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

English

The present thesis focused on the authoritative role of the ancestors in matters of social cohesion, succession, inheritance, and property ownership in Ancient Egypt. The main goal has been to investigate whether religious sources concerning ancestor cult can provide concrete information about ancient Egyptian law administration. In order to pursue this objective a group of written sources that testify to the involvement of the ancestors in matters of inheritance and succession have been identified and thoroughly analysed. Rather than focusing exclusively on philological aspects, the research has mainly been aimed at reconstructing the ritual scenarios in which these textual sources were used in terms of space (by identifying the possible “theatrical settings” of the rituals), time (to be meant as the specific moments in which the ritual actions were enacted) and the type of audience involved.

In chapter 1, the importance of comparativism within History of Religions has been discussed and the relevant terms and concepts have been defined. In chapter 2 a critical approach to previous studies has been conducted; rather than focusing exclusively on the topic of ancestor worship and its role in Egyptology, a wider problem has been identified and deepened: that of certain dramatic rituals – the Opening of the Mouth Ritual, the Tekenu Ritual, and the Haker feast – which have been incorrectly considered as survivals of archaic shamanic practices rather than as contemporary expressions of ancestor cult.

Chapter 3, 4 and 5 have been dedicated to the analysis of the sources. In chapter 3 all the main data currently available concerning the Opening of the Mouth Ritual scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual and the Haker feast have been translated and analysed. Chapter 4 and 5 focused on the so-called Letters to the Dead. Specifically, chapter 4 analysed the Letters to the Dead written to solve inheritance, or economic-related issues, while chapter 5 focused on the Letters to the Dead addressed to deceased women. Chapter 6 is dedicated to a comparative study between pharaonic Egypt and other societies of the Ancient Near East, with a special focus on the authoritative role of the dead in validating power relations, inheritance issues, and real estate ownership.

Finally, in chapter 7, the results of the research have been outlined: ultimately the analysis of the data has shown that ancient Egyptian religious practices pertaining to ancestor cult played a foremost role within the legal sphere, especially with regard to inheritance issues, real estate ownership, and the public validations of social roles.