



The Conception of Pilgrimage in the Ancient Egyptian Religion

Hebatallah Sobhy Ibrahim¹

Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Sadat City University.

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Abstract

The concept of pilgrimage in most religions is similar to a great extent to the ancient Egyptian festivals and celebrations. This is shown in the way of performing the rituals and reviving of the religious myths. Festivals in ancient Egypt provided a good chance for people to gather and celebrate in a distinctive and traditional way.¹ Ancient Egyptians did not consider the celebration as representing a sort of their personal piety. Scholars debated that the ancient Egyptians thought of the celebrations as a kind of change or an opportunity to alter their daily routine.² So the research is focused on the religious concept behind the festivals and celebrations of the ancient Egyptians, and their relation to the personal piety. The research is applied to the festival of Osiris at Abydos as a model of the concept of celebration. It was chosen as a good example of the interaction of the public, and because they had a starring role in the rituals. The research compared the rituals performed during the Egyptian festivals pilgrimage to the religious proving that there are many points of similarity to religious pilgrimage.

Introduction

Festivals of the ancient Egyptians varied in their significance and were celebrated regularly during the year.³ This means that they were not a yearly pilgrimage, but to revive many legends and myths. This is because the ancient Egyptian religion is based on polytheism. Festivals were also a good chance for the community to join the celebrations organized by the state.⁴ They were considered an exceptional participation, as common citizens were not always invited to official celebrations.⁵ The ancient Egyptian cults and rituals were usually limited to the temple area and performed by priests and high officials, not by common citizens.⁶ On the other hand, the festivals are organized when the deity leaves the shrine and interact with common people.⁷

Celebrations have certain dates, and a regular agenda.⁸ They represent a certain type of the personal piety as the person is in direct interaction with his deity at the celebration and involved in the community cult. Most researchers confirms the idea that the celebrations give a chance to the public to have a sort of change in their daily routines and get involved in community events, which give the state a more controlling and powerful role.⁹ The most common words or expressions used for such events are: Celebrations, festivals, incentives, and cheerfulness. This indicates that common

¹ hebaky@hotmail.com

citizens thought of the celebration as a kind of fun and as a chance to have a good time rather than a religious aspect, it is just a revel.¹⁰

Celebrations of some deities were considered a sort of ritual itself; as they were organized by the priests of the deity under the supervision of the government or state. This can be considered as a community religion that has a direct effect on the personal piety. The connection between the state cult and the personal piety is shown in the policy of the government at that time. Some scholars suggested that festivals were used to make individuals nearer to the state policies and ideas.¹¹ In conclusion, the governments usually link both the cult ritual and the state policy to influence the personal piety in the form of a community act under the supervision of the state.

It is crucial to distinguish between the state cult and personal piety. There were some physical and emotional actions during these events and feasts, which should be put in consideration, and the spiritual or emotional part should not be neglected. It was found that the state directs the citizens' physical actions, but it is hard to assess to which level. And on the other hand, the state cannot direct the individual religiosity.

According to the sources, feasts were a good way of having a social interaction. The feasts usually represent a combination of the past and present, they represent some actions, which were done by the god or the king in the past, and are repeated in the present in the form of celebration. This would form a kind of social memory that is the main source of community linking and ethics. Also it is crucial to assess the degree of interaction of the Egyptians to celebrations, how individuals express their hereditary thoughts as the personal piety of the individuals may be influenced by their ancestors and their inherited habits. And to have a clearer picture about the personal piety of the Egyptians, and their way of expressing their religion; besides the effect of religion upon them.

Celebrations consist of many rituals, each ritual has its religious significance. These rituals could be divided into: - being present in the festival of the deity, interacting with the community in the activities, making offerings to the deity in the form of erecting a statue or a memorial stela or any other offerings. Celebrations were a public event where most citizens and members of the society attend. Most of the attendees attended in the past years and knew all about the festival from their community members, or teaching new members how to act in their social event.

When someone is new to a community who worships parts of the universe, he would be influenced by their beliefs, would know the behaviors of this community and the way of dealing with the community problems.¹² Festivals and celebrations were considered as a common and a clear way of showing this. The common belief in the holiness of the elements of the universe were commonly known, which results in the belief of the life after death or the afterlife. Luckmann in his study of the invisible religion discussed festivals and celebrations as a way to strengthen the relation among the citizens.¹³

The Festival of Osiris at Abydos

This Celebration date was in October and November each year, this period was known as *Khoiak*, it was the fourth and last month of the *Akhet*.¹⁴ It was the season of the Nile

floods.¹⁵ After recession of the inundation, the land becomes fertile, full of silt and productive.¹⁶

The reason behind the celebration or the festival of Osiris is the belief that the land was revitalized or born-again.¹⁷ The main concept of the festival was the concentration on the revival of Osiris, as the whole celebration was concerned with the legend of Osiris. The legend depicts the murder of Osiris by his evil brother god Seth, and the rebirth of Osiris again by the aid of his beloved wife Isis. Osiris, was the king of Egypt, was rejuvenated as the ruler of the netherworld. On the other hand, Horus, the son of Osiris from his wife Isis was the ruler of the living or representative of the king of Egypt. The legend depicts a typical way of performing rituals that helps all the performers to be reborn in the netherworld and to be rejuvenated.¹⁸

This myth explained the way of accession of the throne of the kings and explained how the living king is identified with god Horus; while the dead king is identified with Osiris.¹⁹ It also explained the reason behind linking Osiris with the city of Abydos or *Alaraba el Madfouna*, which was the main city and capital of Egypt where Osiris and his successors chose to be their burial place.²⁰ Many of the rituals performed during the festival were the performance of the events which happened to Osiris with his evil brother Seth during the legend.²¹

The main focus of the research is the rituals done during the festival, referring to them as a legendary drama. Many scholars used different expressions to describe the rituals of the festival, some called it “The Mystery Play”, while others called it the “The Passion Play”.²² These two expressions are not totally accepted, as the rituals of the celebration were done by common people and are not a secret part to be described as a mystery. On the other hand the word passion is considered a contemporary term, which is more related to the contemporary celebrations of pilgrimage.

The drama presented in the festival included the figure of Osiris and other related deities, like god Soker, The Festival of god Soker took place in the fourth month of the *Akhet*; scholars argued that it was linked to the festival of god Osiris. Some of them believed that the link between the two festivals occurred as early as the Middle Kingdom,²³ while others related it to the end of the New Kingdom and not related to the festival of god Osiris.²⁴

God Soker statues usually journeyed from the desert tomb called Peqar.²⁵ The play or the ritual depicts that the journey of Soker was attacked by the evil power represented in god Seth, and a battle arose between the good and evil representatives.²⁶ When the statue of Soker reached the temple of Osiris, rejuvenation of Osiris was depicted by images of Osiris while being revived and reborn. Then the figures of the deities were returned again to their temples.²⁷

Regarding the Festival of Osiris, it started to appear as early as the Middle Kingdom, at the tomb of the first dynasty king Djer, which was thought to be the tomb of Osiris.²⁸ This first dynasty tomb was found in the area of Elkab that might represent Peqar site in ancient Egypt.²⁹ Many monuments were found commemorating the rituals of the festival of Osiris, set by different donators during celebrating the festival. These monuments were in the form of statues or stelae of the donors.³⁰ The relation of the

monuments to the festival ensures that this area was a pilgrimage place, where people gather from various parts of the country to perform their rituals, as some of these monuments states the place of origin of the donor³¹ Most of the dedicated stelae depict the rituals without any sort of inscriptions,³² a matter which might indicate that people from all classes perform the rituals of the festival; therefore it was important to set a stela for the god to record their participation.³³

It should be noted that the Festival of Osiris at Abydos took place from the beginning of the New Kingdom till the end of the Ptolemaic Period, but it stopped during the reign of King Akhnaton.³⁴ However, many scholars debate that the festival of Osiris was as an important event, as it agreed with the local customs or celebrations of local deities, and was performed in the same way.

Scholars argued that it was a national day celebrated all over the country.³⁵ On the other hand, other scholars depended on the archaeological remains and evidences different size statues and depictions to confirm that each area has its unique way of burial of Osiris,³⁶ So the rituals may be the same but the details of acting and performing differ according to the local city. This was clearly shown in the depictions of the temple of Dandara, which shows representations of Osiris in various places.³⁷

The stela of Iker-Nofret, who was a treasurer in the Middle Kingdom during the reign of king Senosert III commemorates the details of the festival.³⁸ The importance of the stela is because it focused on the rituals of the festival of Osiris. These rituals include the construction of the shrine carried out with the statue of Osiris, as well as the statues of Osiris and other gods related to the festival. It also depicts the ceremony and the parade of Osiris to his burial place, plus the fight against the foes of Osiris.³⁹

The temple of Hathor at Dandara is considered also a rich source depicting a more detailed picture of the festival and its rituals. The inscriptions on the walls of the temple depict the events of the ceremony.⁴⁰ It relates in detail the sequence of the rituals during the days of celebration.⁴¹ The celebration starts with the establishment of some dummies or figures of Osiris, and the gods related to the festival, like god Soker.⁴² These dummies are known as the “corn mummies”, as they were made from corn, and different constituents.⁴³

The corn mummies differ according to the place of manufacture, some were found gilded or ornamented with precious stones. It seems that when a new dummy or figure was established in the temple, the old one was buried in the area of Peqar.⁴⁴ There is another ritual called “The Hours’ Watches”.⁴⁵ This ritual is placed in an area known as “The Pure Part”, in which purification process took place.⁴⁶

There are various rituals and celebrations included in the event, as giving offerings and libations plus burning of incense; these were done by the priests of the temple, with a musical background.⁴⁷ The whole performance and acting in this ritual is meant to show grieve for Osiris followed by his rejuvenation in the other world.⁴⁸

The main ritual of the festival was the carrying of the statue or the figure called corn mummy of Osiris in a procession; there is also another figure of Osiris involved in the rituals known as the Fetish.⁴⁹ Osiris Fetish has various forms, as some scholars stated that this fetish was the head casket of Osiris during the New Kingdom.⁵⁰ It is formed of

a head, and usually with the facial features of Osiris fixed a pole.⁵¹ Other scholars described it as a crown consisting of the sun disc and two plumes, flanked with uraei.⁵² This is meant to show the head of Osiris as a kind of celebrating.⁵³

In addition to the depiction of the Fetish, there were various representations of what the fetish changed to during the celebration.⁵⁴ These representations consist of a double figure of the king in different barques.⁵⁵ The purpose of these barques are still unknown.

During the parade of the figure of Osiris, foes attacked the procession.⁵⁶ Performers of the drama were priests and followers of the parade of Osiris, as both sides fought, similar to the fight between Osiris and Seth in the Myth.⁵⁷ Then the parade continued its way in peace till they reached the burial place of Osiris in Peqar, where the figure of Osiris got buried.⁵⁸

Then the next part of the celebration was the renovation of Osiris, with a happy ending and festive from all the attendance. Then the figure of Osiris returned to its place at Abydos in its barque. This was presumably followed by erection of the Djed Pillar, which is the symbol of the stability and power and depicts the backbone of god Osiris.⁵⁹

Discussing the Concept of Pilgrimage

The whole festival was carried out to celebrate the rebirth of Osiris. Reiteration of the myth was to renew or keep the legend alive in the hearts and minds of the believers. This is exactly the same concept behind the rituals of pilgrimage.

The first element to discuss is whether attending the festival was obligatory or optional. Scholars debate that there is not any solid evidence that the ancient Egyptians were obliged to attend the festival.⁶⁰ There are many votive stelae from Abydos that records that citizens covered a long distance to participate in the event.⁶¹ These stelae indicate that citizens who attended the festival vary in their social class, as the stelae differ in the carving quality.⁶²

Those who took part in the event, intend to be participants in the creation of the universe which exceeded their usual power. This theory is invented by Luckmann in the study of the invisible religion and is considered a pure religious aspect.⁶³ But his theory has no solid base. The festival is also considered as a well representation of the power of the government over the citizens, urging them to make their religion a social act.

Another element of the festival is giving an offering to the god in the form of a votive stela or libation. This could be considered as a traditional action inherited from ancestors. It also reflects the social standard as it differs in the quality of the offerings presented. This means that this element is not related to the personal piety of the participant.⁶⁴

In terms of the actual performance of the festival, the rituals are related to the legend of Osiris and his struggle against the evil power. Several rituals depict the mourning of god Osiris, and the happiness after his birth. This might provide a model of that all the believers will be born again in the netherworld.⁶⁵ This means that attending the festival assure that they will have an afterlife, similar to Osiris. However, it is not possible to make certain what the ancient Egyptians thought of these rituals. But the significance behind performing the ritual is clear that is to allow them to survive in the afterlife.

The participants of the festival of Osiris erect statues and stelae in the area to commemorate their participation in the festival. This might suggest that they want to leave an effect on the cosmos to allow them to have a secured rebirth in the afterlife like Osiris.⁶⁶ Offering a statue or a stela indicates that the ancient Egyptians thought that the statue left in Abydos will help them in their afterlife.⁶⁷ This means that it was linked to their personal piety, but not accepted as a kind of tradition.

Regarding re-attending the festival, there is no solid evidence that it is related to personal piety, not it affects the afterlife of the individual. It might be the eagerness to visit the area and join the festival as a kind of religiosity. Repetition of the rituals might also have a social side, as some people might want to prove their loyalty to the government and the doctrine by joining the festival. This is more related to the power of the state and its influence over the citizens.

The burial at Abydos is also a unique feature of the festival, as evidences showed that there were several burials of those who actually lived in remote areas but preferred to be buried in Abydos.⁶⁸ This may indicate that the Egyptians thought that the burial close to Osiris provides a kind of blessing and facilitates their resurrection in the netherworld. But it is hard to set this as a rule, as many people were buried in their home cities. It might be because the burial in Abydos is costly or difficult, as they need to move all the funerary equipment to the place. Therefore, the area was considered sacred and blessed, but not everyone takes the advantage of being buried there.

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مفهوم الحج في الديانة المصرية القديمة

هبة الله صبحي إبراهيم عبده

كلية السياحة و الفنادق، جامعة مدينة السادات

الملخص

الاحتفالات المصرية القديمة تشبه إلى حد كبير مفهوم الحج في الأديان السماوية في أسلوب توظيف الطقوس وإحياء الأساطير الدينية، بالإضافة إلى إتاحة فرصة جيدة للشعب للتجمع والاحتفال بطريقة تقليدية تحت إشراف الدولة. لم يدرك المصريون القدماء فكرة أن الاحتفال يمثل نوعاً من التقوى الشخصية أو إنه نوع من أنواع العبادة. فقد ناقش العلماء مفهوم الاحتفالات وأثبتوا أن المصريين القدماء فكروا في الاحتفالات كنوع من التغيير أو فرصة لكسر الروتين اليومي. لذلك ركز البحث على دراسة المفهوم الديني وراء الاحتفالات التي أقامها المصريون القدماء، وخاصة علاقتهم بالتقوى أو العبادة والتدين الشخصي. تم تطبيق نظرية البحث على احتفال أوزوريس في أبيدوس كنموذج لمفهوم الاحتفالات، وذلك لكونه مثلاً جيداً لتفاعل الحاضرين، والذين يمثلون دور البطولة في الطقوس. كما قارن البحث بين الطقوس خلال الاحتفال بأوزوريس والحج، مما يثبت أن هناك العديد من النقاط المتطابقة وأن احتفالات المصري القديم كانت بمثابة الحج الديني.

معلومات المقالة

الكلمات المفتاحية

الحج؛ الاحتفالات؛
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