

The Legend of Osiris and the Dance

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Introduction

The central figure in Ancient Egyptian religion was Osiris, and the chief fundamentals of his cult were the belief in his divinity, death, resurrection and absolute control of the destinies of the bodies and souls of men.¹ The ancient Egyptians seemed to have been obsessed with death and immortality which explains why the legend of Osiris survived its long history. Osiris' fame extended to surrounding nations, fortunately, as historians are indebted to these foreigners for the short narratives they wrote. Though incomplete, they give validity to legend, song and dance that are handed down by word of mouth and through depictions of activities of a people in paintings on the walls of ancient tombs.

The most noted of these narratives is that which was written by Plutarch, a Greek biographer and essayist. He lived during the middle of the first century A.D. Diodorus, who was born in Sicily in the latter half of the first century gives an account of Osiris and Isis in his renowned history. Both of their works represent the views which were current among other classical writers of the time.

The legend of Osiris was an underlying factor as to how the peoples of ancient Egypt conducted their daily lives, performed rituals and accorded death. Every aspect of life was tied into the cosmic cycle of the universe as were the explanations of the gods and goddesses. Music, dance, drama and literature evolved from the re-enactment of legends based on ancient Egyptian religion. The purpose of this study is to note the relationship between the legend of Osiris and rituals evolving from it.

¹ E.A. Wallis Budge Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973.



The Gods Osiris and Khepri (Richard Deurer)²

The Legend of Osiris

Ra, later Amun-Ra, the Sun God, was the principal deity in the very complex theology of Ancient Egyptian. The Nile came second to Ra. It was sometimes worshipped as Khnemu or Khnum but came to be enshrined in the person of the goddess Isis, as it was part of the entire principle of life and reproduction. Osiris, son of Geb and Nut and brother/husband of Isis, became supreme god of the dead and representative of eternal life. His importance is based on the belief that all will be judged and ruled by him in the Duat, that is, Land of the Dead.

“They are all thine, all those who come to thee,
Great and small, they belong to thee;
Those who live upon the earth, they all reach thee,
Thou art their master, there is none outside thee.”³

Stories of the Duat were told by magicians and others who supposedly journeyed there and returned to tell of it. “The Book of the Dead“, though fragmentary, has been restored with the aid of pictures and inscriptions from the tombs and segments of rolls of papyrus. It was believed that renditions of this book were buried along with those who could not afford tombs that would have had instructions painted on the walls. The Papyrus of Ani is one of the finest and most complete examples of this type of Egyptian funerary text to survive. It now resides in The British Museum, London.⁴ Descriptions of

² <http://www.egyptartsite.com/osiris1.html>

³ Henri Frankfort Ancient Egyptian Religion New York: Columbia University Press, 1948 pp. 103-104

⁴ <http://www.egyptartsite.com/book.html>

the Duat were pieced together by those who studied carvings and inscriptions in the pyramid of Zoser, Seti I, Ramses II and Ramses III as well as from the Temple of Horus at Edfu. These findings along with the writings of Plutarch, Diodorus and other classical essayists provided anthropologists and historians with enough knowledge to be able to piece together the legends of Ra and his descendants. The following is one of many variations of the legends.

Ra was the maker of all things. He took on the form of a man and became the first pharaoh of Egypt. Thoth was god of wisdom and magic. He prophesied that Nut, goddess of the heavens, would give birth to one who would rule Egypt. Ra, threatened by a successor, cursed Nut that she should not give birth to any child on any day in any year, nor in the night. Thoth devised a scheme so that Nut could give birth. He challenged Khonsu, the moon god to a game of draughts and won enough light from the moon to make five extra days.⁵ Hence, Nut bore her five children, Osiris, Harmachis, Set, Isis and Nephthys on these five days. Thoth advised Nut to entrust Osiris to Pamylos, a man from Thebes, so that no harm would come to him. Thoth instructed Osiris and Isis in all the wisdom of the gods and Khonsu taught Isis the mysteries of the moon. Isis, known for her magical powers, married Osiris. Nephthys, their sister, married their brother Set. Ra, still in power, refused to give up his throne. Thoth taught Isis how to gain power over Ra so that Osiris could reign. Osiris eventually became pharaoh and Isis, his queen.

When Osiris came to the throne, Egyptians were cannibals. He taught mankind how to sow and reap wheat and barley, how to grow fruits and how to make wine. Osiris and Isis taught man to live in peace under laws. He left Isis to rule over his people while he took his teachings to distant lands. Set, was extremely jealous of Osiris' power and decided to get rid of him. He gathered 72 co-conspirators and planned the murder of Osiris. He had a beautiful chest made of cedar constructed to fit the exact measurements of Osiris. He and his co-conspirators held a feast in honor of Osiris where the chest was displayed. He announced that whoever fit into the chest would be granted ownership of this beautiful box. Osiris took his turn after the others found they did not fit. When he got in, Set slammed it shut, nailed it and poured lead over it to insure Osiris would not get out. He then cast it into the Nile. The swift waters carried it through the delta and into the sea until it came to shore at the city of Byblos in Syria. A large Erica tree sprang up and enclosed the box completely. Meanwhile, Isis found out what had happened. Cutting a lock of her hair to represent her state of mourning, she immediately set out to find her beloved husband's body. According to one legend, she left her son, Horus with Buto, the cobra-goddess, who, in time she became a prominent protectress of all of Lower Egypt.⁶

After searching for days, she discovered that the king of Byblos had cut the tree down and made it into a pillar because of its extraordinary beauty. Isis sat at the shore until the queen's maids came to wash their clothes. She spoke kindly to them and braided their

⁵ E.A. Budge Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973 p. 2 (The five extra days are known as the epagomenal days of the Egyptian year.)

⁶ Roger Lancelyn Green Tales of Ancient Egypt England: The Bodley Head, LTD., 1967 p. 31

hair for them. The queen learned of this kindness, therefore beckoned Isis to live with them and nurse her child. Isis, after being identified as a goddess was given the pillar so that the chest could be cut out and returned to Egypt for burial. Upon returning to Egypt, Set stole the chest with the body and tore it into fourteen pieces. He scattered the parts throughout Egypt. Isis, once again, set out in search for all of the parts of her husband's body with the help of Anubis, who was ironically the son of Nephthys and Set. In order to better serve Isis, he took on the shape of a jackal. They found all but the phallus, which had supposedly been eaten by fish, which were accursed for ever after.

Isis buried Osiris in thirteen different places so that many could worship him. Once the burials were accomplished, Osiris passed into the Duat where he became King of the Dead. The legend continues with his son, Horus, the Avenger and his continued battle with Set, whose accusations of Horus' bastardlyness is thought to continue to this day as the battle of good over evil.

Osiris and the Dance

From Diodorus we learn that Osiris passed through Ethiopia where a company of satyrs were presented to him. He took great pleasure in music and dancing so asked them to join his army.⁷ This not only describes the love Osiris had for music and dancing but throws a light on the cult of Osiris and one for the most important features of Nilotic people. They dance at weddings, funerals and all other ceremonies. Certain dances are considered to be acts of worship. Evidence of this is obtained by Egyptian bas-reliefs of all periods. They contain many illustrations of kings dancing before Osiris and other deities. The pygmy were thought to have known how to dance a particular kind of dance which was associated with Osiris. They were from the Punt, a land that was very much associated with "spirits" and "fantasy". Kings of Ancient Egypt tried to get possession of these pygmies so that they would have good standing in the eyes of Osiris. "Historians believe that Punt was referred to as the Abode of the Gods because of its location to the east of Egypt, from where the sun might seem to rise."⁸

⁷ E.A. Budge Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973 p. 231

⁸ <http://www.mapsofworld.com/world-ancient-history/land-of-punt.html>



<http://www.touregypt.net/images/touregypt/dance6.jpg>⁹

The Funeral Dance

Referrals to dances in ancient Egyptian literature are very rare, therefore, pictures are the exclusive source of study of the Egyptian Dance. In pictures of ancient Egyptian funeral dance, Lexova distinguishes three kinds of dances; (1) ritual dances which form a component part of the funeral rites; (2) expression of grief by persons' participation at funerals; (3) and secular dances performed to entertain the spirit of the deceased. The ritual funeral dance was originally a secular dance held in high esteem because of its antiquity. Ancient Egyptian expressions of grief were restricted to certain postures and gestures. Thus, the funeral dance evolved from the natural expressions of grief, which was not performed by trained dancers, but by all funeral participants. It may have later progressed into a more choreographed form which was performed by the professional dancer.

In the historical demotic novel of Vienna, which deals with King Petubastis, the king sends out messages to various princes of Egyptian provinces in which he summons them to participate actively at the funeral ceremonies for the deceased King Yenharrou. Peklul, having received the message admonishes his son saying, "My son, Pemu, go and see to the troops of the Eastern Country, have them prepared with their girdles and myrrh, with the temple officials, masters of ceremony and dancers, who frequent the embalming rooms. Let them sail by boat to Per-Osiris, let them convey the deceased body of Osiris, the King Yenharrou to the anointing room, have him embalmed and buried and arrange a beautiful, grand funeral for him."¹⁰

Osiris was a passive and suffering figure, murdered by his brother, mourned by his wife, and dependent on his son Horus. This dependence on his son in the all important matter of his tomb and its equipment, he resembled every Egyptian. Men and women began to

⁹ <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/dance.htm>

¹⁰ Irena Lexova Ancient Egyptian Dances Brooklyn, NY: Dance Horizons, 1935 p. 67-68

identify themselves with Osiris in death. Funerary inscriptions were preceded by the name Osiris as illustrated in Lexova's account of King Yenharrou. The consequences were far reaching. This identity with the god made the use of texts, rites and emblems, which were used specifically for royalty, appropriate for all to use. In the First Intermediate Period, royal crowns and scepters began to appear among objects depicted in the coffins of common people. Another consequence was the increased prestige in obtaining a tomb at Abydos, where Osiris was supposedly buried. For those who found this inconvenient, a funerary stela (carved stone used for commemorative purposes) could be erected at Abydos, so that one could imagine to be buried there to join the god at the beginning of one's journey into the Duat.

Within the Egyptian ritual the gods were sometimes represented by actors. Embalming priests may have worn a mask of a jackal symbolizing Anubis' aid in the search for the dismembered body. Professional funeral dancers would have short hair or have shaved their heads in representation of Isis' mourning for her husband. In summary, according to Plutarch, the purpose of ceremonies was to represent in dramatic form the search for Osiris' body, its assembly and resurrection through dance, music, song and pageantry.¹¹

¹¹ Lincoln Kirstein Dance: A Short History of Classical Theatrical Dancing Brooklyn, NY: Dance Horizons, 19357 p. 9-10