accompanied by the depictions of other rituals, the function and the nature of the Tekenu has been frequently investigated in the light of a broader framework which considered the latter as connected with these other ceremonies.[209] The main hypotheses can be summarised as follows:

---

[205] This aspect has been elaborated further in chapter 3, section 3.2.1a.
[206] E. Lefébure 1900.
[207] J. G. Griffiths 1958, 120; A. El-Shahawy 2005, 54.
[208] G. van der Leeuw, 1938, 164.
[209] K. Paraskeva 2013, 40, 42, 65 and 43; G. West 2019, 195-207.

1) The Tekenu and the funerary procession

The most frequent representation of the Tekenu depicts it within the funerary processions leading the corpse to the tomb.[210] Given that, within this iconographic pattern the Tekenu is usually depicted together with the body of the deceased and his canopic chest, several scholars have claimed that the Tekenu can be identified with an object made of the "waste" of the mummification process and, currently, this is one of the most accredited theories among Egyptologists.[211]
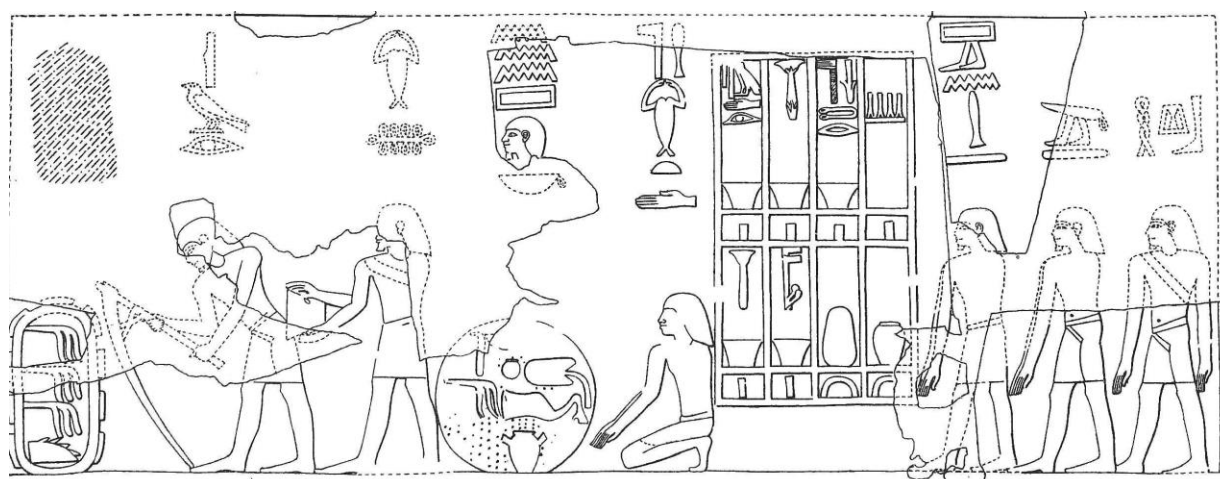

Figure 2 Remains of a slaughtered bull placed inside a pit

Although the captions never refer to the Tekenu as a part of the deceased's body, a depiction in TT20 seems to suggest that the *msk3*-skin covering the Tekenu was buried in a pit located in the vicinity of the tomb (Fig 2) and, remarkably, archaeological excavations have revealed the existence of pits located within the necropolises actually used as "intentional deposits of waste created during the mummification process".[212] However, as stressed by C. Theis, none of these remains seem to resemble the peculiar shape of the Tekenu.[213]

2) The Tekenu and the human sacrifices

The identification of the Tekenu with a human sacrifice – real or in a fictitious ritualised form to be meant as the survival of an archaic practice – is mainly based on a wall scene depicted in TT 20, a tomb belonging to a high official who lived during the 18th dynasty.[214]

---

[210] See chapter 3, section 3.2.1b.
[211] E. Hornung 1992, 69; S. Ikram and A. Dodson 1998, 108-109; J. Assmann 2005, 301.
[212] C. Knoblauch 2016, 329.
[213] C. Theis 2011, 35-36 and 138.
[214] E. Lefébure 1900, 161; G. Maspero 1909, 31; A. Moret 1922, 45; contra: J. G. Griffiths 1958, 114-120.

In this scene,[215] two representations related to the Tekenu ceremony – one concerning the Tekenu lying on a sledge (type 1) and the other portraying the Tekenu as a standing man (type 4) – are accompanied by the depiction of a ritualised strangling of Nubian prisoners, which are flanked by two other prisoners represented in a pose rather similar to that of the Tekenu type 1 (Fig. 3).[216] Ritualised killings of enemies are attested in Egypt during both proto-historical and historical times;[217] and, as stressed by U. Matić, it is possible to establish a connection between these presumed human sacrifices and the execration rituals certainly attested in pharaonic Egypt.[218] Yet, the identification of the Tekenu itself with the real or symbolic victim of these sacrifices is problematic. As a matter of a fact – even though this theory has been revived again in a recent monograph[219] – the only argument in support of this theory is given by the depiction of the Nubian prisoners in TT 20 and, remarkably, the latter are never expressly indicated in the inscriptions as a Tekenu, while in the other representations of the Tekenu occurring in the same tombs, the captions are very explicit in this regard (cf. Fig.3, first register).

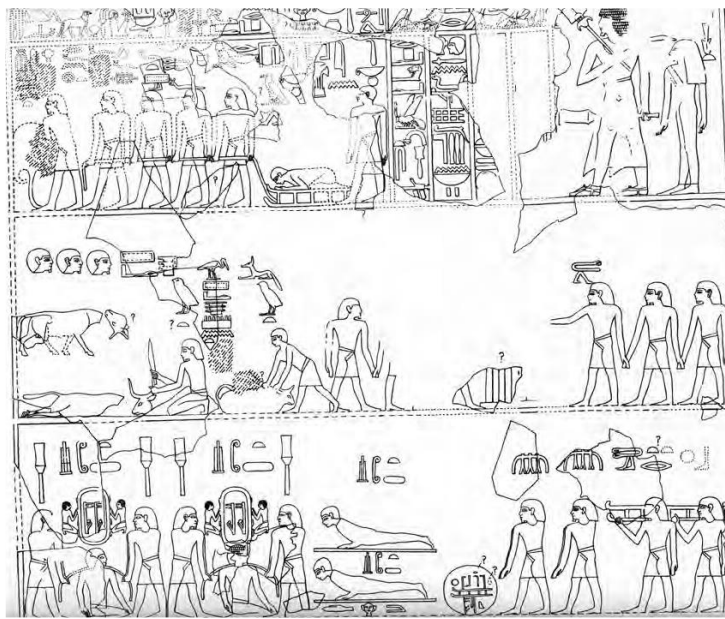*Figure 3 TT 20 - The dragging of the Tekenu and the Tekenu standing with the msk3-skin (first register); the ritualised killing of Nubian prisoners (third register)*

By analysing the whole figurative repertoire of this tomb,[220] it seems that the articulated funerary ritual, which involved the Tekenu, entailed also an execration ritual. The depiction of the human sacrifices – regardless of whether they were real or fictitious – has thus to be linked to this phase of the ceremony rather than be identified with the Tekenu itself.

---

[215] TT 20 is the tomb in which the Tekenu has the greatest number of representations. It occurs three times: it is depicted twice while being dragged on a sledge; and once as a standing man holding the *msk3*-skin.
See: G. West 2019, 213-214. See also chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b, documents 19 and 21.
[216] G. West 2019, 208-223.
[217] U. Matić 2020.
[218] U. Matić 2020, 25-28.
[219] K. Muhlestein 2011, 34-37.
[220] G. West 2019, 208-223.

3)   The Tekenu and the so-called Butic Burial /Holy District/Sacred Temenos

The Tekenu appears to be inextricably linked with another figurative theme typical of New Kingdom elite tombs: the so-called Butic Burial.[221] The latter, also known as "Sacred istrict/Heiliges Bezirk", "Rites in the Garden", "Holy district", or "Sacred Temenos", is a modern label used by scholars to indicate a recurrent pattern of scenes depicted in early 18th dynasty tombs and subsequently re-proposed within the iconographic repertoire of Late Period tombs.[222] The representation was readapted and modified in each tomb, but it is possible to identify some fixed distinctive traits, such as the erection of two obelisks, the Hall of the *Mww*-dancers, a landscape characterised by a pool surrounded by trees, an area dedicated to the slaughter of bovids, an area with three pools dedicated to the gods Sokar, Khepri and Heqet.[223] Also, the Butic Burial seems to be somewhat connected to the representations of pilgrimages to the main Egyptian holy cities, such as Buto (*Ḏbꜣ*)/ Pe and Dep (*P, Dp*), Sais (*Šꜣw*), Busiris (*Ḏdw*), Heliopolis (*Ỉwnw*) and Abydos (*ꜣbḏw*).[224] However, it must also be mentioned that these pilgrimages had probably a symbolic meaning, indicating the specific moments during which certain rituals were enacted or a specific point on the funerary procession route, rather than depicting actual journeys to diverse sacred places.[225]

Although the Butic Burial is often considered as a typical element of elite New Kingdom tombs, some of its characterising features are certainly much older, and it has been posited that this pattern of iconographic themes could be understood as a reformulation of previous, more ancient rituals. The scenes depicting the dragging of the Tekenu and the *Mww*-dancers are already attested in Old Kingdom tombs.[226] As for the three pools dedicated to Sokar, Khepri and Heqet, H. Willems has identified a quite similar ritual in CT 234, where the four basins of Khepri and Heqet are mentioned.[227] Likewise the ritualised erection of the

---

[221] J. Settgast 1963, 58-61; H. Altenmüller 1975 A, 1-9; J. G. Griffiths 1958; G. West 2019, 204-207.
[222] A. Wilkinson 1994, 391; K.-A. Diamond 2012, 98-99; C. Theis 2011, 126.
[223] J. Settgast 1963, 49-50; A. Wilkinson 1994, 391-392; C. Theis 2011, 126 and ff.
[224] K. -A. Diamond 2010, 16, 26-27, 58; J. Assmann 2011, 305-308; C. Theis 2011, 126 and ff.
[225] H. Willems 1988, 157 and ff.
[226] H. Altenmüller 1975 A, 9.
[227] H. Willems 1996, 110-113.

two obelisks could be interpreted as the reformulation of a similar depiction attested within the *object frieze* of a Middle Kingdom coffin.[228]

Other scholars have even hypothesised that the Butic Burial could be considered the "survival" of an archaic funerary ceremony originally celebrated for the prehistoric chiefs of Buto (also known as the double city of Pe and Dep), hence the name. According to this interpretation, the aforementioned *Mww*-dancers would be the souls of the ancient rulers of this locality, the Bas of Pe (*b3.w P*), and, indeed, some passages of the Pyramid Texts – Pyr. 1004/5 and 1974/5 – refer to the dancing souls of Pe, which welcome the deceased to the netherworld.[229] It must be said, however, that the existence of the prehistoric reign of Buto is not well documented and, therefore, the aforementioned souls of Pe would be more mythological than historical.[230] H. Altenmüller, in this regard, identifies the *Mww*-dancers with the ferrymen who had to lead the deceased into the netherworld, and also acted as guardians of the liminal space between the realm of the living and that of the dead.[231] Yet, as Altenmüller himself points out, given the multiple associations between diverse mythological entities typical of ancient Egyptian religion, an assimilation of those mythological ferrymen with the Souls of Pe is not to be excluded.[232]

The whole scene of the Butic Burial appears to be focused on the concept of liminality. In this regard, the symbolism of the three aforementioned pools dedicated to Sokar, Khepri, and Heqet is particularly indicative, since they were respectively associated with death, transformation, and post-mortem rebirth.[233] Moreover, as stressed by H. Willems, these basins were certainly involved in purification rituals which played an important role in the OMR enacted on the mummy of the deceased at the end of the funerary procession, and in the ritual of the sleeping Tekenu.[234] Indeed, it is quite likely that the Butic Burial was something more than a mere mythological or symbolic representation. These scenes probably portrayed a phase of the funerary rituals, and several scholars have identified the representations of the Butic Burial with an actual ritual area, located between the embalming hall and the tomb, that functioned as a theatrical setting for a ceremony concerning the passage from the realm of the living to that of the dead. This dramatic ritual

---

[228] H. Willems 1996, 113-114.
[229] H. Junker 1940, 24-28.
[230] T. von der Way 2001, 219.
[231] H. Altenmüller 1975 A, 36-37.
[232] H. Altenmüller 1975 A, 36-37.
[233] H. Willems 1996, 114-115; A. Wilkinson 1994, 391.
[234] H. Willems 1996, 110-112.

had to be performed after the embalming procedure, but before the inhumation of the mummified body into the tomb.[235]

4)   The Tekenu and the Opening of the Mouth

As stressed above, the Tekenu can be represented as an anthropomorphic figure lying on a bed (type 3) and, according to the captions, when the Tekenu is portrayed in this pose it is involved in a ritual sleep indicated by the Egyptian term *sḏr*.[236] This is the same verb used for the ritualised sleeping of the *sem* priest described in the scenes 9 and 10 of the OMR; moreover, some of the Tekenu-related captions say that, at some point of the funerary rituals, the *msk3*-skin covering the Tekenu had to be removed[237] and, notably, the verb used is *sfḫ*, the same word used in the OMR scene 19 to describe the change of garment of the *sem* priest before wearing the leopard-skin.[238]

Also, in a restricted number of tombs, both the depictions of the sleeping Tekenu and the sleeping *sem* priest appear to be somewhat linked with each other: TT 100, where the two rituals are depicted in two opposite walls of the same room; TT 295, where, within the representation of the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the verb *sḏr* used to describe the ritual sleep of the *sem* priest is written with an unusual determinative, which strongly resemble the Tekenu sleeping on a bed (type 3).[239]

Given the presence of a the ritual sleep within the Tekenu ceremony, it has been pointed out that the Tekenu may be identified with a living human being, specifically with a ritualist who is performing something similar to the ceremony described in OMR scenes 9 and 10. According to some scholars both the *sem* priest and the Tekenu-ritualist could even be identified with the same individual involved in two different ceremonies strictly related to each other.[240] Especially H. Willems has highlighted that, at least according to the New Kingdom sources, both the OMR scenes describing the sleeping *sem* priest and the scenes portraying the sleeping Tekenu might be considered two "iconographically different renderings of the same ceremony".[241] Other scholars, instead, has posited that, although the

---

[235] J. Assmann 2011, 305-308; K.- A. Diamond 2012, 109; H. Willems 1996, 110-112; C. Theis 2011, 126 and ff.
[236] See chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b, documents 20 and 21.
[237] See chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b, documents 18 and 19.
[238] J. M. Serrano Delgado 2011, 161; E. Otto 1960, Vol. II, 41.
[239] J. M. Serrano Delgado 2011, 158.
[240] A. Moret 1922, 46-55; J. G. Griffiths 1958, 115-118; G. Reeder 1994, 59; H. Willems 1996, 111-114. Contra: G. West 2019, 256-262.
[241] H. Willems 1996, 112.

Tekenu might be identified with a living human being acting as a ritualist, there is not enough evidence to identify the latter with the *sem* priest. For example, according to Serrano Delgado, they were probably two distinct ritualists involved in a similar ritual action,[242] while M. Barta identified the Tekenu with the priest of Heqet, who is often mentioned in the captions related to this ritual.[243]

5)   The Tekenu ritual as a dynamic sequence of actions

As already underlined, the iconography of the Tekenu is varied and it appears to be involved in different actions: on a sledge, on a bed, standing (Fig. 1). Furthermore, in a restricted number of cases, more than one depiction of the Tekenu occur in the same tomb.[244] Starting from these assumptions, it has been hypothesised that the diverse representations of Tekenu can be interpreted as different stages of a unique articulated ritual. This hypothesis, proposed for the first time by A. Moret,[245] has recently been supported by both J.M. Serrano Delgado and G. West, but from different points of view. J.M. Serrano Delgado identifies the Tekenu with a ritualist, probably different from the *sem* priest, but involved in a rather similar ceremony, which included the same kind of ritual sleep.[246] West, instead, considers the Tekenu as a symbolic representation of the deceased's Ka and the different actions in which the latter is involved would thus represent its mythical/magical journey to the netherworld.[247]

6)   The Tekenu and the msk3-skin

One of the distinctive elements of the Tekenu ceremony is the central role played by the *msk3*-skin.[248] It is not surprising, thus, that several scholars focused on its possible symbolic meaning. Although the term *msk3* may indicate diverse kinds of animal skins, it is quite probable that, in the specific context of the Tekenu ritual, it refers to a bovine piece of leather.[249] The involvement of this item in the representations of the Tekenu has been explained as the survival of an archaic burial custom according to which the corpses of the rulers were wrapped in the skin of a bull,[250] or with the symbolic connection between bovid

---

[242] J. M. Serrano Delgado 2011, 156.
[243] M. Barta 1999, 116.
[244] See chapter 3, section 3.2, table 2, docs. 9 (TT 125), 10 (TT 11), 19 (TT 20), 23 (TT 100).
[245] A. Moret 1922, 41-100.
[246] J. M. Serrano Delgado 2011, 159-162.
[247] G. West 2019, 232-233.
[248] See chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b, documents 18 and 19.
[249] J. M. Delgado 2011, 151.
[250] A. Moret 1922, 59.

skins and the human placenta, an aspect that should confer to the *mskꜣ*-skin a symbolic regenerative power.[251] Remarkably, the colour of the *mskꜣ*-skin changes according to the type of action in which the Tekenu is involved. As for the depictions of the Tekenu dragged on a sledge, colours may vary (black, red, yellow, sometimes with the typical spots characterising bovids 'coat); instead, white colour – linked to purity and often used for the garments of ritualists – was predominantly associated with the sleeping Tekenu crouched on a bed.[252]

2.4.c The Haker feast

The Haker feast occurred within the annual celebrations of the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos and most of the information to understand its main features has been gleaned from the so-called "Abydos formula" typical of the 12th dynasty. This is composed of a group of "Osirian wishes", a list of requests concerning a desirable post-mortem existence as a follower of Osiris.[253] Although in the Egyptological literature it is often underlined that such wishes would describe the idealised concept of Egyptian afterlife, as a matter of a fact, they mainly concern the association of the mortuary cult of a deceased person with the cult of Osiris, the dead wishing to participate in the processions celebrated at Abydos and to enjoying the offerings given to this god.[254]

It has been hypothesised that the name of the feast, *hꜣkr*, could derive by the first words of a liturgy chanted during this celebration – *hꜣi=k r=i* – whose meaning, "come down to me", was interpreted as an appeal of the son/Horus searching for the soul of his deceased father in the netherworld, or a more generical invocation directed to Osiris or Ra.[255] However it must be stressed that there is no concrete evidence to support this hypothesis.[256]

One of the first attestations of the Abydos formula referring to the Haker feast can be identified in a Letter to the Dead – the Louvre bowl – belonging to the second half of the 11th dynasty.[257] Subsequently, the Haker feast occurs in a number of Middle Kingdom stelae from Abydos, all belonging to high functionaries, in a restricted number of Coffin Text spells and in some chapters of the Book of the Dead. Given that the Haker feast is not

---

[251] A. Moret 1922, 50-51; C. Spieser 2006, 232.
[252] G. West 2019, 191-192.
[253] G. Griffith 1977, 929-930; see: M. Lichtheim 1988, 55-58 and 129-134; Z. Végh 2021, 322-333.
[254] M. Smith 2017, 232-235.
[255] W. Helck 1952, 78; G. Griffith 1977, 929-930.
[256] G. Griffith 1977, 930.
[257] A. Piankoff and J. J. Clère 1934, 157-158; Z. Végh 2021, 326.

mentioned in the Pyramid Texts or in other Old Kingdom sources, it is thought to have arisen with the advent of the Middle Kingdom.[258]

The Haker feast was strictly linked to the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos, but to establish the exact moment in which it was enacted within this articulated celebration is still subject of debate, also because, considering the current data, to reconstruct the diverse phases of the Middle Kingdom Mysteries is a difficult undertaking, and unanimous consensus was not still reached among scholars.[259]

One firm point is that the Mysteries were structured as mimicking the funerary rituals for Osiris and involved a theatrical performance – perhaps in the form of a simple chanted recitation – concerning the highlights of the Osiris myth.[260] From the currently available sources, the Middle Kingdom Mysteries appear to have been characterised by a series of processions, during which the sculpture or the emblem of Osiris was carried out of his temple at Abydos and transported to his presumed tomb at Poqer, (modern Umm el-Qa'ab), which was the actual sepulchre of a 1st dynasty king, probably Djer, subsequently identified as the very burial of the god Osiris himself.[261] The sources refer of a "First Procession" (*pr.t tp.t*) strictly linked to another procession dedicated to the god the Upuat (*pr.t Wp-w3.wt*).[262] During this first stage the emblem of Osiris was transported from his temple in Abydos to a location with a lake. Subsequently, during "The Great Procession" (*pr.t ʿ3.t*) and the "God's Sailing to Poqer" (*d3.t nṯr r Pḳr*), the statue of Osiris reached his tomb.[263]

The celebration of the Abydienne Middle Kingdom Mysteries also included one or more nocturnal phases, which in the textual sources are strictly linked to the Haker feast. The main Egyptian terms indicating this part of the celebrations were *sḏr.t Pḳr*, or *grḥ n sḏr.t;* another expression, *sḏrỉ.t n Ḥr-Šn/Šn-Ḥr,* is instead more problematic, since some scholars interprets it as a divine name indicating a specific manifestation of the god Horus,[264] while Z. Végh considers it a toponym.[265]

---

[258] G. Griffith 1977, 929.
[259] Z. Végh 2011; Z. Végh 2021, 322.
[260] R.A. Gillam 2005, 55-59.
[261] M. Smith 2017, 233; Z. Végh 2021, 140.
[262] Z. Végh 2021, 317-318. 322-323 and 330.
[263] Z. Végh 2011, 145; Z. Végh 2021, 360.
[264] W. Helck 1952, 74; W. Barta 1968, 64; C. Leitz 2002, 292b; D. Franke 2013, 70; H. Altenmüller 2009, 11; H. Altenmüller 2013.
[265] Z. Végh 2021, 316 and 336-337. This aspect has been elaborated further in chapter 3, section 3.3.1.

Some scholars have hypothesised that the Haker feast was performed during the night spent in Poqer. Especially Moret, Helck and Altenmüller highlighted how this ritual seems to show significant common traits with the aforementioned ritual sleep (*sḏr*) performed by the *sem* priest in the OMR scenes 9 and 10.[266] J. Assmann, instead, recognises a strong resemblance between this phase of the Mysteries and the so-called *Stundenwachen*: a phase of the funerary rituals attested since the Middle Kingdom, which was enacted at the embalming hall during the night preceding the inhumation and immediately before the procession leading the mummy to the tomb.[267] Assmann's hypothesis partially overlaps with that proposed by other scholars, who highlighted that the Haker seems to have had an "initial function", taking place at the beginning of the Mysteries and being probably enacted shortly before the of the First Procession.[268]

However, the data are not enough clear in this regard. J. Quack, for example, highlighted that the Haker could be performed more than once,[269] and a similar hypothesis has also been proposed by Z. Végh, which posited that it would be possible to distinguish between a proper "Haker feast", probably enacted at the beginning of the First Procession, and an "Haker ritual", which was performed on different occasions and in different places.[270]

Given the possibility that the Haker could be performed more than once, the only undisputable element of this ritual being its strong connection with death, regeneration and a moment of social display for the royal power,[271] all hypotheses listed herein may not be mutually exclusive. Especially the "initial function" and the identification with the *Stundenwachen* are particularly interesting. Since the *Stundenwachen* took place immediately before the funerary procession leading to the deceased's tomb, it could be hypothesised that the Haker was a reformulation of this phase characterising the funerary rituals specifically meant for the funerals of the god Osiris.

According to the textual sources, the Haker was characterised by a ceremony designated the "counting of the dead". Given that all the Egyptian terms used to express the concept of counting or numbering (*ḥsb, ip, sip, ṯnw*) also had a specific juridical meaning,[272] it has

[266] A. Moret 1909, 6 and note 6; W. Helck 1952, 78-79; H. Altenmüller 2009, 11; H. Altenmüller 2013.
[267] J. Assmann 2011, 260-279 (especially p. 267).
[268] J. Spiegel 1973, 151; Z. Végh 2021, 360.
[269] J. Quack 2012, 202.
[270] Z. Végh 2021, 337-338.
[271] Z. Végh 2021, 339.
[272] R. Grieshammer 1970, 48-51; Z. Végh 2011, 151.

been hypothesised that during this feast a certain kind of judgment of the dead occurred, but the exact nature of the latter is still to be fully understood.[273] Furthermore, the Haker feast probably involved also a ritual action involving some *msk₃.w*-skins which shows a certain similarity with some phases of the Tekenu ritual.[274]

2.5 Critical approach to the state of the art

Even though Otto never explicitly uses the term "shamanism" with regards to the OMR scenes 9 and 10, he remarkably describes the latter as showing a certain «vorklassischen Schicht».[275] This statement is justified by the fact that Egyptian religious texts are usually characterised by an astonishing number of mythological references, while in scenes 9 and 10, not only the gods are almost never mentioned, but the captions related to the vignettes clearly describe a practice focused on the interactions with the spirits of the dead through a ritual sleep performed by the *sem* priest (*sḏr, ḳdd*). In addition, an important role is played by certain animals – such as falcons, bees, a praying mantis and a spider – or other kinds of supernatural beings, such as the shadow (*šw.t*), all elements that according to Otto would denote an archaic substratum.[276]

The first explicit use of the label "shamanism" to describe the OMR scenes 9 and 10 appears, instead, in a 1970 monograph by B. George devoted to the concept of "shadow" (*šw.t*). George, strongly influenced by Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade, considers the "shadow" as a kind of vivifying force related to the sexual energy. As for OMR scene 10, she argues that the *sem* priest is acting here as a shaman, whose actual purpose is to heal the deceased from death through a state of *trance* (*sḏr, ḳdd*). Moreover, in her opinion, the *sem* priest would be also able to catch the vivifying force of the deceased (*šw.t*) and use it to re-animate the sculpture of the latter thanks to the help of special animal guides (the spider, the bees and the mantis), as attested in several shamanic practices described by Eliade.[277]

The "shamanic interpretation" was subsequently adopted in different works by W. Helck.[278] The latter not only sustains that the OMR scenes 9 and 10 testify to the survival of a

---

[273] Z. Végh 2021, 332-333. This aspect has been elaborated further in chapter 3, section 3.3.3.
[274] M. Lichtheim 1988, 77-80; R. Landgráfová 2011, 162-166. See also chapter 3, section 3.3.4.
[275] E. Otto 1960, Vol II, 55-59.
[276] E. Otto 1960, Vol II, 55-59.
[277] B. George 1970, 87-90.
[278] W. Helck 1984 A; W. Helck 1987, 21-29 and 48-51.

shamanic practice – he indeed translates the term *ḳdd* as "trance"[279] – but given this starting point, he outlines some insights regarding the historical evolution of ancient Egyptian religion. Helck's main argumentation is based on the typical dress worn by the *sem* priest, a leopard skin. Individuals wearing this kind of garment are portrayed on several pre- and protodynastic artifacts, sometimes accompanied by a caption *ṯt*, which likely refers to a title. Given that this latter word shows a certain affinity with the term *ṯ3ty*, attested in historical times to indicate the role of "vizier", Helck hypothesises that during the archaic period there was a shaman-like ritualist who played a crucial role by assisting the chief/ruler in his main activities. Only through time, this shamanic figure evolved in two different roles: the vizier and the *sem* priest, who maintained certain shamanic traits in the form of a "living fossil" still recognizable in OMR 9 and 10.[280] Furthermore, according to Helck, some aspects of the Mysteries of Osiris appear to share significant common elements with the OMR scenes 9 and 10, especially with regard to the nocturnal phases of the celebrations and the Haker feast. Both the Mysteries celebrated at Abydos and the OMR would therefore show a common substrate stemmed in archaic shamanic practices concerning the inhumation of the deceased ruler.[281]

Remarkably, although Helck does not make explicit reference to it, the influence of Mircea Eliade on his interpretation is undeniable. Especially in „Schamane und Zauberer", Helck sustains that his interpretation would finally show the proof of an African shamanism,[282] and it is well known that in *Shamanism* by Eliade, even though shamanism is considered as a universal phenomenon, the data from Africa are practically omitted, probably because considered "more spurious" than the beliefs and practices identified in other geographical areas, such as North and Central Asia.[283] Furthermore, even more undeniable is the identification of a shamanic substratum within ancient Egyptian religion which is to be identified with the original religion of prehistoric Egypt, a feature that will recur in numerous subsequent studies.

One of Helck's main arguments is that the leopard skin worn by the *sem* priest can somewhat resemble the garments of certain individuals depicted in pre-and proto-dynastic

---

[279] W. Helck 1984 A, 104. See also chapter 3, section 3.1.
[280] W. Helck 1984 A, 103-108.
[281] W. Helck 1952, 78-80.
[282] W. Helck 1984 A, 104.
[283] L. Ambasciano 2014, 69-73.

objects. It must be said, however, that the vignettes of OMR scenes 9 and 10 always depict this ritualist with another type of dress: a tight garment characterised by horizontal stripes.

Figure 4 The garment worn by the sem priest in scenes 9 and 10 (TT 100)

This inconsistency is the object of an article by G. Reeder published in 1994. Reeder, re-elaborating a previous theory by A. Moret,[284] suggests a possible explanation by connecting the scenes 9 and 10 of the OMR with the Tekenu ritual. Given that in some depictions the Tekenu is represented with anthropomorphic traits, and it is subjected to a ritual sleep rather similar to that of the *sem* priest, Reeder identifies the Tekenu itself with a ritualist.[285] Also, because of various elements, including the fact that in the Rekhmire tomb (TT 100) both the sleeping Tekenu and the sleeping *sem* priest are portrayed in the same room, Reeder argues that both these ritualists could be identified as the same person. The Tekenu ritual, therefore, could be understood as a kind of preliminary ceremony performed by the *sem* priest in order to prepare himself for the shamanic trance described in scenes 9 and 10.[286]

The first work that openly rejects the shamanic interpretation of the OMR is a study by H.-W. Fischer-Elfert published in 1998. Given that the main focus of scenes 9 and 10 is the construction of a statue depicting the deceased, Fischer-Elfert interprets scene 9 as "the search for inspiration" experienced by the *sem* priest; the terms *sḏr* and *ḳd* would thus not refer to a shamanic *trance* but to a "deep meditation" aimed at the making of the sculpture. Scene 10, instead, would concern the instruction given by the *sem* priest to the artisans and both the animals and the shadows would be nothing more that metaphors used to describe the different phases of the construction.[287]

The theme of shamanism is also somewhat connected with the debate concerning the rise of "personal piety" and, in particular, with the historical evolution of the Egyptian religion

---

[284] A. Moret 1922, 31 ff.
[285] G. Reeder 1994.
[286] G. Reeder 1994.
[287] H.-W. Fischer-Elfert 1998, 8-52.

outlined by J. Assmann.[288] According to the latter, non-royal people could not have direct contact with the divine sphere. Only after important transformations which occurred with the advent of the New Kingdom – and strictly connected with the "Amarna revolution" – a special feeling of intimacy with the gods started to spread among diverse social groups.[289] This historical reconstruction must be understood in the light of a wider theoretical framework. In 1984 Assmann published *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* and, it is interesting to note that the category "shamanism" plays a certain role in this work. Assmann's starting point is that *Gottesnähe* ("the nearness to God") can be manifested in several ways (*Dimensionen der Gottesnähe*): the "local/cultic dimension", the "cosmos", the "verbal or mythic dimension", "ecstasy/shamanism", "mysticism/meditation", "history/ personal destiny"; and each religion is characterised by a specific combination of such dimensions.[290] Specifically, as for the ancient Egyptian religion the first three ones – the "myth", the "cosmos" and the "cult" – played a major role. The "dimension of history", instead, gained a certain importance only after the advent of the New Kingdom, causing the rise of "personal piety", while only sparse samples of mysticism or shamanism can be identified.[291]

This concept was further developed in 2001 in *Tod und Jenseits*. Here, Assmann clearly states that, for the Egyptians, the borders between the realm of humans and the realm of supernatural beings (including both gods and spirits of the dead) were not only rigorously separated, but also subject to a strict cultural control.[292] This means that every contact with the supernatural world had to be regulated and mediated by special rules. Thus, phenomena like "ecstatic trances" – that denote a direct and intimate connection with the supernatural sphere – had a rather minor role in the way in which Egyptian culture perceived the divine sphere:

> *The Egyptians believed that no one (with the possible exception of*
> *the king) was capable, during his life, of looking at the gods, of*
> *having visions, or of entering in the realm of the gods. Prior to the*

---

[288] This is certainly not the place to summarise all the criticisms aimed at Assmann's theoretical approach and the current status of the so-called "personal piety" in Egyptology. For further information on this issue, see the following studies: M. M. Luiselli 2008; M. M. Luiselli 2011; L. Weiss 2015, 1-11 and 179-180.
[289] J. Assmann 2004.
[290] J. Assmann 2001 B, 153. First Edition, in German: J. Assmann 1984.
[291] J. Assmann 2001 B, 153 ff.
[292] J. Assmann 2005, 15. First Edition, in German: J. Assmann 2001 A.

Greco-Roman period, there are no traces of shamanism, prophecy,
or mysticism in Egypt.[293]

It is interesting how this sentence was strongly criticised in all the main reviews of *Tod und Jenseits*. Several scholars questioned this assumption, underlining the role of ecstasy and intoxication in certain Egyptian festivals, the existence of a certain mysticism recognizable in some passages from funerary literature and the possibility to have a direct contact with the spirits of the dead as testified by the so-called Letters to the Dead.[294]

However, paradoxically, in *Tod und Jenseits*, Assmann himself is inclined to admit the peculiar traits of OMR scenes 9 and 10:

They are unique in the history of the Egyptian religion; they are an
instance of trance or meditation, for which there are no parallels
whatsoever in Egypt.[295]

It could be posited therefore that the combination of these two factors – the criticisms to Assmann's assumption that in Ancient Egypt there was no trace of shamanism and the fact that he himself admits that OMR scenes 9 and 10 could be interpreted as a peculiar sample of "trance" – has led to a renewed interest in the presumed Egyptian "shamanism" within a wider interpretative framework based on a kind of "survival theory". In these works, "shamanism" is considered a crucial trait of the archaic Egyptian religion (pre and proto-dynastic); and, a number of religious aspects of the historical times, like the OMR, as well as other rituals and myths, could be interpreted as "living fossils" of these archaic practices.

In a 2002 paper, S. Hodel-Hoenes argued that OMR scenes 9 and 10, not only show shamanic traits, but it would also be possible to recognise in these texts an ancient "African substrate", since the presence of the mantis and the spider finds numerous parallels within African traditional tales.[296]

---

[293] J. Assmann 2005, 78.
[294] Cf. A. J. Morales 2007, 74; L. H. Lesko 2007, 962; F. Scalf 2011, 124.
[295] J. Assmann 2005, 313.
[296] S. Hodel-Hoenes 2002, 185- 196.

An article by L. Morenz, published in 2003 tries to demonstrate that during the Thinite Age several religious practices interpretable as forms of "shamanism" played a crucial role. The main arguments are deducted through an analysis of recurrent iconographic patterns: such as the depictions of certain animals, and the presence of individuals wearing masks or animal skins. Yet, for Morenz, Assmann's statement that shamanism had a secondary role in pharaonic Egypt is substantially correct: it was only with the advent of the centralised state that shamanic practices were marginalised, surviving only in certain traits of Egyptian religion. In his opinion, although the shamanic elements of the OMR could be questioned, certain descriptions of the netherworld attested in the Coffin Texts and several elements of the Osirian myth seem to testify an undeniable shamanic substratum. [297]

S. Neureiter, instead, supports shamanic interpretation of the OMR scenes 9 and 10. In her opinion, not only was shamanism a predominant trait during the pre and proto-dynastic age, but it widely survived as a "Teil des kollektiven Gedächtnisses" (part of the collective memory) in historical times. It follows that several Egyptian religious phenomena could be interpreted as a form of "shamanism", especially specific kinds of medical practices, but also the cult of deceased kings, the ancestor veneration and certain forms of communication with the deceased testified by the Letters to the Dead. Neureiter also draws special attention to the OMR scenes 9 and 10 and other similar religious practices – such as the Tekenu Ritual and the Mysteries of Osiris celebrated in Abydos – all characterised by a "special form of sleeping" (*sḏr*) that should be interpreted as a shamanic trance.[298]

Finally, M. Nuzzolo assumes a position somewhat similar to that of Morenz. In his opinion, certain aspects of the protohistoric Egyptian religion would seem to show some shamanic features. Although he denies the existence of an "Egyptian Shamanism", this label could be an interesting heuristic tool to better understand certain aspects of the historical Egyptian Religion, such as the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Sed-festival, but also the special role of the pharaoh as privileged intermediary between the divine and human spheres.[299]

2.6 Rethinking ancient Egyptian death rituals

The previous section has highlighted how the main argumentations adopted by the supporters of the shamanic theory could be summarised in the three following points:

---

[297] L. D. Morenz 2003.
[298] S. Neureiter 2005.
[299] M. Nuzzolo 2017.

1)   The iconographic resemblance of the main ritualist performing the OMR, the *sem* priest, with certain individuals depicted on pre and proto-dynastic artefacts and monuments

2)   The absence of mythology and references to the traditional gods of the Egyptian pantheon in OMR scenes 9 and 10

3)   The assimilation of certain actions, indicated by the Egyptian word *sḏr* and *ḳdd*, performed by the *sem* priest with a form of *trance*. The shamanic interpretation concerning both the Tekenu ceremony and the Haker Fest are mainly based on the fact that also these ceremonies had a phase characterised by an action indicated in the textual sources with the word *sḏr*.

These three salient points will be therefore analysed and deconstructed with the aim of throwing new light on the Egyptian death rituals here taken into account by trying to recontextualise them as dramatic rituals linked to the ancient Egyptian ancestor worship.

First argument: the sem priest and the archaic wearers of the leopard skin

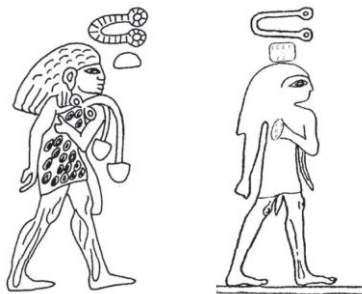As noted in the previous sections, the ritual actions of the *sem* priest have been interpreted

Figure 5 'The Wearer of the Leopard Skin' in the Narmer Palette (left) and in Narmer Macehead

as a survival of archaic shamanic practices also because of his typical garment, a leopard skin. Indeed, depictions of individuals wearing a similar clothing are attested in several sources of the predynastic and protodynastic times, such as the Hierakonpolis tomb n. 100, two Naqada I white-painted vessels, the so-called "lion palette", the king Scorpion Macehead, king Narmer Macehead, the Narmer Palette and a stela of king Khasekhemwy.[300]

However, do we have enough evidence to consider these individuals as shamans and are they directly linked with the *sem* priest of the subsequent historical phases?

The depictions of the 'wearer of the leopard skin' are never associated to actions that could be interpreted as ecstatic or healing practices. Rather, these individuals are mostly involved in scenes of violence, often related to the executions of prisoners. It has been posited, thus,

---

[300] B.B. Williams 1997.

that the leopard skin should be considered as a symbol to point out the martial prowess of certain individuals.[301] Another interpretation, instead, has identified this figure with a woman – probably the daughter of the ruler – involved in diverse ritual actions, including a ritualised killing of the enemies.[302] One has also to consider that there are no valid reasons to posit the same function for all the 'wearers of the leopard skin' attested during the predynastic and proto-dynastic times. Actually, we are dealing with a long span of time – about a thousand years – and the same clothing item may have taken on different meanings depending on regional areas, or changed its function over time.[303] Yet, it is noteworthy that the leopard skin always appears in contexts strictly related to the affirmation of social differences. The only element that brings together all these diverse depictions is the will to underline a special social position: the institutional role played by certain individuals related to the central power. Significant is in this regard that, in some stone sarcophagi datable to the 4th dynasty, the lid is decorated with a bas-relief of a leopard skin.[304] Especially for the Cairo Museum sarcophagus JdE 48078, the inscriptions on the coffin allow us to identify its owner, a man called *Iry-n-wr*, who held several important titles, among which those of "hereditary prince" or "noble man" (*ir.i-pˁ.t*) and "Sealer of the King of Lower Egypt" (*ḥtm.w-bi.ti*).[305] It follows that the only element of continuity that it is possible to identify between the pre- and protodynastic wearers of the leopard skin and the ones attested during the historical phases is the will of highlighting an important social status held by certain individuals.

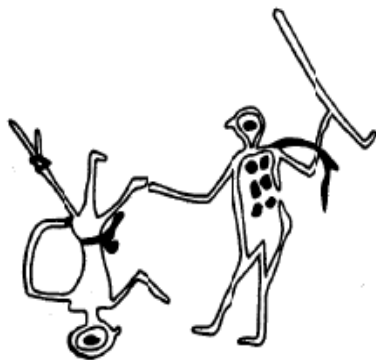It is also necessary to underline that, although the leopard skin is one of the typical garments of the *sem* priest in scenes 9 and 10 – considered by most of the supporters of the Egyptian shamanism as a survival of an archaic ecstatic practice – the latter is usually portrayed with another kind of clothing: white, tight, with some stripes, which might resemble the bandages of a mummy. This is another element that could refute the shamanistic interpretation: the *sem*

Figure 6 Fighter scene from Hierakompolis Tomb 100

---

[301] B.B. Williams 1997.
[302] J. Kelder 2013, 144-145.
[303] J. Kelder 2013.
[304] M.H. Gauthier 1930, 178-180; A.M. Roveri Donadoni 1969, 122-123.
[305] M.H. Gauthier 1930, 178-180.

priest is associated with a shaman because he wears a leopard skin that resembles that of certain presumed shamans during the "archaic" phases of Egyptian history; but, when he performs the only historical ritual that may resemble a shamanic practice, he wears a different kind of garment.

The review of the previous studies concerning "Egyptian shamanism" has highlighted how these works were strongly inspired by the Elidian assumption, according to which "shamanism" should be considered not only as a universally valid category, but also the "primordial stage" of any religious experience. Indeed, this premise is far from being proven, and a great number of scholars have rejected it. Notably, one of their main arguments concerns a methodological aspect. The interpretation that identifies any image of animals – or individuals wearing animal skins or animal-like masks – as proofs of shamanic practices has to be considered misleading, because essentially based on too weak similarities between iconographic data belonging to very diverse geographical, cultural and historical environments.[306]

The same criticism can be applied to the supporters of the Egyptian shamanism. One of their argumentations is that the dress of the *sem* priest resembles the dress of some individuals of Egyptian archaic times, which could appear similar to the clothing items used by shamans within other cultural contexts. Actually, we have not enough data to identify the actions and the gestures of the proto-dynastic and pre-dynastic 'wearers of the leopard skin' as shamanic. Rather, their depictions are undeniably intertwined with the appearance and consolidation of social differences, an element that testifies to the special position achieved by certain individuals. The presence of the leopard skin on pre and proto-dynastic artifacts cannot thus be considered as the proof of the existence of an archaic Egyptian shaman; rather, it is a "symptom", of the rise of the state and the consequent social inequality. In other words, it is a proof of the end of prehistory.

Second argument: the absence or minor role of the gods

Several scholars have argued that the OMR scenes 9 and 10 would show a "pre-classic", "archaic" or "shamanic" substrate because of the absence of explicit mythological references, but this statement is problematic from several points of view.

---

[306] L. Ambasciano 2014, 164-165.

Although the first textual sources concerning the OMR date back to the Old Kingdom, scenes 9 and 10 are not attested prior to the 18th dynasty.[307] Even the lexicon used in their captions – especially the use of the word ḳdd to indicate "dream" – is typical of the New Kingdom.[308] The paucity of explicit references to the traditional pantheon is certainly an undeniable fact.[309] On the other hand, one has to note that OMR scenes 9 and 10 are not the only Egyptian documents showing this peculiar trait. The captions relating to the Tekenu, for example, do not show explicit references to mythology,[310] nor are the individuals involved in this rite explicitly assimilated to Egyptian deities.

This point could be pushed even further, by arguing that the absence, or better the paucity, of explicit mythological references constitutes a distinctive characteristic of most textual sources concerning Egyptian ancestor worship.

For example, with regard to the so-called Letters to the Dead, Michael O'Donoghue stressed that: "References to the gods in the letters are remarkably sparse. When the gods are mentioned, they are rather secondary actors in the drama".[311] The same characteristic also occurs in a restricted collection of Coffin Texts spells focused on the interaction between the living and the dead. They include: CT spells 131–146, aimed at rejoining the family of the deceased; CT 149, in which the deceased turns into a falcon to eliminate the enemies of his living relatives in the context of a legal dispute, and CT 30-41, centered on the relationship between the dead father and his living son. Remarkably, H. Willems describes these texts as "a small collection of spells 'without mythology' or "where mythological themes seem to be of only secondary importance".[312]

It is therefore possible to identify a group of textual sources focused on the interplays between the living and the dead, where the gods and explicit mythological references play a rather secondary role. How could it be explained? As mentioned above, in a paper published in 2013, H. Willems has clearly highlighted that the absence of mythology in a

---

[307] R.A. Gillam 2005, 69-70.
[308] K. Szpakowska 2003, 28.
[309] Yet, the analysis of the texts provided in chapter 3, section 3.1 has highlighted how the name of Horus appears once in scene 10.
[310] The only exceptions are two inscriptions in which the god Ruti is mentioned. See chapter 3.2.1.b, documents 12 and 13.
[311] M.M. O'Donoghue 1999, 87.
[312] H. Willems 2014, 183.

religious text cannot demonstrate its "archaism", and how such a type of interpretations must be considered the result of an ethnocentric bias.[313]

Indeed, if the rise of polytheism is an element strictly linked to the emergence of state organization,[314] this does not entail that those religious ideas concerning the dead and the possible interactions with them must be considered as an exclusive feature of pre-state societies. To believe in the supernatural role of the dead is actually one of the most common kinds of beliefs – probably because strongly intertwined with certain dynamics typical of the human mind – and it is an element recognizable in an impressive number of cultural contexts, stratified and verticalised societies included.[315] It cannot be excluded that the interactions between the living and the dead had a foremost role within the prehistoric Egyptian religion. However, this does not mean that the presence of beliefs and practices related to ancestor worship attested within historical Egypt should be considered as a mere "survival" of archaic religious facts. A wide number of studies have shown how ancestor worship played a foremost role in Pharaonic religion. And, if these beliefs were so widespread, it means that they had a specific meaning within the ancient Egyptian society.

In addition, the lack of explicit references to the gods does not mean that these texts cannot be understood in the light of a mythological framework that, although not explicitly mentioned, had to be immediately understandable to the ancient Egyptians.

As stressed by H. Willems, the relationship between the deceased father and his living son in spells 30-41 clearly follows the mythical model of the relationship between Horus and Osiris.[316] The mythical paradigm of the practices linked to the Letters to the Dead can be identified with an episode of the Osirian myth narrated in P. Chester Beatty I (recto 14,6-15,8).[317] Finally, rather similar considerations can be made for OMR 9-10; as stressed by H. Altenmüller, despite the lack of mythology, the ritual actions described within this liturgy must be considered as a "sakramentale Ausdeutung aus dem Osirismythos".[318] Therefore, the interactions between the *sem* priest and the image of the deceased must be interpreted in the light of the fact that the OMR scenes 9 and 10 were meant as a quasi-theatrical performance, where a ritualist played the role of Horus, while the sculpture of the

---

[313] H. Willems 2013.
[314] M. Liverani 2012, 87-95.
[315] D. Sheils 1980; M. Poo 2009, 1-10.
[316] H. Willems 2001, 363-368.
[317] S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 208-219; U. Verhoeven 2003, 38.
[318] "sacramental interpretation from the Osiris myth". H. Altenmüller 2009, 1.

deceased was identified with Osiris, but this role-play was, as a matter of a fact, kept implicit by eliminating most of the direct allusions to it within the liturgical text.[319]

Remarkably, something similar is recognizable in the second book of the *Histories*, where Herodotus shows a certain reticence in reporting the name of Osiris. According to an analysis by P. Sandin, the avoidance of Herodotus would not concern the names of this god *per se*. In several passages, the Greek historian shows no hesitation in transcribing the name of Osiris. Rather, this reticence was about the occurrence of the name of this god within the context of certain Egyptian death rituals.[320] According to Sandin, this behaviour is to be explained in the light of a taboo typical of the ancient Greek culture.[321] Yet, this does not preclude other kinds of interpretations. For example, it has been posited that certain omissions concerning the names of certain Egyptian gods made by Herodotus may reflect an actual Egyptian custom and could be explained with a typical attitude of Herodotus in being respectful towards foreign traditions. Indeed, it is well attested within Egyptian sources that certain aspects of their religion were not meant to be divulgated.[322] According to Laurent Coulon, for example, it is possible to recognise how in four occurrences of Book II, the name of Osiris is subjected to a very specific linguistic taboo:[323]

- The feast of Isis at Busiris - 2.61.1[324]

I have already described how they keep the feast of Isis at Busiris. There, after the sacrifice, all the men and women lament, in countless numbers; but it is not pious for me to say who it is for whom they lament.

- The embalming of the dead and the choice of the sarcophagus -2.86.12

There are men whose sole business this is and who have this special craft. When a dead body is brought to them, they show those who brought it wooden models of corpses, painted

---

[319] H. Altenmüller 2009, 1.
[320] P. Sandin 2008.
[321] "the educated Athenian gentry who paid to listen to him reciting his histories would not appreciate Egyptian blasphemies. The paying audience will appreciate an attitude in the lecturer which concurs with their own attitude or even better, one which articulates matters which they themselves have only conceived of vaguely, on an emotional plane". P. Sandin 2008, 14.
[322] L. Coulon 2013, 173.
[323] L. Coulon 2013, 173-177.
[324] The translation of the following passages is taken from P. Sandin 2008, 3-5.

likenesses; the most perfect way of embalming belongs, they say, to One whose name it would be impious for me to mention in treating such a matter; the second way, which they show, is less perfect than the first, and cheaper; and the third is the least costly of all.

- A golden cow used as a coffin for a princess and involved in a sacred procession performed once a year during a celebration for the god Osiris - 2.132.2

It does not stand, but kneels; it is as big as a live cow of great size. This image is carried out of the chamber once every year, whenever the Egyptians mourn the god whose name I omit in speaking of such a matter.

- The tomb of Osiris at Sais and the dramatization of the Osiris myth here performed -2.170.1- 2.171.2.3

There is also at Sais the burial-place of one whose name I think it impious to mention in speaking of such a matter; it is in the temple of Athena, behind and close to the length of the wall of the shrine. Moreover, great stone obelisks stand in the precinct; and there is a lake nearby. On this lake they enact by night the story of the god's sufferings, a rite which the Egyptians call mysteries. I could say more about this, for I know the truth, but let me preserve a discrete silence.

It is clear that this taboo is linked to the same kinds of religious facts here taken into account. One of them (2.86.12) concerns the embalming procedure and the coffin of the deceased, like the OMR, which could be performed on mummies, statues, and also coffins, or the Tekenu ceremony, which was involved in the funerary rituals and it is often depicted together with the coffin and the canopic chest. The other passages, instead, describe specific mortuary rituals which took place within the festivals in honour of Osiris; this is a context that shows undeniable affinities with that of the Haker feast celebrated during the Mysteries of Abydos. Moreover, the description of the dramatised ritual performed at Sais shows strong resemblances with the-so called Butic Burial, such as the presence of the lake and

the obelisks.[325] Particularly noteworthy is also the episode of the golden cow. Herodotus says that the latter was used as a coffin for a princess who died at a young age and that it was involved in a ritual procession; indeed, the deification of an individual who died at young age is a well attested phenomenon, especially during the Late Period,[326] and Herodotus here seems to refer to a deified human celebrated together with Osiris during an annual festival.

One could therefore argue that a taboo typical of Greek culture overlapped with a rather similar custom belonging to the ancient Egyptians. Evidence of a certain reticence in transcribing or speaking about the most violent episodes of the death of Osiris are indeed known from Egyptian sources.[327] It is therefore plausible to assume that the explicit reference of divine names, and the explicit assimilation of both the deceased and the ritualist with Horus and Osiris during certain specific moments of both funerary and mortuary rituals, was perceived as something that went against decorum. But the question is, which kind of moments?

Of course, such a restriction did not concern all the rituals related to the sphere of death. The explicit assimilation of the deceased or the officiant with Osiris – as well other deities – and the presence of conspicuous references to the mythological sphere are among the most characteristic features of Egyptian religious texts concerning the death sphere.[328] After all, the documents taken here into account have been noticed by scholars because of their absence of mythology.

A significant element shared by the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Letters to the Dead, and the so-called Coffin Texts without mythology is that they concern forms of interaction or even communication between the living and the dead, and therefore a kind of necromantic action.[329] Another element, not so obvious at first glance, is the fact that these documents are written textual sources which testify to the existence of dramatic rituals which have to be performed in a quasi-theatrical form, likely in front of an audience.

---

[325] The obelisk often associated to the Tekenu ritual sleep have been linked to Sais by H. Willems (see: H. Willems 1996, 113-114, and note 342). This aspect will be further explored in section 3.2.1.b.
[326] M. el Amir 1951.
[327] J. Quack 2008.
[328] M. Smith 2017, 141-144.
[329] As we will see later, the same element also characterised the Tekenu ritual. See chapter 3, section 3.2.4.

In several cultures, funerals can be interpreted as a dramatic performance, including the rites performed within several modern cultural contexts.[330] It was also pointed out how both royal and elite funerals can also be interpreted in the light of an ideological function aimed at ratifying the legitimation of the successors and, therefore, as a moment of social display.[331] The same ideas can indeed be applied to both ancient Egyptian funerary and mortuary rites, especially with regard to the documents examined here.[332]

The taboo concerning the explicit references to the mythological backgrounds of these rites was thus active within the context of ceremonies which had the following characteristics:

- They were related to specific liminal ritual actions concerning the interplays and the communication – necromancy, according to the definition used here – between the living and the dead

- They took the form of dramatic performances in the form of collective rituals linked to the Osiris myth and meant for an audience which was perceived – according to the ancient Egyptian emic point of view – as larger than usual: for example, by involving people from diverse social strata or even the dead.

The final phase of the funerary rituals, the one concerning the transportation of the deceased and the grave goods to the tomb, certainly included the participation of both the family members and the friends of the deceased.[333] As regards the festivals for Osiris at Abydos, the question is more complex. Middle Kingdom data show that most of the monuments and

---

[330] R.E. Turner and C. Edgley 1976.

[331] Cf. for example: C. Given-Wilson 2009.

[332] For the topic concerning Egyptian funerary rites as a dramatic performance Cf. R.A. Gillam 2005, 36-43; 63-65; 73. Especially the OMR and the Butic Burial were likely conceived as dramatic performances. Cf. R.A. Gillam 2009.

The celebrations for Osiris at Abydos have been interpreted as a "dramatic performance" or a "theatrical play" by several scholars. See, for example: R.A. Gillam 2005, 55-59; for the rather similar Khoiak-fest celebrated in the subsequent historical phases see R.A. Gillam 2005, 100-108; see also: R. Gundlach 1987.

As for the Coffin Texts "without mythology", J.R. Ogdon interpreted spells 30-37 as a ritualised drama performed during the funerals. Cf. R.J. Ogdon 1982. This theory has been subsequently rejected by H. Willems 2001, 253-254. Yet, his main argument consists of the fact that the spells have been intended as a monologue, rather than as a dialogue. This indeed does not preclude that the recitation of the spells might have been performed in a "quasi-theatrical" way, and meant for an audience.

As regards the so-called Letters to the Dead the question is more complex. Yet, it must be said that these documents have to be intended as physical witnesses of diverse kinds of articulated ritual actions performed near the tomb of the deceased recipient. It has also been hypothesised that the ritualised deposition of the documents took place during the funerals or within the mortuary rituals linked with the recurrent festivals for the dead, such as those performed at Abydos. Moreover, according to H. Willems the "Coffin Texts without Mythology" could be interpreted as the very liturgy performed for the deposition of the letters (H. Willems 2001, 357-358). With regard to the Letters to the Dead and their ritual of deposition see also chapter 4, section 4.1.

[333] R.A. Gillam 2015, 37; 64-65; 76-77.

stelae found in the terrace of the Great God belonged to prominent members of the elite; yet, stelae attributable to lower social groups, such as craftspeople, have been identified too.[334] In this regard, some textual sources seem to suggest that, while most individuals were just allowed to hear the litanies recited by the ritualists from designated areas outside of the sacred spaces, only few persons could actually attend the ceremonies.[335] It has also been hypothesised that the deceased themselves were perceived as a possible audience for the performance, since the stelae and the monuments located in the terrace likely functioned as a medium so that the dead could observe the ritual,[336] and remarkably some monuments were conceived with special holes which – according to some scholars – functioned like a window specifically meant for this purpose.[337]

Third argument: the action expressed by the verb sḏr

The Egyptian term *sḏr* is used to indicate both a ritual action performed by the *sem* priest within OMR scenes 9-10, and a specific moment of the Tekenu ceremony. Moreover, the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos included the same kind of ritual action, known in the sources as *sḏr.t* or*, sḏry.t*. So, what did the verb *sḏr* and the nouns derived from it mean? Could they really indicate a shamanic *trance*?

Modern dictionaries of the Egyptian language propose diverse translations for the verb *sḏr*, such as "die Nacht zubringen", "schlafen", "liegen"[338] ("to spend the night"; "to sleep"; "to lie"). The term is also attested as a semi-auxiliary verb in certain kinds of sentences.[339] As for the nouns *sḏr.t*/*sḏry.t*, derived from it, scholars are rather divided. These terms are often translated as "sleeping" or "repose";[340] yet, some Egyptologists prefer to render them with "vigil".[341] Above all, J. Assmann, adopted the latter translation based on the strong analogies he identifies between the *sḏr.t*/*sḏry.t* occurred within the Osiris Mysteries and the

---

[334] R.A. Gillam 2015, 59.
[335] Z. Végh 2015, 268.
[336] R. Gundlach 1987, 54-60.
[337] K.A. Kitchen 1961.
[338] Cf. Wb IV, 390.9-392.6; Hannig 2005, 2411-2412.
[339] C. Gracia Zamacona 2019, 55-56.
[340] A. Moret 1909, 6 and note 6; W. Helck 1957, 78; H. Altenmüller 2013.
[341] J. Spiegel 1973, 74; M. Lichtheim 1988, 88; Z. Végh 2021, 329-330.

"Stundenwachen" performed in the embalming hall during the night preceding the inhumation of the corpse.[342]

These discrepancies could be explained by the fact that the verb *sḏr* referred to a semantic area that has not an exact match in other modern languages, such as English, or German. According to C. Gracia Zamacona, it might be understood as a causative of a verb (currently not attested) derived from the lexeme *ḏr*, which means "side".[343] The actual meaning, thus, would be "to lie on one side". This would also explain the semi-auxiliary function of the verb, which often occurs in parallel with another semi-auxiliary verb, *ʿḥʿ* ("to stand up"), to be intended as its antonym. In addition, in some passages from the Coffin Texts, *sḏr* is also used as a synonym of *ḥtp* which can denote the setting of the sun.[344]

One has also to take into account that *sḏr* is usually determined with the sign of a man lying on a bed ▭ (A 55),[345] and in some cases the same hieroglyph is used as an ideogram to write the whole word.[346] It is therefore clear that this verb had to express a specific meaning concerning an action, which in English can be translated as "to lie down on the side", which was perceived as strongly linked not only to "sleeping", but also to the final stage of the solar cycle and, consequently, to death.

In the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the term *sḏr* is associated to the lexeme *ḳdd,* which usually indicates the act of sleeping but, as stressed by K. Szpakowska, from the Late New Kingdom onwards it assumed the meaning of "dream":

> *It is not until the late New Kingdom that we find firm evidence that*
> *ḳd can denote specifically the noun 'dream', as well as 'slumber'.*
> *The meaning of ḳd as dream is further confirmed in the oracular*
> *amuletic decrees of the Third Intermediate Period, where we find*
> *no less than ten separate instances of ḳd referred to as having been*
> *seen. The primary meaning of ḳd as 'sleep' or 'slumber' is*

---

[342] J. Assmann 2001 A, 260-279.
[343] C. Gracia Zamacona 2019, 43.
[344] C. Gracia Zamacona 2019, 43-45.
[345] C. Gracia Zamacona 2019, 43-45.
[346] C. Gracia Zamacona 2019, 43-44.

inappropriate in these cases. This is corroborated by the substitution of rsw.t for ḳd in otherwise identical phrases in two others oracular amuletic decrees of the same period.[347]

Before the New Kingdom, instead, the most common term used to denote what we refer to as "dream" was the word *rsw.t*, a noun derived from the verb *rs*, which literally means "to wake", and idiomatic expressions, such as *mꜣꜣ m rsw.t* ("to see in a dream"), would imply that the Egyptians perceived the dreams as something that a human being can experience by "wakening" while experiencing the condition described by the verb *sḏr*.[348]

Textual sources clearly indicate that the Egyptians considered the dream as a kind of liminal space, where the sleepers could interact with supernatural entities, such as the gods or the dead.[349] In this regard, it is remarkable that in two Letters to the Dead the senders explicitly ask the deceased recipient of the missive to appear them in a dream.[350]

In the light of these data, it can be posited that the diverse, often contrasting, renderings of *sḏr.t*/*sḏry.t* can be understood as a mere superficial problem concerning the difficult rendering of the semantic area expressed by the verb *sḏr* into modern languages. Within the ritual contexts considered here, this verb and its derivates were used by the Egyptians to describe a specific performative action: to lie down in a sacred space, such as a necropolis, a tomb, or the cenotaph of Osiris, in order to seek an interaction or a form of communication (necromancy) with a dead. This interaction could assume various forms, such as watching over the mummified body during the night preceding the funeral, or experiencing a visual form of communication with a dead, perceived as a dream. It is not important to understand whether this kind of ritual action corresponded to our *etic,* physiological concept of sleeping or involved a state of vigil, since this problem is strictly linked to our *etic* vision of the world, having little to do with the ancient Egyptian meaning of the verb *sḏr*. Therefore, *sḏr* and both the nouns *sḏr.t* and *sḏry.t* will be conventionally translated here as "to perform a ritual sleep", and "ritual sleep".

---

[347] K. Szpakowska 2003, 28.
[348] K. Szpakowska 2003, 28.
[349] K. Szpakowska 2003, 28.
[350] These documents will be further discussed in chapter 3, section 3.1.b and in chapter 5.

The perception of the dreams as a tool to communicate with the deceased may indeed recall other phenomena attested within diverse cultural contexts, which have been often labelled as "shamanism" in some ethnographic and anthropological works. However, the terms "trance" would be rather misleading here, suggesting a pattern of beliefs and interpretations that cannot fit the ancient Egyptian culture. Above all, Egyptian textual sources make clear that the visions experienced by the sleepers during the dreams did not entail a detachment of the soul from the body, rather it was a condition which allowed a mainly visual interaction with certain supernatural beings; furthermore, the state experienced by the "dreamers" was eminently passive: they cannot control the supernatural beings they meet in the dream-zone, as certain other specialists from other cultural contexts are able to do.[351]

This kind of behaviour is rather widespread among the most diverse human cultures. Yet, this fact does not prove the existence of an archaic "shamanic religion" of which it would be possible to detect "spurious forms" through time and space. Rather, as stressed by Boyer, this kind of beliefs are quasi-universal because they are able to hack some structures typical of the human mind and can be thus "recreated" and re-formulated" several times in diverse contexts without any cultural transmission.[352] In addition, although certain kinds of beliefs – such as the possibility to communicate with the dead through the dreams – are certainly widespread, it does not mean that they have the same meaning and function in all the diverse social and historical contexts in which they are attested.[353]

2.7 Results

The critical approach to the previous studies has identified a tendency of the Egyptological literature in interpreting a group of rituals related to the death sphere – the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker feast – as "survivals" of archaic shamanic practices. A critical analysis of the data have rather shown how these rituals could be better understood as an expression of a core of beliefs strictly focused on the interactions between the living and the dead.

---

[351] K. Szpakowska 2003, 38.
[352] P. Boyer 2007, 13-15; P. Boyer 2020, 465-466.
[353] P. Boyer 2007, 13-15; "More generally, the extraordinary and persistent success of wild traditions as described here, compared to the coercive and often unsuccessful imposition of religious organizations' doctrines, would suggest that these wild traditions are the place to start, if we want to understand those features of the human evolved cognitive architecture that produce varieties of religious ideas". P. Boyer 2020, 472.

Specifically, the three main arguments in favour of the shamanic interpretation proved to be unfounded. The typical leopard skin of the *sem* priest can indeed show a certain similarity with other garments worn by certain figures recurring in pre- and proto-dynastic artifacts but no substantiated elements have allowed the identification of these archaic wearers of the leopard skin with actual shamans. Rather, the presence of this kind of garment in the pre- and proto-dynastic iconographic repertoire testifies to the remarkable status reached by certain individuals associated to the main chief and, consequently, the advent of social inequalities and the rise of an "elite". As for the absence of explicit references to the Egyptian mythology, it proved to be just a mere superficial aspect. Several textual sources other than the OMR scenes 9 and 10 – such as the Letters to the Dead, or the Coffin Texts spells without mythology identified by H. Willems – show this same feature. The analysis of the data also allowed to understand how all these textual sources actually referred – in a deliberately implicit way – to certain episodes of the myth of Osiris. This made it possible to assume the existence of a certain reticence in explicitly narrating some passages of the myth of Osiris within the specific context of "dramatic rituals". The avoidance of explicitly mentioning the name of certain gods was probably triggered by the fact that these quasi-theatrical performances were enacted in the form of collective rituals, which involved the presence of a large audience, or forms of interactions, contacts or even communication between the living and the dead. This was indeed the case of some phases of the funerary ritual and that of the recurrent festivals aimed at celebrating the dead. Finally, the identification of the action indicated by the verb *sḏr* as a "shamanic trance" turned out to be not grounded. The possibility to interact with the dead through oneiric visions is indeed one of the most widely held beliefs among human beings and it does not necessarily imply the enactment or the "survival" of an actual shamanic practice. Furthermore, the verb *sḏr* and the nouns *rsw.t* and *ḳdd* had a very specific meaning that testifies to a core of conceptions and belief typical of the ancient Egyptian culture, such as that of the "dream-zone", a liminal space where it was possible to experience the vision of supernatural beings but in which the dreaming human being was essentially passive.

Taking these results as a starting point, it is therefore possible to conduct a detailed analysis of all the relevant sources concerning the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker feast in order to further investigate the exact function of these religious practice and their evolution through Egyptian history.

.