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

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6. A comparative approach: ancestors, legitimation and power in the Ancient Near East

6.1 Aims

The present chapter is devoted to the analysis of religious beliefs and practices focused on the cult of the dead attested in various Ancient Near Eastern societies, within a specific framework where the care for the dead had a special function in legitimising the social role of living individuals. Specifically, the data have been investigated within two different research horizons: a first section has been devoted to the role of ancestor worship in legitimating property ownership and social roles; the second section, instead, focused on the actual practices pertaining to the cult of the dead, in other words, public performances specifically meant to praise the dead and the ways in which this ideological framework was used in the self-presentation of both elite and royal families.

The main aim is to show how ancestor worship was an intrinsic feature of the Ancient Near Eastern polytheisms and that the religious practices linked to these kinds of beliefs were of foremost importance in legitimising power and rights over the property of the real estate and in validating succession.

6.2 Ancestors, property and social roles

According to the seminal study of J. Goody, *Death, Property and Ancestors*, the cult of the deceased forebears is strongly intertwined with the rules concerning the transmission of property. Ancestor cult provides indeed a supernatural framework through which the power relations characterising the social order can be maintained and reinforced. As a consequence, the cultic actions addressed to the dead should not be understood as simple acts of piety but respond to a specific frame according to which the deceased worshipped as ancestors are those from whom one has inherited.[629] Although the work of Goody is focused on the LoDagaa of the Northern Ghana, strong connections between ancestor cult, legitimation of property and inheritance systems is attested in several different cultural contexts,[630] and it could be stated that within certain social frameworks the deceased are venerated because of their authoritative role in validating the social position of the living.

Several elements seem to suggest the existence of rather similar beliefs within the diverse Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Of course, different strategies occurred in different cultural areas, as well as transformations over time. Nonetheless, it is possible to outline a general framework. The extended

[629] J. Goody 1962, 412.
[630] T. Chee-Kiong 1993, 145.

family played a crucial role in the whole area. [631] The chief of the family, who normally was the father, was also considered the main owner of the estates connected to a household and the role of "householder" was traditionally transmitted from father to son.[632] The firstborn was usually considered the privileged heir, but several exceptions are known.[633]

The available sources are not homogeneous. Especially as regards the Levant, between the third and the first half of the Second millennium BCE we have rather scanty information, sometimes limited to very specific social frameworks. For example, most textual sources from Mari were found within the royal archive and, consequently, the tablets mainly deal with kingly aspects.[634] Nevertheless, several documents highlight the foremost role played by the *kispum*-ritual, periodically celebrated to commemorate and feed the deceased.[635] The *kispum* was a custom well attested also in Mesopotamian tradition, and it was indeed recognised as a cultural homogeneity characterising the whole Mid-Euphrates valley, the Dyiala basin and Babylonia.[636] Although the sources from Mari mainly focus on the role played by the *kispum* in legitimating the ruling family[637] it would be reasonable to posit a similar function also for non-royal contexts. In this regard, it is certainly interesting to mention a Paleo-Babylonian document found at Susa, where a woman claims her right to inheritance in connection with her duty of celebrating the *kispum* for her deceased father.[638]

Conversely, the tablets from Emar, do not stem from a royal archive and most of the documents concern private transactions often legal in nature, such as fictitious adoptions to stipulate the sale of real estate, or marriages. Among these, a restricted number of texts – testaments stipulated for extraordinary circumstances in which the heir was not the eldest son, but, for example, the daughter – are interesting for the present purpose.[639] They show a clause that link the legal possession of a propriety with the duty of taking care of both the "gods" (*ilanu*) and the "dead" (*metu*) of the testator. Moreover, even in this case it is possible to figure out a certain cultural continuity since this clause is attested also in a restricted number of documents from the settlement of Nuzi, in Iraq. [640] The strict correlation between the words "gods" and "dead" occurring within these documents has allowed some scholars to hypothesise that both terms were used here as a *hendiadys*, referring thus to the same

[631] R. Westbrook 2003, 36-39; J. C. Moreno García 2012.
[632] R. Westbrook 2003, 36-39.
[633] R. Westbrook 2003; P. W. Pestman 1969, 58-77.
[634] W. Heimpel 2004, 4-6.
[635] A. Jacquet 2012, 123-136.
[636] A. Tsukimoto 1985; A. Tsukimoto 2010, 101-109.
[637] A. Jacquet 2012; B. B. Schmidt 1996 A, 44-45.
[638] D. Charpin 2012, 31.
[639] B. B: Schmidt 1996 B, 141-153. W. T. Pitard 1996.
[640] K. van der Toorn 1994; W. T. Pitard 1996; B.B. Schmidt 1996 B, 141-153.

category of supernatural beings, the "divine ancestral spirits",[641] but such an interpretation has been criticised by other scholars.[642] On the other hand, it is undeniable that the dead, here, are considered as a special category of supernatural entities: they can survive after death, they deserve food-offerings like the gods and, above all, to venerate them appears to be a crucial prerequisite to legitimise the possession of property.

In this regard, it has been hypothesised that both the terms *ilanu* and *metu* would indicate the sculptures involved in house-cults, which were perceived as an integral part of the real estate.[643] J. M. Durand, instead, posited that the strong connection between the ancestral spirits and the ownership rights over a real estate could be explained by the fact that in the Levantine area it was a widespread custom to bury the deceased family members underneath the houses.[644] However, this argument is not totally convincing, since at Emar the presence of tombs located under the houses is not attested.[645]

Without completely foreclosing the validity of these interpretations, the most remarkable aspect is that the care of the ancestral spirits – and, above all, the care addressed to the deceased father – had to be an unavoidable duty of each householder. The last wills under analysis were indeed stipulated for non-traditional heirs, within a cultural context in which to be a householder was a significant social role transmitted from father to son. It follows that to inherit a house meant to become the new *pater familias* and entailed the duty of taking care of all the family members, both living and dead.[646] It is thus remarkable that in most of these documents the chosen heir was a woman and she was not just appointed as legitimate main heir, since the document specifies that she was also in charge to act "as both male and female", which, in other words, means that the female heir was formally allowed to assume the social role traditionally belonging to the eldest son, especially with regards to the perpetuation of the ancestral cult.[647]

This aspect finds a meaningful connection with some Ugaritic literary texts. The famous passage of the ideal son from the poem of Aqhat underlines the foremost social role played by the eldest son. The firstborn had certainly to take care of his elderly parents and, even after their death, his duties would not have ceased, since the eldest son had to maintain the posthumous cult of the father.[648]

[641] K. van der Toorn 1994, 47.
[642] W.T. Pitard 1996; B.B. Schmidt 1996 B, 141-153.
[643] W.T. Pitard 1996, 126; contra: B.B. Schmidt 1996 B, 147-148.
[644] J.M. Durand 1989, 15-18; B.B. Schmidt 1996 B, 149
[645] W.T. Pitard 1996, 139.
[646] K. van der Toorn, op. cit. 2014, pp. 83-84; I. Finkel 2021, 45.
[647] B.B. Schmidt 1996 B, 149 and ff.; W. T. Pitard 1996, 125-126.
[648] P. Xella 1983, 183-216.

6.3 Ancestors, power and public performance

The previous analysis has shown that ancestors exercised a wide authority in validating inheritance and succession in the context of elite extended family. Likewise, the veneration of the forebears had certainly a crucial role not only in legitimising the power of the ruling dynasty, but also in ensuring social cohesion between the king, the elite and, sometimes, even between the royal power and the whole population. Such an ideological function of ancestor cults finds its most striking expression in specific festivals. In order to analyse this kind of phenomena, the concept of "festival" will be here approached as "cultural performances" designed for a specific "audience".[649] The present section will therefore be focused on the main festivals relating to the cult of the ancestors and attested between the third and the second millennium BCE. A special attention will be given to the social groups involved in the ceremonies, since it appears a to a be a crucial element with which to understand the specific function to which a festival was aimed.[650]

In this regard, further clarifications are necessary. As stressed in several studies, the traditional distinction between "official" and "personal" religion risks to be misleading if applied to the Ancient Near East. Indeed, "personal religion" in the modern sense of the term did not exist, or more likely had not a prominent role within the sources examined here. Rather, in these ancient cultures, the individual identity coincided with a collective identity built around the sense of belonging to diverse kinds of social groups,[651] such as the extended family or other kinds of groups, like those of people involved in the same work activities. This consideration also entails that an individual could perform a specific religious action within different framework (family, local, trans-local etc.).[652] Consequently, most religious practices described in the previous sections – such as those concerning the *kispum*, but also the Letters to the Dead, or the oracular consultation of certain deceased pharaohs within ancient Egyptian culture– used to be performed within some of the public celebrations here taken into consideration.

At Ebla, textual sources not only confirm the existence of cultic activity aimed at the veneration of the dead members of the royal family but also the existence of a royal mausoleum outside the city wall. Three texts – ARET XI 1, 2, 3 – found in the L.2769 archive, show an articulated ritual mainly focused on the royal couple.[653] Scholars have not reached a unanimous position regarding the function of the ceremony and different interpretations have been proposed: a mortuary liturgy connected to

[649] E. DeMarrais 2014, 161.
[650] E. DeMarrais 2014, 157-158 and 161.
[651] K. van der Toorn 1996, 94-95.
[652] L. Weiss 2015, 17-19.
[653] M.G. Biga and A.M.G. Capomacchia 2012, 19-20.

the ancestor cult, a coronation ceremony, or a ritual to renew the power of the rulers similar to the Egyptian *Sed-festival*,[654] or more likely a liturgy to be enacted during the marriage, somehow connected to the enthronement of the king.[655] The only sure element, however, is the role played by the ancestors, especially in connection with a "pilgrimage" or, more correctly, a processional journey led by the royal couple to a site called Nenash.[656] Here was located the *é ma-tim,* the "house of the dead", that must be identified with a mausoleum of the deceased rulers, where both the queen and the king had to sit on the "thrones of their fathers".[657] The main aspect of the ceremony is surely the "pilgrimage" – during which the procession had to stop in several different places of worship dedicated to the gods or to the royal ancestors. This kind of ritual journey was a characteristic element of the Eblaite religion and, according to Ristvet, textual sources suggest that not only the elite was surely involved, but also common people were allowed to assist.[658] In light of this aspect, it was suggested that the ritual was meant as an encomiastic demonstration of power of the ruling dynasty aimed at establishing their dominion at both the centre and the periphery of the reign.[659]

In the Amorite kingdom of Mari, the annual festival of Ishtar was certainly one of the most important events of the calendar. It included a procession of the statue of Ishtar from the site of Der – where probably the deceased kings were buried[660] – to Mari.[661] Textual sources mention that the celebration was also associated with a festival in honour of the royal ancestors, mainly focused on the performance of *kispum*-rituals for the deceased kings. Such a celebration was meant as a ritualised act of obedience to the ruling dynasty, since local governors, high officials and political allies were allowed to participate. This kind of audience has also to be understood in the light of the strategic marriage policy of the Amorite rulers. Both local elite members and political allies were often married to royal princesses and, as consequence, the ceremony aimed also at strengthening political alliances.[662]

The sources from Ugarit do not provide numerous information to reconstruct in detail public performances related to the religious sphere, nor to figure out the social extension of the people involved in the ceremonies. However, one ritual text, KTU 1.161=RS 34126, is certainly useful for the purpose of the present study. The document concerns an articulated ceremony performed in

[654] F. Pinnock 2016, 396-397.
[655] A. Archi 2012.
[656] M. G. Biga and A. M. G. Capomacchia 2012, 402; F. Pinnock 2016, 398; A. Archi, 2016, 33-34; P. Xella 1996.
[657] A. Archi 2016, 33-34.
[658] L. Ristvet 2015, 67-68.
[659] L. Ristvet 2015, 71.
[660] A. Jacquet 2012, 133-134.
[661] L. Ristvet 2015, 101.
[662] L. Ristvet 2015, 101.

honour of the deceased king Niqmaddu III, who died in the last decade of the thirteenth century BCE.[663] The actual function of the text is still object of debate. While Pardee claims that the rite had a narrowly funerary aim,[664] other scholars posit that the text might be connected with the enthronement of the new king. In effect, the final part of KTU 1.161 is strongly focused on the successor of Niqmaddu III, Ammurapi, and the text ends with specific benedictions for the new king, the royal family and the whole kingdom of Ugarit.[665] Given these premises, the ceremony could be intended as a double rite of passage. Both the dead king and his successor share a rather similar liminal condition: the first has not yet become an ancestor and the second has not yet become the legitimate sovereign. It is therefore reasonable to posit that such a transitional phase was perceived as potentially dangerous, since the dead king could act as a vengeful spirit, claiming his social position at the expense of the living heir.[666] In addition, the lack of an official ruler was certainly a situation of potential social chaos as well. The rite, thus, enabled Niqmaddu in joining the ranks of the divinised royal forebears and, at the same time, it conferred the role of king on Ammurapi, with the specific aim to legitimise the passage of the royal power from father to son.[667] As mentioned above, the text does not give enough information to reconstruct how and where the rite was performed. The fact that the throne plays a crucial role could suggest that the ceremony was celebrated within the royal palace. And it is suggestive that archaeological data confirm the presence of graves under this building.[668] Consequently, it could be posited that the ritual audience was restricted to the royal family and other prominent individuals. Some scholars stressed that KTU 1.161 could be compared to the royal *kispum* celebrated at Mari.[669] However, another, maybe stronger, resemblance can be recognised in certain Egyptian ceremonies, such as the OMR[670] and the Middle Kingdom mortuary liturgy composed of Coffin Texts spells 30-41.[671] As outlined in the previous sections, the officiant of these rites was the main heir of the deceased and the performance of the ritual not only aimed at transforming the dead into an ancestor, but also affected the heir/ritualist himself, who, after the celebration, achieved a new

[663] D. Pardee 2002, 85-89.
[664] D. Pardee 2002, 85-89.
[665] P. Xella 1983, 279-80.
[666] P. Xella 1983, 279-80.
[667] P. Xella 1983, 279-287; J. M. Suriano 2009.
[668] In this regard Pardee hypothesised that KTU 1.161 was characterised by a ritual lowering of the deceased king into a pit-installation beside the royal tombs in the royal palace, a hypothesis that may be confirmed by the fact the presence of a pit between the royal graves and the palace is archaeologically attested. (D. Pardee 1996, 273-275). According to Suriano, this reconstruction is not reasonable since “it is unparalleled in any other ancient Near Eastern source” and “archaeologists have yet to properly study the phenomenon of pit-installations inside royal tombs”. Cf. M. J. Suriano 2009, 113-114. However, these observations do not invalidate the possibility that the ritual could be performed inside the royal palace.
[669] P. Xella 1983, 281-287; J.M. Suriano 2009, 119-123.
[670] See chapter 2, section 2.4a and chapter 3, section 3.1.
[671] H. Willems 2001, 253-372.

status, assuming the social role that belonged to the deceased.[672] A similar mechanism could also be applied to KTU 1.161, since some observations made by Suriano seem to suggest that the successor of Niqmaddu, Ammurapi, was also the main officiant of the rite.[673] Furthermore, according to the translation provided by P. Xella, the ritual described in KTU 1.161 was focused on a sculpture of the deceased king rather than on his corpse.[674]

6.4 Results

The analysis of the data has highlighted how practices and beliefs pertaining to ancestor worship were an intrinsic trait of the polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East. Cultic actions devoted to the dead had a specific function in legitimising the social role of the living and could take the form of public performances meant as a moment to display the self-presentation of both royal and elite families. Also, ancestor worship turned out to be strictly intertwined with the rules regulating inheritance and succession.

In the light of these data, the Egyptian beliefs and practices analysed in the previous chapters, such as the OMR scenes 9 and 10 and the Tekenu ceremony, but also the Haker feast celebrated within the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos can be understood in the context of this wider framework where ancestor worship was an ideological tool to legitimise power and succession. From this, it also follows that an actual juridical function of the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues is quite grounded since it perfectly matches with the religious mindset typical of Ancient Near Eastern cultures.

[672] See chapter 2, section 2.3.
[673] J.M. Suriano 2009, 115.
[674] P. Xella 1983, 281-287.