

Egypt

Practices

Ancient Egyptian culture flourished for thousands of years, from around 3000 to 30 BC. Egyptian rites for the dead were constantly evolving and changing. But some practices were so significant and over-arching that we can use them as inspiration for an Egyptian-themed Pagan funeral.

Archeologists found the earliest Egyptian graves in the desert dated at 4000 BC. They were small oval or rectangular pits dug in the sand. The Egyptians placed the deceased's body in a tight position, on its left side. They buried food and drink alongside the deceased, as well as slate palettes covered with magical religious spells.¹ The Egyptians also included other goods that they thought necessary for life after death, such as bowls, combs, and other trinkets.

The ancient Egyptians later replaced these simple graves with brick "mastaba." These oblong graves with sloping sides and flat roofs were popular during the Memphite dynasties. In time, the Egyptians began to create elaborate step pyramids. Eventually, these step pyramids evolved into the grand pyramids we see today at Giza. But the Egyptians built these enormous pyramids for kings, not commoners—not even wealthy ones. However, one still could easily determine a person's social status and wealth by the size and cost of his or her tomb.

Later evidence demonstrates that processions to the tomb were a fairly common part of Egyptian funeral rites. These processions included musicians and professional wailing mourners, including two priestesses who represented the Goddesses Isis and Nephthys. Once the procession reached the tomb, a priest anointed the mummy with various oils.

Anyone who could afford it had his or her body mummified. This practice preserved the dead body by treating it with special oils and other preservative ingredients and wrapping it in strips of cloth. However, before the priests wrapped a mummy, they removed symbolically important internal organs, such as the heart, and placed them in special canopic jars, which were buried alongside the deceased. The mummification process was carried out by a group of specialized priest and took around 70 days.

One of the most important parts of the mummification process was the Opening of the Mouth. The ancient Egyptians believed that this ritual allowed the deceased to use his or her eyes and mouth in the afterworld. This rite also allowed the deceased to receive offerings. A priest performed the secret rite of the Opening of the Mouth. He touched the mouth, eyes, ears and nose (in this order) with an adze (a heavy hand tool with a steel-cutting blade attached at right angles to a wooden handle, similar to a hatchet) in order to awaken the senses of the deceased.² The priest also recited prayers as this was done. Once the body was properly prepared, it was placed in a coffin or sarcophagus and sealed in the tomb. This ritual was originally performed on statues, so that they could sustain the ka of the dead. Later it was depicted as being performed four times during the mummification process.³

Ancient Egyptian death rituals often ended with a feast and celebration, as they believed that the deceased had started his or her journey to Duat - the afterlife.

The underworld was a reflection of the real world, with skies that were always blue, rivers and boats for travel, Gods and Goddesses to worship and fields and crops that needed to be ploughed and harvested. Small statues, called shabtis, could perform any work needed and thus were a common feature of Egyptian tombs

1 "Ancient Egyptian Burial Customs." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Egyptian_burial_customs>

2 "Death Rituals." N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.historyembalmed.org/egyptian-mummies/death-rituals.htm>>

3 "Tour Egypt :: Egypt: Opening of the Mouth Ritual, A Feature Tour Egypt Story." N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/open.htm>>

The deceased reached the afterlife, a semi-paradise, after two main trials. The first was standing before the 42 divine judges and pleading innocence of any wrongdoing during his or her lifetime. The second was having your heart weighed against the feather of Ma'at to show that you had indeed been virtuous in life.⁴

Deities and Important Concepts

- **Ka**
A symbol of the reception of the life powers from the gods to each person. The ka was the source of these powers and was the spiritual double that resides within every person. The ka as a spiritual double was born with every person and lived on after he or she died, as long as it had a place to live, like a tomb or statue
- **Osiris**
A God who died, but then rose from the dead, after being brought back to life by his consort, the Goddess Isis. Osiris was God of the afterlife, the underworld, and the dead. He opened the door to the afterlife for the deceased.
- **Isis**
Along with her sister Nephthys, the Goddess Isis aided the deceased on his or her path to the afterlife.
- **Nephthys**
Sister to Isis. Sister-wife of Set. One of the roles shared by Isis and Nephthys was as protectors of the mummy and the god Osiris. She is a protective goddess who symbolizes the death experience, just as Isis represented the (re)birth experience.
- **Ptah**
The "Self-Created One", who was believed to have created the universe either by the wish of his heart or by speaking. He was depicted as a bearded mummy-formed man. He crafted the boats that the dead used to travel to Duat – the realm of the dead. He was also associated rebirth. The Egyptians called him the "Lord of Eternity."
- **Anubis**
This God, shaped like a jackal, dealt with mummification. He protected the dead during their journey into the afterlife.
- **Ma'at**
The is the Goddess of truth, balance, order, law, morality, and justice. Ma'at was responsible for judging a person's deeds at death by weighing the deceased's heart against a feather—and meting out the appropriate awards or punishments.

Modern Adaptations

1. Clergy or the family of the deceased may wish to rap the body in linen and anoint it with sacred oils or ointments, such as frankincense, myrrh or cedar oil.
2. Perform the opening of the mouth ritual as follows.
 - *Touch the mouth*
You shall eat of the fruits of the afterlife in Duat— the Land of the Two Fields.
 - *Touch the eyes*
You shall be open to experience that which lies beyond the veil.
 - *Touch the ears*
You shall hear the prayers of those still living.
 - *Touch the nose*
You shall breathe in the sweet smell of all you need to learn.

⁴ "The Underworld and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt – Australian Museum." N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Apr. 2015. <<http://australianmuseum.net.au/the-underworld-and-the-afterlife-in-ancient-egypt>>

- *Hold the adze (you can use a hatchet) to the sky*
You shall move on with the knowledge that we who are left behind shall not forget you.
- 3. Tell people to solemnly proceed to the burial site. If musicians are a part of the rite, you might have them play during the procession.
- 4. Talk about the ancient Egyptian custom of wailing to mourn the dead and how it is okay to feel the pain of loss. Allow people to cry, pray, wail, and shout—if they feel comfortable doing so.
- 5. Talk about all of the good that the person did in life and how he or she will be able to stand before Ma'at, the Goddess of Truth. Discuss how the deceased will be rewarded for good deeds, before moving on to the afterlife.
- 6. Bury some everyday items with the deceased. You might ensure that you have enough small items so that everyone who wishes to can add an item to the grave. You might also bury religious objects, such as small statues of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses or amulets to give the deceased luck in the afterlife. These items may include ancient Egyptian symbols of life after death, like the “ankh” (a cross-like symbol in which the top arm is a loop) or the scarab beetle (which the Egyptians believed to magically arise to life from nothing).
- 7. Make a small step pyramid using bricks on top of the grave.
- 8. Make copies of Egyptian funeral texts and bury them with the deceased.
- 9. Invoke Osiris to open the door to the realm of the dead.

Sample Readings

Ptah performing the first Opening of the Mouth ceremony⁵

May Ptah open my mouth, and may the god of my town loose the swathings, even the swathings which are over my mouth. Moreover, may Thoth, being filled and furnished with charms, come and loose the bandages, the bandages of Set which fetter my mouth; and may the god Tmu hurl them at those who would fetter [me] with them, and drive them back. May my mouth be opened, may my mouth be unclosed by Shu with his iron knife, wherewith he opened the mouth of the gods. I am Sekhet, and I sit upon the great western side of heaven. I am the great goddess Sah among the souls of Annu.

Speech of the Dweller in the Embalment Chamber (Anubis)⁶

Pay good heed, O righteous Judge to the Balance to support [the testimony] thereof. Pay good heed to the weighing in the Balance of the heart of the Osiris, the singing-woman of Amen, Anhai, whose word is truth, and place thou her heart in the seat of truth in the presence of the Great God.

Resources

- Wikipedia article on Egyptian burial customs
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Egyptian_burial_customs
- Burial customs in ancient Egypt
<http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/burialcustoms/index.html>
- Egyptian afterlife
<http://www.crystalinks.com/egyptafterlife.html>
- The Egyptian Book of the Dead
http://www.thenazareneway.com/index_egyptain_book_dead.htm
- Ancient Egypt : How to make a mummy
<http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/ancient-egypt/videos/how-to-make-a-mummy>
- Spurlock Museum: Egyption Mummification materials
<http://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/explorations/online/mummification/pages/materials1.html>

⁵ “Ptah.” – New World Encyclopedia. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ptah>>

⁶ “The Egyptian Book of the Dead.” EBD Book 2. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.
<http://www.thenazareneway.com/ebd_book_2.htm>