

Analysis of the Influencing Society Factors of the Burial Ritual Evolution and Formation in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract: The burial rituals in Egypt include the construction of tombs, the display of burial objects, the treatment of bodies and funeral ceremonies. As the symbol of Egyptians' wishes for the afterlife, their formation was deeply affected by the religious culture of Egypt. However, the Egypt society also played an important role in the changes of burial rituals. This paper has chosen some typical examples from different periods in Egypt to discuss the social influence of funeral ceremonies from three aspects, namely scientific and technological development, economic situation and social ideology. The evolution and formation of funeral ceremonies in ancient Egypt were influenced by three factors: technology, economy, and social ideology. Technological development provided conditions for Egyptians to construct complex cemeteries and create exquisite funeral supplies. The economy would affect the scale of funeral ceremonies, while social relations mainly influenced the tomb objects in different tombs. Through the discussion and research of the cemeteries from different periods, the paper demonstrates that the society factors had a great influence on the burial ritual evolution and formation; they promoted the burial rituals to develop and differentiate into various forms.

Keywords: Egypt, burial rituals, Egyptian cemeteries, burial objects

1. Introduction

The burial ritual has always been an important topic in the study of ancient Egyptian history, but the materials about the comprehensive study of various society factors and burial rituals in different periods are relatively few [1]. So, the author read several papers on this topic and tried to use them as the basis to summarize the different society factors that affected the burial rituals. In the paper, the author firstly discusses the technology development. In this part, the author pays attention to examples of early Egypt. In early Egypt, burial articles and tomb construction became more luxurious and sophisticated. Since the Predynastic period, the treatment of the body also gradually evolved. In the second part, the author discusses the influence of the economic situation. The author takes the New Kingdom as an example. With the economic depression, tomb specifications were also simplified to save costs and prevent theft. Through the example, the paper discusses the relationship between the burial rituals and the society economic conditions. In the third part, the paper separates the social ideology into two aspects. For social relationship, the author reads some materials about individual tombs in the predynastic period and study the symbolic significance of burial articles for the social status and characteristics of the deceased. For social class polarization, the author discusses the growing inequality in the tombs in early Egypt and relates it to the class polarization at the same time.

The paper is relatively comprehensive on the research of Egyptian burial rituals. It provides material to study the development of Egyptian burial rituals from different aspects.

2. The development of technology

The development of technology is the basic reason for the evolution of the burial rituals in ancient Egypt. This factor is mainly reflected in the change of burial articles. The paper will focus on the burial rituals in early Egypt to discuss the effects of technology on Egyptian tombs. Around 4500 BCE in the earlier period, most of the grave goods were potteries, flint pieces, as well as jewelry or toilet articles. Subsequently, during the Naqada era, the quality of the grave goods improved, and the variety of materials increased. At this time, copper - made jewelry and weapons emerged in the tombs. From the middle of the fourth millennium on, a significant change occurred is that items which were specifically made for showing the social status of their owner instead of using started to be used in tombs. Another change is that the ancient Egyptians began to use the jewels of gold, silver and fine stones in the tombs also as the symbol of the status of the owners at the end of this period [1]. The two changes both indicate that productivity increased in that period since ancient Egyptians had the ability to specialize the production of burial goods. Besides, throughout the entire early Egypt period, as time passed, both the quantity and variety of burial articles increased. The reason is that people's ability to produce items was increased. They continuously invented more sophisticated tools to process more type of materials. That's the reason why more types of jewelry occurred in relatively late tombs. These are the results of the technology development.

Except burial goods, the technology development also had a large influence on body preserving and tomb construction. The earliest grave were just simple oval pits or rectangular pits, and the bodies were wrapped in skins or basketwork. Until the Dynasty 1, people used linen and resin to keep the shape of the bodies. However, they still had difficulty with abdominal evisceration, so they couldn't stop bodies rotting. To achieve this goal, Egyptians spent about two thousand years in improving this technique [1]. In addition, they also spent much time to build a perfect tomb. The earliest tombs were just simple pits which were dug into the ground. Then, at the end of the predynastic period, people started to put bodies in the wooden and terra cotta coffins more and more frequently. At the beginning of the third millennium, people started to use bricks to build their tombs [1]. Then, in the Old Kingdom, the first pyramid appeared. Those earliest pyramids were stepped and from a low square structure over the burial place. They were soon replaced by smooth-sided structures [2]. As mentioned above, the process of technology development provided more effective methods and more defensive conditions to the deceased.

According to the examples, the author supposes that the technology development can directly impact the form of tombs. The tombs became more sophisticated while the technology was improving.

3. Economic situation

Except the development of technology, the economic conditions in different periods also caused diversity in tombs from different dynasties. This diversity was clearly reflected in the tombs from the New Kingdom. In this period, the rulership of Egyptian king was weakened, and the trade routes were disrupted. In this situation, the Egyptian economy inevitably experienced a downturn. At that time, some people couldn't afford the cost of coffins and grave goods, so they decided to rob others' graves and use their coffins and grave goods to solve this problem. To adapt the economic condition and avoid robbing, elite Egyptians developed a new set of funerary values. They only focused on the minimal essentials for rebirth rather than put plenty of valuable and various burial goods in their tombs. They didn't build grand tombs to show their wealth either. Instead, at that time, they used unusual coffin decorations and innovations in mummification technique to show their status [3]. As

a result, the tombs from the New Kingdom had a distinct change in style compared to the tombs before the period.

Though the burial rituals served the deceased, the cost of them were paid by the living. So, complexity of the tomb structures and the value of coffins and grave goods all definitely depended on the wealth level of their owners. The individual wealth level was closely related to the entire economic situation of the society. When the society was in a depression, it would reflect in the tombs, especially for those belonging to elites. Because of their status, the society economy could make a greater impact on them. Besides, their burial rituals were always the most completed and complex in the whole society which also meant that the influence on their burial rituals were the most obvious. Based on the information collected from their tombs, it's clear that economic condition change could make a tremendous and far-reaching influence on the burial rituals. When the society economy declined sharply, the burial rituals had to greatly simplify as a consequence of people's reduced property.

4. Social ideology

4.1. Social relationship

In general, technology and economy were mainly reflected in the diversity of tombs between different periods. The social ideology, however, could be reflected in diversity of different periods and different tombs from the same period. Whether from a holistic or individual perspective, social ideology is an important factor affecting the form of the graves.

In the predynastic period, the tombs demonstrated a strong sense of sociality. Drawing on the work of Alice Stevenson, burial rituals may have held important meaning for those who attended the funeral, or for those who had interaction with the body and the objects accompanying it by other way. Ancient Egyptians used the choreography of bodies and artifacts within burial spaces to show the identity and social characteristics of the deceased. They were good at use different articles such as vessels, beads, and sculptures to describe the deceased by producing items of different types and using different permutations and combinations of the items. They composed various materials in the tombs to show the status, personal information, wealth level and relationships of the deceased. For instance, in some cases, they provided deformed ceramic vessels to represent the deformation of the deceased [4]. By using this kind of representation, ancient Egyptians associated the characteristics of the deceased with various burial articles. Funerals were like exhibitions to show the community members what kind of person the deceased had been before their death. The relatives showed the burial articles associated with the deceased to other community members. This could build and emphasize a close emotional connection between the mourning community and the deceased. This connection could also affect the layout of the tombs. This is because that community members sometimes may give something as a gift to the deceased when they attend the funeral. There is some evidence to support this theory such as some jewelry that were unsuitable for the owners or were not worn on the corpse. These gifts changed the layout of the tombs in some degree, as a representation of connections between the mourner and mourned [5].

Based on the discussion above, the author states that the social relationship is the major determination of the diversity of tombs from the same period. Each person played a different role in the community, so the burial articles to describe them are different. Besides, their social networks were also different, so the gifts the deceased received on the funeral were various. The diversity of people's identities made tombs have differentiation and personalization.

4.2. Social class polarization

From a longer and larger perspective, the social ideology still played an important role in the evolution of the tombs. The paper will discuss this from the aspect of social differentiation in the content below. Differences in status, property and other aspects of different classes make Egyptians build different tombs. The effects of class polarization were enormous and clearly reflected in the tombs. The ‘mausoleum culture’ in the necropolis was mainly developed for provision for the royal and elite deceased. The information about luxuriant decorations and complex rituals people can access today was almost all from elites’ tombs; however, the destiny of most Egyptians in death is almost unknown, and many were disposed of in ways that have not been recovered archaeologically [6].

The tombs in early Egypt clearly showed that class polarization had a noteworthy influence on the evolution of burial rituals. As Baines and Lacovara mentioned, in the Predynastic period, cemeteries showed increasing polarization in tomb size, as well as in the number and elaborateness of the grave goods they contained, with the largest constructed tombs in contrast to several levels of less wealthy burials [6]. The predynastic period is exactly the beginning of the social differentiation in Egypt. In this era, the inequality appeared in different area at different time respectively. Initially, the inequality reflected as some temporary leaders with varying power, which formed the hereditary leadership in settled communities later and caused the emergence of the country in the end [7]. The development of the inequality corresponds to the polarization of the cemeteries. From the existence of some larger and wealthier tombs in the Badarian times to the construction of great pyramids in the Old Kingdom, the disparity between the tombs that belonged to people of different statuses expanded gradually with the process of social class polarization. Therefore, it’s provable that class polarization is a strong effect of the evolution of the burial rituals in Egypt.

5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion and textual research above, in the society aspect, the burial rituals evolution and formation of Ancient Egypt is influenced by several different factors including technology, economy and social ideology. They changed with the times and promoted the burial rituals to show different forms in different periods. The development of technology provided the condition of constructing sophisticated cemeteries and manufacturing delicate funeral objects for Egyptians. It also played a significant role in the improving and perfecting of mummification. For the economy, the burial rituals reflected both the wealth level of individuals and the economic situation of the entire community. The differences between people’s wealth made their tombs polarize obviously. Besides, from a greater perspective, the economic situation in different periods also made the tombs change with the times. Except from the technology and economy, the paper also discusses the social ideology in two parts. The social relationship mainly affected the burial articles in the different tombs, which diversified because of the different social networks and statuses of the owners; the social class polarization played an important role in the differentiation of the burial rituals in early Egypt. Overall, the burial rituals as an important part of Egypt society, it integrated multiple social factors in its formation process and reflected the changes of different periods in Egypt. The burial rituals are like the microcosm of Egyptian society.

The paper still has some limitations on this topic. The burial rituals are comprehensive and complicated, and their evolution and formation are affected by many different reasons. The paper only selects some major and distinct factors and examples. However, there are still some influencing aspects that are not taken into account in the paper. Due to the Egyptians' focus on the afterlife, the evolution and formation of burial rituals are closely associated with their real lives. By studying the burial rituals, we can learn more details about Egyptians’ lives.

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