



The Meaning and Practice of Mummification in Ancient Egypt

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ABSTRACT

A number of mummified bodies have been found and studied to ascertain the methods and the types of chemicals used for preserving the dead. There seemed to be no specific method of mummification in ancient Egypt because the practice was different from one Egyptian period and region unto the other. There is a need to elucidate the general practice of mummification. The knowledge of the ancient Egyptian practice of mummification may help in the modern practice of embalmment. This research is first, an explanation of the concept of mummification as it was practiced in ancient Egypt; second, the researcher targets the primary reasons behind the Egyptians practice of mummification. The primary reason for this research is to inquire about the motives or intentions behind the Egyptian varied step-by-step rituals for mummification. The researcher promoted the view according to which mummification was a precursor for the evolution of the beliefs that death is a journey. The beliefs also helped in the gradual sophistication of mummification rituals from one Egyptian period unto the other.

KEYWORDS: African, bodily death, modern, mummification, otherworld, scientific.

INTRODUCTION

Death is a way of life. It is a stage that every living thing had to pass through. In simple terms, death is inevitable (Cooper 1992:21). Over the years, humans have done various activities to understand the cause of death or to overcome or deal with death or to come to terms with death as a reality that must be accepted by all. The Egyptians mummified in order to “deal with death” (Garland 2020:2) while the ancient Israelites came to terms with death by accepting it as “the way of all the earth” or “normal” especially to individuals that died at old age (Agai 2015:170). It thus becomes pertinent to inquire the meaning of death as perceived by different human societies and especially by the ancient Egyptians.

Death used to be regarded as a stage where the heart ceases to function (using electrocardiographic tracing). With advances in modern sciences whereby electroencephalograph tracings are used, the complete malfunctioning of brain impulses is now highly accepted as the primary criterion for defining death. Brain death is when the percipient or the patient can no more be resuscitated or bring back to life (Halsey and Johnson 1989:758) and in clinical death, the percipient might be resuscitated (Moody 1977:196-199).

While death is generally seeing as the end of life by many, not all societies agree to this concept of death as the end of existence. For the ancient Egyptians and may other Africans, death is not the end of life (Lawuyi 1998:372). Citing references to the meaning of death for the ancient Egyptians, it could have meant one or all of the following:

- a journey that required that the normal things needed in life like food, water, etc. be provided for the dead so that the journey could continue in a less stressful way seemed the journey was believed to be lengthy. The ancient Egyptians believed that farming and business activities like irrigation, brewing, baking, trades, and craft would continue in the afterlife where servants would continue to serve their rulers (Cavendish 1977:21).
- a state of ascension to heaven or descend to the netherworld (Bernstein 1993:12, 14);
- a state of being or a mediatory stage where kings or pharaohs directly mediated with Osiris and where the king had the power to help his/her loyalists gain salvation in the resurrection life (Turner 1993:15; Spronk 1969:87-91). It was also believed that Osiris could not deny the request of the king to provide salvation to the king’s servants because at some instances, the king shared equal status with Osiris (Bernstein 1993:12);¹
- a state of existence where the physical body is handed over to the bereaved because the deceased could no more control or manage the activities of his/her physical body without the full support of the living. So, death meant surrendering the physical body to the living in a physical world while the dead became only active in the

1 Osiris is an important god associated with resurrection because he himself resurrected through mummification (Mark 2008:2).



spiritual world and although the dead could control his/her physical body but not in terms physical reality in the same way he/she lived when he/she was alive.

More so, because the Egyptians believed that death is a continuation of life, certain activities and beliefs systems was required in order for the dead to continue with his/her journey. Mummification became the most standard and organized practice that enabled the deceased body and soul to journey peacefully and happily to the world of the dead: “[t]he goal of mummification was to preserve the body in the most life-like state possible”² so that the dead could continue to enjoy his/her physical body in the otherworld (Garland 2020:2). Mummified bodies from Egypt have been studied over the years. The archaeological finds and studies on Egyptians mummies conducted by Gaston Maspero in 1881 and those by Howard Carter between 1922 and 1923 (Scheffler 2000:121, 117) together with many other archaeologists, scientists and researchers generally have contributed immensely to further scientific-interest on the study of the Egyptian mummies.

In addition, further chemical analysis is conducted on more mummies in both Egypt and in diaspora by more chemical scientists today in order to ascertain the exact chemicals that might have been used for mummification. Emma Davies said that the Egyptian mummies in particular have never ceased to amazed humans in modern society: “[E]gyptian mummies have been prodded, poked, and pondered over by generations of archaeologists, scientists and historians” (Davies 2011:48). The study of mummies in particular and other Egyptian artifacts contributed immensely to the rise of modern Egyptology (Tyldesley 2005:43-44).

The question of why the Egyptian mummified or the purpose for mummification and possibly their processes of mummification might have re-echoed itself in the scientific-modern world and in most modern religious beliefs. While religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam teach about the rise or the resurrection of the body (perhaps a new body) and the soul after physical death, some scientists on the other hand have made several scientific efforts and have applied several scientific approaches to carefully preserve a deceased physical body with a view according to which in future, further scientific breakthroughs could help raise or resurrect the dead through a process known as cryonics (Mercer 2017:1-2).

This researcher is aware that cryonics is not accepted by many scientists as a mainstream science (Mercer 2017:1). Notwithstanding, the fact the subject is being debated and studied among some scientists suggest that the idea of the rising or the resurrection of the physical body is important in the scientific world (cf. Wallenfang n.d.:1-5; Harpur 1991:98; Grosso 1989:237-239). This research is centered on the reasons or the purpose for mummification in ancient Egypt. The researcher discussed the concept of mummification and why the Egyptians mummified.

² National Geographic

THE CONCEPT OF MUMMIFICATION

Mummification is an important aspect of the ancient Egyptian burial rituals which was aimed at preparing the deceased for a journey to the otherworld (James 1976:157). According to Partridge, the word “mummy” might have been derived from an Arabic term *mumiya* which described a body preserved in bitumen (Partridge 1994:12). Robert Garland also echoed the same view and said that the word mummy is Arabic in origin and that it is derived from the word *mumiya* which means “bitumen” or “something made of bitumen” (Garland 2020:2). Although the ancient Egyptians did not use bitumen for mummification, however, it is likely that the appearances of most mummified bodies as dark or black corpses were mainly due to the many processes the mummified bodies went through in addition to the many years the bodies lasted as mummies. This might have made the Arabs to associate it with the color of bitumen (Partridge 1994:12). Bitumen are black tarry materials or substances used in coal-tarring roads (cf. Garland 2020:2).

Emma Davies reported that York’s Buckley and Richard Evershed have been studying the Egyptian mummies (1900 BCE to AD 395) for many years. After their chemical analysis regarding the chemicals used by the Egyptians to preserve their mummies, they came to the conclusion that beeswax and probably not bitumen was used to mummify: “[b]lack coatings on a mummy might [not] be bitumen used in embalming, but just be oxidised paraffin wax applied by museum staff” (Davies 2011:3). This was mainly the result of their analysis of a black resinous coating of a Ptolemaic mummy which contained 87 per cent of beeswax mixed with a little amount of resin. They found out that many other chemicals not just beeswax were used. Some of the compounds that were used to mummify included wax esters, hydroxyl wax esters, alkanes and many more (Davies 2011:3).

While there is many evidence that showed that the Egyptians were not the only ancient people that mummified, their practice is more pronounced due to the abundance of evidence that supersedes the practice in other parts of the Ancient Near East or Africa (Partridge 1994:7). Other regions of the world like Peru, Yemen and others also mummified (Davies 2011:4). It is not known precisely why the Arab origin of the term “mummy” was associated extensively with the color black than with the significance of the practice which is the continuity of life after death.³ It cannot be ascertained

³ It is important to raise this concern because some Arabs especially from the post-Islamic period had stereotypes over black people according to which black people were inferior. They regarded the Hamitic myth as suggesting that black people who were tagged as the descendants of Ham were meant to be slaves. Another view that might have been propagated by some Arabs is that the hotter the climate, the less civilized its residents. They said that Africa is located in the north of the Equator with the hottest climate which made its people black and probably less civilized (Hunwick n.d.: 1-23, 7-8; Sanders 1969:521).

at this stage whether the connotation was stereotypic or the direct physical appearances of mummies attracted the association with black color. On the other hand, an Egyptian origin of the term “mummy” suggest its connection with “dignity” or “nobility” (Davies 2020:2). Davies reiterated that the Egyptian origin of the term “mummy” is *sah* which meant dignity (Davies 2020:2). Spronk is in tandem with this view when he noted that the Egyptians glorified mummified bodies as *sah* (Spronk 1986:90). Seemed the practice of mummification is an indication of honor to the dead, associating the word “mummy” with respect or honor might have been the original intention of the ancient Egyptians to refer to mummified bodies as mummies. While the Arabs associated mummy with color, the Egyptians on the other hand associated with dignity.

WHY DID THE EGYPTIANS MUMMIFIED?

Introduction

The Egyptian perception of the human body might have influenced their views regarding mummification and their perception of death as a journey. The Egyptians believed that the body is one but divided into various constituents that made the *one body* work or function properly. Their view of the body is first, the physical body and second, the spiritual body. The physical body is also referred to as the *Khat* or *Kha*. The *Khat* is the body that survived after mummification (Seawright 2013:1). The other aspect of the physical body is the Egyptian *Akh* referred to as the “shadow of man” that also required food and water offerings. It is sometimes referred to as the *Khaibit* (Murnane 1992:41; Seawright 2013:1).

The constituents of the spiritual body are the *Ka* which is said to be present in all humans irrespective of their social status. The *Ka* is that spiritual entity that enabled the dead to journey well through offerings and food provided in the grave without which the dead would be forced to feed on offal from the dead body. This was detestable to the Egyptians so they preferred to provide funerary goods to the dead (James 1976:156).

More so, another constituent of the spiritual body is the *Akh* or *Khu* or *Akhu* which was believed to have transcended the human body to live with the gods. The *Sahu* is the most purified aspect of the human body that successfully passed the Osirian judgment (Seawright 2013:1). The Egyptian *Ba* or *Bai* meant that spiritual body that was represented as a human-headed bird which also meant the human personality and psychic that was responsible for all the journeys in the afterlife. It is the *soul* that is equated with the *Ba* (Parrinder 1951: 203-204). The various processes and perceptions of mummification by the ancient Egyptians indicates that their views were guided with respect to their perceptions of the division of the human body. The physical body and what they termed as the spiritual body contained in the physical body all needed to be prepared for the journey of the dead. Mummification became the best practice to prepare the

dead for such types of journeys that involved the dead. It thus becomes pertinent to inquire explicitly why the Egyptians mummified considering the fact that the practice was laborious and expensive, yet, they were glad to do it.

More so, the specific methods of mummification in Egypt might not be certain as few materials exist written by people that have witnessed the practice. The Egyptians themselves did not keep records that involved the processes of mummification (Partridge 1994:7). The knowledge we have today about mummification was mostly written by Herodotus, a Greek historian who witnessed the practice of mummification in the fifth century BCE when he circumnavigated Egypt. Herodotus taught that the Egyptians might have been one of the earliest peoples to have believed in death as a continuation of a journey into another world (Partridge 1994:10-11). Another source of information we obtain about mummification pertained to the scientific study of mummified bodies found in Egypt and in other parts of the world (Davies 2011:51).

Some knowledge about mummification is also gathered from paintings, funerary goods, fragments on papyri and probable comparison between Egyptian mummies and other mummies found in other parts of the world (Jordan 1976:144). Most importantly, one of the primary goals of mummification has been for the preservation and the reformation/decoration of the body to give it a shape or a look as if the deceased was not dead.⁴ In other words, the Egyptians mummified in order for the physical body to continue to exist as a “normal” body.

For the Continual Existence of the Body

The Egyptians made sense of mummification after they found out that the bodies of the deceased kept or left behind or found by accident were mummified naturally especially during the Pre-Dynastic Period. Bodies not buried or buried in shallow graves mummified easily due to the warm weather in Egypt that enabled the bodies to resist quick and fast decay (Jordan 1976:144-145). Most people that embalmed in ancient Egypt lived around the west bank of the Nile where the sun set and the supposed home of the dead due to the sunny weather that enabled an easy dryness of the body (Garland 2020:2).

The mummification caused by the natural circles of the Egyptian warm weather prompted the need for a technical or advanced practice of mummification and might have resulted to some more complex beliefs that there is a life after the death of the physical body. In other words, as the practice of mummification became more complex, it might have enhanced the beliefs in life after death (Partridge 1994:10). The preparation of the body for a continued journey after bodily death might take up 70 to 80 days performed by people that understood human anatomy and priesthood (Garland 2020:3).⁵

4 National Geographic, 1.

5 National Geographic, 1.

Mummification was performed differently for the poor and for the rich. For the wealthy individuals, the exercise was lengthy and costly. After death, the body was sent to the embalmers. The process involved firstly, the removal of certain internal organs that decay easily. Some of the organs removed are the intestine, lungs, liver and the stomach. These items were stored in mostly four Canopic jars with added Natron to enable the parts not to decay easily.⁶ Each of the parts removed were cleansed and sanitized separately using Natron (Jordan 1976:21). Natron contents was also used to clean the mouth of the mummy to enable the mummy sing and speak during his/her journey to the otherworld (El-Shahawy 2005:75).

After this, the brain is also removed by incision through the nostrils using a long needle. The interior body parts were cleansed and all parts that were cuts sewed. The heart was not removed because they thought that the heart would be judged by Osiris in the otherworld.⁷ But the brain is removed because they thought the brain had no relevance in the otherworld (Davies 2011:48). In some instances, the eye sockets were also removed and artificial eyes inserted into the eye sockets (Cavendish 1977:21). After all these processes, the body was bandaged. The Egyptians had a view according to which bodies bandaged left the bandages behind whenever they set-out for the afterlife journeys (Spronk 1986:93). These practices were done especially during the New Kingdom Period (Davies 2011:48-49; Garland 2020:3; Partridge 1994:8).

An individual's social status determined the category of mummification he/she was given. For the poor people, mummification was simple and direct. The embalmers used some special pin-like and syringe-like items to inject a chemical oil through the anus of the deceased for a very short period of time. Before the oil gets released, it dissolved almost all the internal organs within the human body including the heart that was supposed to be judged by Osiris. This practice ensured that the physical body and not the internal organs that decayed easily was preserved (Garland 2020:4). The brain and the viscera were also removed or extracted through the nostrils in a simpler way than those of the wealthy people (James 1976:157-158). After these processes, the mummy was handed over to the relatives of

6 Natron is a natural chemical compound made up of Sodium Carbonates and Sodium Bicarbonates. It is not known exactly when natron was introduced as a preservative ingredient for body preservation in ancient Egypt and the compound might have been discovered by accident (Partridge 1994:9). The function of natron was to facilitate the dissolving of body fats. During the process of extracting body fluids, great caution was exercised so as not to extract all body fluids from the body because some of these body fluids helped to maintain biological body form (James 1976:157-160; cf. Otey 2004:1).

7 National Geographic, 1.

the deceased and placed in wooden coffin and taken to the tomb on a bull for further rituals before internment (Garland 2020:4).

For both the rich and the poor, it was important to bury a mummy alongside items used in their daily lives like toiletries and kitchen utensils. The difference being that the rich were buried with more and expensive items unlike the poor. Other items that accompanied the burial of mummies are potteries, furniture, tiny models, spices, resins, *shabtis* and more toiletries (Garland 2020:5). Amulets, the *Book of the Dead*, heart scarab, statues and many more buried alongside the mummies helped the deceased in his/her journeys to the otherworld. The heart scarab for example enabled the deceased not to bear false witness during the Osirian judgment (James 1976:158-159). One of the last rituals before the insertion of the mummy into the tomb involved the slaughtering of a calf and its heart while still-beating removed and sacrificed by presenting it the mummy before the closing of the tomb (Garland 2020:5).

The methods of mummification continued to improve in Egypt and reached its apex during the Twenty-First Dynasty. During this period, even deformed limbs were restored to their original position after dehydration. This was achieved by packing limbs with linen, fats and mud. The identification of certain leaders with specific animal-like symbols such as lions and birds, led to the mummification of animals. These mummified animals were later regarded and venerated as sacred beings. The practice of animal mummification in Egypt extended through the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (James 1976:160-161).⁸

However, from the 22nd Dynasty, mummy-making began to decline, many Egyptians wanted to become mummies upon death and as a result the normal processes of mummification were not followed. For example, mummy-makers used less stuffing and more molten resin which turned mummies dark and heavy and sometimes bodies were mixed-up and combined accidentally. During the Period of Decline, there was pessimism and skepticism whether death was a journey in afterlife, at this period; people began to doubt the afterlife (Spronk 1976:68). The lesser value they attached about death as a journey lowered their interest on the value of mummification. Another reason why the ancient Egyptians mummified was to prepare the soul for journey to the otherworld.

For the Continual Existence of the Soul

The Egyptians had a view according to which the soul does not die but changed its status at the death of the body. They thought that death is just a transition from one level of existence unto the other (Jordan 1976:147). The two major

8 The remains of over 800 dogs believed to have been meticulously buried and excavated in ancient Ashkelon (Scheffler 2000:126-128) suggest that animals were mummified as well.

aspects of the spiritual body that enabled the individual to journey successfully after bodily death are the *Ka* and the *Ba* (Garland 2020:6). The Egyptians thought that every human being was born with a *Ka* irrespective of one's social status. The *Ka* is that spiritual entity in all humans that required to be fed with food and water after bodily death without which the mummy suffered during the journey of dead (Bernstein 1993:13). It is not surprising that the Egyptians referred to the tomb as the *House of the Ka* (James 1976:37). Also, the *Ka* was important to the Egyptians to the point that they equated its value with the human heart, one of the most important organs to be judged in the presence of Osiris. During the Osirian judgment, the heart could be referred to as the *Ka* (Bernstein 1993:13).

The *Ba* or *Bai* or *Soul* is that spiritual entity that journeyed out of the mummified body and out of the tomb in the daytime and returned to the mummified body at night: "*Ba* visited the upper world during the day and went back to the body at night" (Garland 2020:6). The *Ba* had will and socialized with the gods and lived with the deceased in the tomb concurrently. The *Ba* was also equated with the heart to the point that it was the *Ba* that determined whether the deceased was good or evil (Murnane 1992:37, 27; Jordan 1976:144). Without mummification, it would not have been possible for the dead to journey towards the paths of the otherworld.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR MUMMIFICATION

Archaeological evidence for mummification during the first three Dynasties is rare until the Fourth Dynasty. Archaeologists have uncovered the tomb of Hetepheres, the mother of King Cheops. The tomb contained a calcite chest with some bandaged packages of visceral matter soaked in a diluted solution of natron. This is a typical example of the Fourth Dynasty Period mummification method (James 1976:157). Furthermore, the tomb of the last king of the First Dynasty, Kea, gave evidence that people who were loyal to the king (*shabtis*) were buried in lateral chambers together with the king (Spronk 1986:57-58).⁹ These evidences support the theories that Egyptian leaders were mummified and that they were buried together with their most loyal servants.

The mummy of Ramses II was found marred and is at present in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The mummy was discovered by Gaston Maspero on 5 July 1881. Information obtained on the stele of Merneptah (1236-1223 BCE) made some scholars to believe that Ramses II, traditionally accepted to be the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus (Ex 1:11), was the father of Merneptah. Ramses II who reigned around 1304-1237 BCE, was known to be a great builder who built for himself more temples and other monuments

⁹ This evidence supports theories that Egyptian leaders were buried together with their servants. Kings were thought of as divine and had powers to influence the resurrection of their servants and they had a key role in determining the destinies of their loyalists in the afterlife.

than any other Pharaoh. Large shrines and statues were also built in Thebes, Seba and Abu Simbel in his honor. He had many wives and might have fathered up to 195 children (Scheffler 2000:121).

An excavation conducted by an Australian team of researchers in a place fifteen miles south of Cairo at a hillside which had a lot of ancient graves, revealed a tomb dating back to 4200 BCE. Inside the tomb were three coffins, one of which was thought to have been the coffin of the tutor of the sixth Dynasty King Pepi II called Meri. His chest was covered with beads and he was standing over another mummy that was swathed in turquoise blue beads, and bound in strips of black linen. The name of the mummy bound in strips of black linen is not known, but it is thought to be the mummy of a middle-class official or even possibly Meri's wife. The third wooden coffin also contained a mummy and had an inscription dating it to the 26th Dynasty. Attached to the coffin was a deity called Petah Sakar. Petah was a deity of the artisans and Sakar was the god of the cemetery (cf. James 1976:157).

A number of heart scarabs with amulets have also been found in Egypt. One of the amulets is said to have belonged to King Sobkemsaf of the early Seventeenth Dynasty (James 1976:159).¹⁰ The practice of mummification of both human beings and animals as illustrated, the acts of burial with funerary objects like water, food, canopic jars, charms, and the burial of a king together with his or her loyalists in ancient Egypt, all suggest that Egyptians believed that life does not end at death. It was required that they bury their deceased with objects that had an importance for them during their lifetimes. The archaeological evidence presented in this section demonstrates that ancient Egyptian views about the afterlife were paramount in the development of elaborate funerary rites practiced by them. There have been many more archaeological finds that have been made to prove that the ancient Egyptians mummified and that they mummified for several reasons to include their beliefs that death is not the end of life.

CONCLUSION

Mummification might have been done in ancient Egypt for sanitation and later for preservation (Partridge 1994:10). The most important reasons for mummification involved the preservation and the preparation of the body and the soul for an adventurous and difficult journey to the otherworld. Mummification was done to make the body look "normal" (Spronk 1986:93). Similarly, the Egyptians could be credited for mummification because according to this research, there seemed to be no other part of the world that preserved more mummies and larger sized pyramids as the Egyptians did (Davies 2011:50). The tagging of the Egyptians as the 'masters of mummification' is deserving.¹¹

¹⁰ The amulets or charms were meant to guide and direct the deceased on the stormy, dry and hard route as he or she journeyed to the world of the dead.

¹¹ National Geographic, 1.

In connection with science, Egyptian mummified bodies have continued to fascinate and motivate further scientific researches regarding the lives of the ancient Egyptians. Emma Davies have listed a number chemical researches and analysis conducted on mummified bodies. He said that chemical analysis on mummified bodies could help understand the type of chemicals used by the Egyptians to mummify the dead and it might help contemporary chemists or scientists to discover some modern preservatives meant to preserve humans or other items relevant for human existence (cf. Davies 2011:48, 51).

Furthermore, using modern techniques in the study of mummification, it is now possible to determine the diseases suffered by ancient Egyptians and the foods that they ate. For example, recent research conducted on the cause of the death of King Tut revealed that he died of chronic malaria which affected his limbs.¹² If the body of King Tut were not mummified, it would not have been found in the same manner it was thus mummification played a contributory role in the contemporary understanding of the ancient Egyptian culture especially of the afterlife. One of the main purposes of this research is to understand the reasons behind the Egyptian practice of mummification. The preservation of the physical body is vital in this regard. This research has fulfilled its purpose by defining and describing the processes and the purposes of the ancient Egyptian mummification practices in connection with classifying death as a journey, while mummification as a preparation for the journeys of the afterlife.

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Citation: Jock Matthew Agai, "The Meaning and Practice of Mummification in Ancient Egypt", *American Research Journal of History and Culture*, Vol 10, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1-7.

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