Cultural Expression in the Old Kingdom Elite Tomb

Sasha Verma

Archaeopress

Dedicated to my Grandmother Bhagwati Debi

"The day will come that he must pass through the wall of oblivion and he wants to leave a scratch on the wall – Kilroy was here – that someone a hundred or a thousand years later will see"

W. Faulkner

Contents

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

AA	American Anthropologist
ÄA	Ägyptologische Abhandungen
ANOC	Abydos North Offering Chapel
AnzÖAW	Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien
ASAE	Annales du Service des Antiquités d'Egypte, Cairo
AV	Archäologische Veröffentlichung, Deutsches Archäologische Institut
BACE	The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
BMA	The Brooklyn Museum Annual, Brooklyn
BSEG	Bulletin de la Société d'Egyptologie de Genève
CA	Current Anthropology
DE	Discussions in Egyptology
EA	Egyptian Archaeology
GM	Göttinger Miszellen: Beiträge zur Ägyptologischen Diskussion, Göttingen
BIFAO	Bulletin de l'Institut francais d'archéologie orientale, Cairo
JANES	Journal of the Ancient Near East Society of Columbia University, New York
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JAR	Journal of Archaeological Research
JARCE	Journal of the American Research Centre in Egypt
JEA	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology, London
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JFA	Journal of Field Archaeology
JMFA	Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Chicago
JSA	Journal of Social Archaeology
LA	Lingua Aegyptica
LÄ	Lexikon der Ägyptologie
LP	Linguistics and Philosophy
MÄS	Münchner Ägyptologische Studien
MDAIK	Mitteilung des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo, Mainz
MIO	Mitteilung des Instituts für Orientforschung, Berlin
MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dept. of Egyptian Art, New York
MMJ	Metropolitan Museum Journal, New York
NAR	Norwegian Archaeological Review
OEAE	Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt
PB	Psychological Bulletin
PM	Porter and Moss, Oxford
PDS	Psychology and Developing Societies
RAIN	Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter
RdE	Revue d'Ègyptologie, Paris and Cairo
SAK	Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur, Hamburg
SAOC	Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations, Chicago
SÖAW	Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien
WA	World Archaeology
WZKM	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, Wien
ZÄS	Zeitschrift fûr ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde, Leipzig and Berlin

Explanation of Signs

[ ]   Damaged text partly restored

…   Indicates the omission of non-essential material

( )   Non-original text added as an explanatory addition to translations

(?)   Uncertain rendering of words/phrases

< >   Material enclosed was omitted by error from original text

Chapter 1: Introductory Remarks

Scholars have given different meaning to the motifs found in the Old Kingdom elite tombs. Addressing this problem means finding a common thread that runs right through all these tombs, a task not made easy by the numerous extant interpretations.

This common thread if it is to apply universally, will also have to be an aspect, which is a raison d'être of these tombs, i.e. a funerary culture based in the preservation of memory. The purpose of the following study is to determine the extent to which identity, individuality, ideology, memory, and change, are aspects of elite funerary culture, and are reflected in the iconography of Dynasties 4, 5 and 6 elite tombs, especially in relation to context, content, and culture and their intrinsic tendency for change. These are termed the 'cultural generics' (generics for short) and will be shown to be the main aspects of funerary art. The search for these generics involves going back in time, such that the connection between the manifestation of culture and the underlying funerary beliefs, symbols, and society, is established as a starting position.

Ancient Egyptian Funerary Culture as expressed in Tomb Design and Tomb Decoration

This is a book about the material and immaterial culture left behind by the ancient Egyptian elite in their tombs starting some 5000 years ago. The book intends to understand this culture reflecting the "intention" of the ancient Egyptians. All these "intentions" are now inaccessible to us, a paradox indeed. A start to solving this paradox is to consider how other Egyptologists have understood tomb culture over the past century. Two main clusters of thought dominate the history of this topic, the literal and/or the symbolic meaning:

Literal: This is based on what is directly seen and is a popular approach for the modern world. One looks at the ancient monuments, hieroglyphs, tomb decoration and any available texts in terms of our own modern conceptions. This amounts to a closed rigid system of analysis based on the obvious and the logical, and does not even refer to observed changes in the iconography.

Symbolic: The symbolic meaning of the funerary culture encompasses the ancient Egyptians' ideas about (1) the meaning of life in this and the next world and (2) metaphysical perfection. Here one tries to conjecture from concepts (e.g. 'known' religious ideas) to derive the symbolic meaning behind a particular motif, ancient monument, text, etc., and this has its own peculiar difficulties, chief of them being the accusation of a subjective bias.

Of course one can argue for a third mid-way course somewhere between the literal and the symbolic meaning; i.e. an attempt to study the evidence in its reality and to search for common, universal factors which may be present and which may aid understanding. This approach has been used. Many Egyptologists oscillate between the literal and the symbolic, attempting what is an either/or approach, simultaneously ignoring the inherent contrasting complexity underpinning any general principles, which may be there.

Some background information and examination is necessary before the general principles can be derived, which may form the central basis for any understanding of the iconography of funerary culture. The start involved asking: How to explain the state of interrelatedness of cultural elements based on a CONSISTENT pattern of values, which are evident in tombs?

One is immediately faced with the problem that there was no such thing as a 'consistent pattern of values', that these values are always and forever in a state of flux. Indeed no two tombs have exactly the same iconography. This fact, although questioned many times, has never been adequately explained. The question then becomes:

1. How to explain the state of interrelatedness of cultural elements based on a DIFFERING pattern of values, which appear to be consistent?
2. How to explain the state of interrelatedness of cultural elements based on a differing pattern of values that are changing?

In order to do so, one has to visualize all the elements that could conceivably form part of a funerary culture. In the funerary cultural context of tomb decoration and construction, one has to think in terms of totalities and then to typify these into relevant sub-categories. The following scheme is proposed where the eight totalities involved are:

1. The human elements as the patron.
2. The necropolis as a sacred landmark having ideological meaning.
3. The gravesite as a particular entity.
4. The location of the materials to be used.
5. The actual materials used.
6. Quarrying methods.
7. The method of transport to the gravesite.
8. The inanimate totality of the value systems behind the construction and decoration as expressed in the entire tomb (decoration plus texts).

Categorization of each of these above totalities in the con-

text of tomb building/decoration gives the following sub-categories:

- Human: King, officials (priests, scribes), craftsmen, and the others.
- Necropolis: Giza, Saqqara, Abusir, Dashur, etc.
- Gravesite: Pyramid, mastaba, and tombs, which are rock-cut.
- Material location: Upper and Lower Egypt, the Eastern and Western desert, and outside Egypt, e.g. colonized parts of Nubia.
- Materials used: Sand, gravel, timber, unbaked brick and various types of stone.
- Quarrying: Depended on type - for soft stone like limestone, mainly open cut methods; for hard stone, mainly pounding in open trenches, were used.
- Transport methods: Humans (i.e. 'others'), donkeys, oxen plus sledges, and boats.
- Value Systems: Belief in gods, magic, *M3ʿt*'s efficacy, and the king's supremacy, collaboration, and kinship.

From the various tombs and texts of the Old Kingdom, it becomes clear that the stimulus for all or some of the above-mentioned activities, could include a range of possibilities, depending on the control aspirations of those in power, artistic/scribal capabilities, and access to raw materials/tools, age and status of the 'tomb owner', etc.

Tomb construction could take a number of years and it is assumed to have started at an early stage of the official's career. The successful completion of such a large project over this long period obviously required extensive co-ordination between the participants, and the integration of value systems. When an order for the construction and decoration of a tomb is given, this will then of necessity, include a chain of decisions on the entirety of the eight totalities and their constituent sub-categories interacting at different levels. This could be something along the following lines:

When one contracts to build/decorate a tomb, one sets in motion a whole social process which influences the outcome, as values (economic/social) are added stage by stage through the social and economic network. Borrowing from economics, this accretion of values will result in increasing efficiency (if the number of mastabas and royal pyramids in the Old Kingdom are any guide) and increasing returns for all participants (if the increasing levels of hierarchy as evidenced in the titles are a guide) - the so-called multiplier and recycling effect.

These effects arise regardless of the resources used (whether goods, precious commodities, or information -such as accrued knowledge), and consequently stimulate further cultural development. Of course in this context, the time-scale between stimulus and development can vary from years to centuries.

We have extremely limited knowledge of the actual type of interaction between the eight totalities and their sub-

categories. However this is not a limiting factor because the significant issue is that once a certain stimulus produces a certain response, which is accepted as worthy, it becomes a learnt experience. To build the perfect pyramid, the angle of inclination, etc. had to be exact, otherwise it was not a pyramid; for the tomb owner to become a 'venerated' one, definite rituals had to be performed, and so on. This development is now accepted as following normal evolutionary principles; stressing the accumulation of only those rules, traits, etc. which have been a proven success based on a sort of learning by experience. This is called adaptive change because it depends on the accumulation and building up of successful past patterns (contrast this with natural change, e.g. biological decay and death, which is the outcome of entropy). The advantage of this type of adaptive change is that one does not have to have it hardwired into oneself; by combining relevant tested rules to any new situation, one can take appropriate action, without any other direction. In due course these patterns of behaviour will then build up to strengthen those attributes/traits/ideas, which can be and are critical for cultural progress but remain subject to subtle change.

Consider the following evolutionary changes which are evidence of the above processes and seen in both royal and elite tombs:

Royal burials:

Dynasties 1 and 2	Pit tombs →Tombs accessed by staircase → Mastaba
Dynasty 3	Step pyramid
Dynasty 4 to MK	Perfect geometric pyramids (Very few exceptions)
NK	Deep rock cut tombs
TIP and Late Period	Burial within temple enclosures

Elite burials:

In a parallel development, beginning in Dynasty 4, the use of stone is extended to the construction of elite tombs, partly grouped into cemeteries around the pharaoh's pyramid, as in the Giza necropolis. These structures also known as mastabas, continue to be used by the elite down to the Middle Kingdom, along with the rock cut tombs all along the Nile valley, the rock cut tombs of Aswan and those at Thebes during the New Kingdom.

Concurrent with the above progress, there are other developments including:

- Emerging State as a central entity.
- Organizational functions/abilities of the bureaucrats' religious/funerary/official roles.
- Craftsmen's abilities (e.g. working of various materials) and their efficient co-operation.

These developments also result in the crucial underpinning of the funerary culture in the form of memory, both private and collective.

- We can therefore propose that central to the development of any society and its culture is the fact that this is always the accumulated contribution of individuals over time, and that such development incorporates memory.

  Humans may muddle through the present but their hopes and fears about their future existence, is quite a different proposition. It is especially so, when the whole belief system (as is the case with ancient Egypt) is built on an endless life in the hereafter, of which there is no actual information[1] for the non-royals of the Old Kingdom. Therefore the most important problem concerns the future: how to get around the fact of natural death. The way the ancient Egyptians did this would largely depend upon their expectations, strategies, and interrelationships of the individuals and the cultural value system. This is where identity, individuality, and ideology start to play a role. Because we are dealing with individual non-linear behaviour, obviously there is no certainty of prediction. Indeed as more interactions take place, the transformations among the participants, the goods, and the services will become increasingly complex. Complexity will result in behavioural differences needing explanation. One explanation is to describe the changed behaviour as individualistic and the fact of change as subject to the concepts of entropy and related complexity.

This enables one to be aware of the range of possibilities and consequences of behaviour at a given time and place, applicable in both the living and the funerary context.

An outline was envisaged of all (animate and inanimate) components in funerary culture and an analysis of their interdependencies, etc., and this identified four components that are 'Generic' general principles i.e. Identity, Individuality, Ideology, and Memory; and the process of human behavior that lead to: Change and Cultural Transmission.

This analysis will involve additional thought patterns and academic disciplines, than previously employed by most Egyptologists, who tended to pay lip service to:

- The idea of constant change.
- The need for a selective weighting of observed changes.
- Identifying the agents involved as precursors of various possibilities.
- Recognizing the agents' involved as subject to complexity, change, and evolving newer forms

rather than as merely describable and discrete elements.

Firstly it is accepted that Egyptologists generally have to deal with an enormous expanse of time. Correlating all aspects of change pertaining to a topic then becomes a sheer impossibility, especially in view of the differing amounts of evidence that are available over the different periods. Secondly issues dealing with society as they occur and change over time, is complex and if we have to wait for all aspects to be finalized before publication, very few new ideas would be born, but this does not mean that new ideas should not be put forward based on the available evidence. An extremely good example of this approach is Antonio Loprieno's groundbreaking study on reinterpreting what is sacred in Egyptian culture.[2]

A cursory glance at the vast amount of material culture left behind will make the above comments obvious. There must have been involved a vast number of interactions among the population. This must of necessity have included the transfer of matter, energy, and information, which in turn would have caused the ancient Egyptian to anticipate and refine the consequences of their actions.

The resultant trend would be towards increasing sophistication and functionality, indeed towards more complexity. Accordingly a concept of permanent equilibrium and stability is far off the mark, and has never existed in Egyptian society and culture (although this appears to be so) nor for that matter can ever exist in any institution, whose essence is its ability to adapt to learnt changes. The model "GRM" below shows possible influences on and interactions within generics.[3]

The model's applicability is universal, and there is not a single branch of the hard or so-called soft sciences, in which it cannot provide useful analogies.[4] Physics and behavioural sciences are well founded but mainstream Egyptologists do not greet interdisciplinary approaches warmly, although they may be aware of the limitations of continuing with their old methods.

Generics Reactions Model ('GRM')

Before applying it to Egyptology a brief recapitulation of the ideas behind each circle in the GRM is necessary.[5]

---

[1] From the MK non-royals wrote the Coffin Texts on the interiors of wooden coffins in use. Another funerary composition of the MK was the Book of Two Ways, which depicted a map of the hereafter, accompanied by a vignette. However, during the NK the best known and most widely used is the Book of the Dead, which is richly illustrated with vignettes. Further developments are seen in the later compositions, which portray the image of the hereafter as a subterranean world, and a nocturnal solar journey.

[2] Loprieno, *La Pensée et L'Écriture, Pour une Analyse Sémiotique de la Culture Égyptiene*, 13-50.
[3] The scheme was inspired by and adapted from Holland, *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* and Kiel, *Chaos Theory in the Social Sciences*. Also see the application of these ideas by Lehner, "Fractal House of Pharaoh: Ancient Egypt as a Complex Adaptive System, a Trial Formulation", in *Dynamics in Human and Primate Societies,* Eds. T. A. Kohler and G. J. Gumerman*,* 275-353.
[4] Byers, *The Blind Spot: Science and the Crisis of Uncertainty*, 69-90. He gives examples of the ambiguity in the various sciences**.**
[5] I have postponed a full discussion of entropy, chaos, and complexity till later so as not to overcomplicate a subject, which needs to be discussed separately. For full details see pages 27-32.
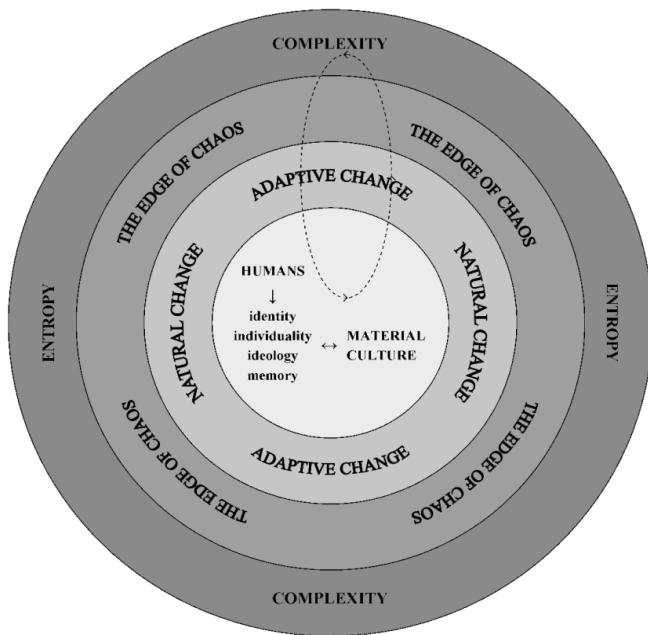
GENERICS REACTIONS MODEL ('GRM')

The starting point in any process, which results in a transition from one phase to another, is the circle titled **'The Edge of Chaos'.** This is the part where things/ideas exist in a transitional phase. This apparent instability is not a drawback, because they (things/ideas) are stable enough to receive and store information yet temporary unstable enough to transmit it. Thus they have the ability to perform complex computations, which may transform things/ideas from being in a transitional phase into higher levels of organization, assuming the right conditions. "Everything is connected, and often with incredible sensitivity".[6] The way information gets into the things/ideas is by the process of repeated learning and application of useful rules through evolutionary processes (Complexity). Entropy on the other hand ensures change, in that the unavoidable dissipation of energy will help to destroy the things/ideas partly. Therefore the way to ensure stability is by the constant input of relevant energy. These processes are encountered in the extreme outer circle titled **'Complexity/Entropy'**.

At the same time the learning process will give rise to Adaptive Change such that worthy rules are strengthened to even more worthy ones, which tend to be more differentiated (complex) than the previous ones, thus conferring on the system the ability to respond to challenges.

Natural Change refers to things/ideas which phase out because they have not been validated enough by the learnt rules, as well as the absence of new energy. The circle titled **'Adaptive/Natural Change'** refers to these processes.

The innermost circle titled **'Humans/Material'** includes the generics, and play a crucial part in the transmission of patterns of traits, which lead to cultural transmission. Cultural transmission is a process by which information (values, knowledge, and practices in the form of cultural traits) is acquired and passed on from individual to individual irrespective of any family relationship.[7] Being cultural, this must be acquired by way of social learning (i.e. learning through interaction with other individuals and not self-learning). This contrasts with the biological transmission of genetic material, which is from parent to offspring only. It is precisely this cultural information, which in ancient Egypt provided the standards for action and ruled their everyday lives.

For our purposes one can propose a scheme as follows:

- The unit of cultural transmission can be termed a cultural trait.
- The social aspects of transmission between individuals can represent the actual pathway it takes, directly or indirectly.
- The area of influence of these cultural traits can be determined by the relevant location(s) and time/period(s) under investigation.

Cultural transmission can take place through many channels and can include oral or written instruction, material artifacts, as well as imitation and emulation. In general there are three forms of persistent cultural transmission: vertical, horizontal, and oblique via parents, one's peers, and social institutions.[8] In addition transmission can also happen from outside one's own culture and, can be the result of less intended activities.

(Note: the constituents of the innermost circle are not fixed and can be adapted to fit any of the other sciences).

Let us now apply these concepts and processes to the building/decoration of a tomb in ancient Egypt:

1. The mere idea to build or decorate a tomb exists in the first place in the mind of the 'tomb owner' (his Intentions). Since these have not yet materialized, they are in a transitional form and thus present in the circle titled 'the Edge of Chaos'.
2. The 'tomb owner' and craftsmen benefit from the information flow contained in the circle 'Complexity and Entropy' which ensures that the tomb is built in more or less keeping with previously exploited rules and belief systems. The information flow would also point to the amount of energy input required in terms of resources and manpower to build a particular type of tomb.
3. The above-mentioned transitional ideas would be further subject to any adaptation constraints which might crop up in terms of location, materials,

---

[6] Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos,* 66.

[7] Boyd and Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process,* 2- 4.
[8] Schönpflug, "*Introduction to Cultural Transmission*", 1-8.

decorative elements, value systems, and so on. These processes, which consist of validating and recognizing tested and new rules, would be augmented by previously learnt rules. This would ensure production according to general principles, which have widespread use both in practical terms and conceptuality and result in creative transformations. These come under the circle titled 'Adaptive/Natural Change'.

4. The effect of all of the above ongoing processes on and in the 'tomb owner' would result in a particular way of showing his 'Identity', and 'Individuality',

5. which would have to be in approximate keeping with the prevalent 'Ideology' (belief systems).

6. The end result of processes 1 - 4 would be an example of material culture and it does not matter whether it is the building of a tomb, decoration within a tomb, grave goods, etc. because the processes above would be the same.

7. In due course, without the necessary energy input (i.e. maintenance), the reverse energy outflow 'Entropy' would mean a return to 'the Edge of Chaos' and the cycle would be repeated albeit with DIFFERENT INPUTS and a CHANGED OUTPUT.

Accordingly this book is an investigation of certain distinct and perhaps universally applicable[9] aspects of elite funerary culture (generics), which can be gleaned from a reading of the elite tombs of Dynasties 4, 5 and 6 in the Memphite region, primarily those in Giza, Abusir, Saqqara, and Dahshur, and the lesser necropolises of Abu Roash, Heliopolis, and Maidum.

The goal is to identify and analyze those aspects of funerary culture, which are inherent in tomb art. By focusing on the formal and thematic aspects of the elite tombs' iconography (involving as they do society, religion and the individual dimension and applying these to the selected motifs)[10], it is hoped to reveal two interrelated elements:

1. Core traditional culture and the integrative value systems of Old Kingdom Egyptian society.
2. Appearance of bonding/adaptive elements therein, which I term the 'generics', i.e. Identity, Individuality, Ideology, and Remembrance,

The way these are depicted in the selected iconography of the Old Kingdom tombs will, it is hoped, also open a window into the mind-set of the ancient Egyptian. One is well aware that due to the restricted nature of this research other periods are not within its scope, but that does not mean that one is taking a synchronic approach only. It is argued that within a limited time span but at different times, one can still study what happened within a particular social context and at a particular time, provided one pays due attention to time and change as limiting factors. Like all systems culture has the characteristic, that changes in one part of the system will create changes in other parts of the system.[11] This means that a host of factors can be involved in the understanding of social groupings in society. Culture in its processes and occurrences is thus to be understood as a symbolic phenomenon continuously changing and underscoring a communicative function. It also signifies that because culture cannot be seen as an entity, one will be concerned with its socially layered manifestations as evidenced in the different behavioural traits.[12] One way of extracting culturally significant meaning is from the grave goods (of whatever kind including iconography), because these goods must have played a part in the culture of that particular society at that specific time, otherwise they would not be present at a time when the cultural life of the deceased had 'ceased' to exist. However culture is not something that is static and its categories of significances are being continually refined such that it is extremely difficult to put any boundaries around culture specific concepts.[13] Therefore when grave goods are understood to represent a concept of cultural signification, these may refer to the ideal rather than reality. In order to overcome this objection, change will also be considered as part of the evolution of culturally significant meaning. When determining the beliefs and attitudes of the ancient Egyptians towards an activity/object, it is assumed that the Egyptians' attitudes changed between Dynasties. In Dynasties 5 and 6 we shall observe the development of an elite class within Egyptian society, with new forms of ideology, identity and even individuality, i.e. the generics. The tomb motifs indicate that these generics would have been influential factors, leading to changes, which resulted in a more sophisticated elite class and structured society.

The majority of the work on elite tombs has been of a descriptive nature calling attention to among other things:

• Architectural developments.
• Relating certain material artifacts to chronological dating and some details of iconography.

---

[9] Universal as applied in this study is restricted to meaning a pattern or mode of behaviour which is widespread.
[10] The selected motifs and related inscriptional texts are as follows: Carrying-chair, Taking Account (Document Presentation), and Mourning. Wherever these are referred to by plate/fig. number and/or tomb owner's name, then this refers to the plate/fig. number in the the relevant publication. Further rather than use the words "themes" and "sub-themes", which could result in a misunderstanding because these could mean either a specific theme for each tomb or a single decorative theme, I have used the words "motif" and "sub-motif" because I think these are less confusing.

[11] Rappaport, "Ritual, Sanctity and Cybernetics", *AA,* (73*)*, 59. While this article focuses specifically on the relationships of ritual form and performance, nevertheless his approach highlights the way ritual behaviour makes social communication between individuals, a reliable indicator of the reciprocal relationships between them.
[12] Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology,* 24-26. He gives a useful definition of culture - "a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours, shared by a group, but harbored differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time".
[13] Hodder, *Reading the past,* 24-25. He states that it is incorrect to take a passive view of society, which disregards the cultural context so central to ideology and ideological functions.

- Describing, and interpreting the wall decorations.

Because of the impossibility of getting to grips with how the ancient Egyptians may be understood, and the emphasis on a narrow philological approach, the result has been a variety of piecemeal approaches and differing, frequently confusing interpretations.

As a starting point it must be admitted that this type of research has been useful in highlighting the problematic character of the interior tomb decoration. However, because its roots were seeped in philology and western logic, it failed to take into account the cultural generics adequately.

A metamorphosis started in the late 90's when Egyptologists sought a new alliance with the hard sciences, and it is ironic that Egyptology aligned itself with the classical mathematics of 'causality' at the same time that the mathematicians/physicists were embracing 'uncertainty' and 'complexity' theories. At best this new inclination was lukewarm - too many vested interests were afraid to think outside the box. In their narrow circles they deluded themselves by supporting each other despite the fact that Egyptology was becoming a marginal discipline. As Lord Keynes said in another but equally relevant context "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds."[14]

A survey of the main research yields the following grouping:

Group 1 attempts to explain the decoration both as symbol and reality simultaneously. Unfortunately this group's conclusions have no objectively verifiable methodological basis, as exemplified by Junker "Alles ist Wirklichkeit und Sinnbild zugleich".[15] While the idea is understandable, it is just a starting point.

Group 2 attempts to connect the decoration to the earthly, and the life in the hereafter of the tomb owner.[16] However because they go further and try to give meaning to the decorations using the two forms of 'life', their interpretations are varied because these include concepts, which are not verifiable. This is the largest group by far and includes:

U. Langner: representation of the tomb owner's life in the hereafter.[17]

J. H. Taylor: the wall decorations reflect the earthly life of the deceased and not the afterlife.[18]

A. O. Bolshakov: the Old Kingdom representations "are essentially realistic, only scenes of real life are shown, nothing transcendental brought forward".[19]

H. Altenmüller: "Es sind Bilder, die in ihrer Gesamtheit jene Verrichtung darstellen, die für die Versorgung des Menschen in der grossen Gemeinschaft des altägyptischen Staates von Bedeutung sind und von denen der Verstorbene auch für seinen Totenkult profitierte".[20]

C. Barocas: The tomb was built and decorated because of a fear of the dead, still recognizing the desire for a good life in the hereafter.[21]

S. Morenz: The decorations are a recording of the tomb owner's lifetime activities which he wished to continue in his afterlife.[22]

H. Groenewegen-Frankfort: Biographical memoir of the tomb owner's life on earth.[23]

P. Montet: Aimed at giving the spectator a vision of the everlasting world.[24]

Group 3 explains the decoration as a means of the sympathetic magic that they were supposed to be imbued with, and the reproduction of the mortuary cult.

R. K. Ritner: Visualized images constitute magical reinforcements.[25]

E. el-Metwally: "Die Dekoration der altägyptischen Privatgräber von Anfang an" bildet "eine Wiedergabe des Totenkultes".[26]

Group 4 attempts to use the decoration in terms of orientation, placement, and chronological development, with a view to the dating of the tombs. This is exemplified by the approaches of *Harpur*[27] and *Cherpion*.[28]

Group 5 suggests a method based on linguistic and semiotics research. It avoids any interpretation until analyzed with the logic and objectivity of funerary-religious language game theory, when it opens the way for a more logical and objective approach, e.g. *van Walsem.*[29]

---

[14] Keynes, "Preface" *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money.*

[15] Junker, *Giza*, vol. 5, 73.

[16] It is acknowledged that in the OK, the tomb owner is never shown as dead. Nevertheless, because the word "deceased" and "tomb owner" are explicit in the mortuary context, they should be understood as identical wherever they appear in this book. Further while the majority of tomb owners are male, some females also have tombs and the use of the word 'he' should not detract from this issue.

[17] Langner, *Forschungsarbeiten zur frühen Kultur der Menschheit,* 313.

[18] Taylor, *Death and the afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 150.

[19] Bolshakov, "The Old Kingdom Representations of Funeral Procession", *GM* (121), 31.

[20] Altenmüller, "Lebenszeit und Unsterblichkeit in den Darstellungen der Gräber des Alten Reiches", in *5000 Jahre Ägypten*, eds. J. Assmann and G. Burkhard, 79.

[21] Barocas, "La décoration des chapelles funéraires égyptiennes", in *La mort, les morts dans les sociétés anciennes*, eds. G. Gnoli and J. P. Vernant, 430.

[22] Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion,* 212.

[23] Frankfort, *Arrest and movement,* 34.

[24] Montet, *Eternal Egypt*, 179.

[25] Ritner, "Magic in the afterlife", in *OEAA,* vol. 2, 333. Also see Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 165, l. 39-40. The Teaching for King Merikare: "He has ordained for them magic, as weapons to fend off the impact of what may come to pass". (ḥsf-ꜥ n ḫprjjt)

[26] Metwally, *Entwicklung der Grabdekoration in den Altägyptischen Privatgräbern*, 165.

[27] Harpur and Scremin, *Decoration in Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom.*

[28] Cherpion, *Mastabas et hypogées d'Ancien Empire.*

[29] Walsem, *Iconography of Old Kingdom elite tombs,* 101.

These studies have been important in laying some of the groundwork; however existing research does not sufficiently explore the affiliation of the iconography and its association to its creators in socio-cultural and art-historical aspects. Indeed there are no studies which I am aware of that have systematically related tombs to dynasties and to regions, to illustrate aspects which have general application in the cultural sense. The dominant philological and archaeological bias is now generally accepted as the theoretical basis of all Egyptological studies. When texts exist and a linguistic translation approximates the meaning, all the other aspects such as archeological context, material, size, and shape are treated as largely irrelevant. The philological/visual culture divide persists. The result is that content is emphasized, but the connections to the cultural processes behind the production of the artifacts are forgotten. These are left to lie in a vague area. This is not to deny the immensely useful contributions of both philologists and archaeologists but one has to take an additional bolder step, which I propose to do in this book. By concentrating on the cultural generics I hope to bridge the perceived gap.

At present there are very few current books dealing specifically with the said cultural aspects like those by Erman, Evers, Von Bissing, and Schäfer (see Bibliography).

The older site reports, e.g. Petrie, Reisner, Junker, Hassan (see Bibliography), try in varying degrees to include aspects of cultural significance. Because this is not conceived of within an overall framework but as an adjunct, it does not provide a concentrated focus and is of limited use.

Some modern site reports, e.g. those that are part of the *Australian Centre for Egyptology,* have understood this problem of too little focus on the cultural/historical aspects of Egyptian elite tombs, and have started to look at this area.[30]

The position in this book subscribes to the view that any attempt at understanding ancient Egyptian funerary culture must go beyond peripheral attempts at interpreting social organization. Material culture should not exclusively be a descriptive list of artifacts or interpretation arising out of ideas about their possible functions, or be based solely on a study of the textual material. In order to understand material culture, one must search for those concepts, which are generic in the nature of the society under investigation, as well as quite possibly being part and parcel of every major past and existing society with similar funerary underpinnings. Further the impact of other disciplines like the hard sciences should also be called into aid.[31] This central premise is based on the belief that "the ultimate purpose of studying Egyptian art just as with archaeology and philology, is to increase our understanding of the culture that produced it".[32]

In fulfilling the task of finding these generics, a conceptual as well as a methodological framework is required. The conceptual framework recognizes that a prerequisite for the development of knowledge is an a priori identification followed by classification, which gives meaningful cultural significance to man's existence. In all cultures this is an ongoing perpetual process and in the case of the Old Kingdom can be witnessed through, among other ways, the media of elite tomb iconography. Further, societies which lay a great emphasis on life after death like the ancient Egyptians will need to perpetuate cults of memory. This will result in the development of belief systems, which being abstract have to be given a material manifestation, in order to be successfully transmitted within society.

The explanation for the world that one lives in is predicated on such a system of beliefs, and because these beliefs, if they are to have any effect at all, have to be communicated, a need for the means to do so arises. The means are varied, but all can be treated as symbols, which convey beliefs. These can be of various kinds, but the ones that are of interest at first are the ones that can be recovered archaeologically in elite tombs: reliefs including wall painting, stelae, inscriptions, and anything of a tangible nature.

These needs arise pursuant to the need for communication and commemoration. Societal behaviour will be affected by both these symbols, those that relate to activities which are of everyday occurrence, as well as to those of a 'metaphysical' nature, e.g. funerary beliefs, both of which indicate an accepted way of doing things as practiced by certain segments of society, in this case the elite. Consider the progression and connection between symbols and society. The examples given below go back to the beginning of Egyptian history, and are found in the Pre-dynastic gravesites of the Badarian ca. 4500-3800 BC, and the following Naqada l, ll, and lll periods ca. 3850 – 3300 BC.

Cemetery T at Nagada excavated by Petrie containing 2043 burials (excluding the adjacent area of Ballas), is one such example,[33] which exhibits a variety of material symbols.

The decorated tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis is another example of a large brick lined pre-dynastic tomb with wall paintings[34] and may have been the tomb of a pre-dynastic king.[35]

---

[30] Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish*.
[31] Germer, "Problems of Science in Egyptology", *In Science in Egyptology,* ed. A. R. David, 521-525.
[32] Russmann, "The State of Egyptology at the end of the second

Millennium", in *Egyptology at the dawn of the twenty-first century: proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists,* (2), eds. Z. A. Hawass and L. P. Brock, 26.
[33] Petrie and Quibell, *Naqada and Ballas*, pl. 1A (map showing the number of burials). The undisturbed cemetery T5 contained a variety of grave goods totaling 42 pots, 5 vessels of stone, ornamental beads made of precious metals and stone like gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian. Cemetery T also contained three large brick lined chambers (T15, T20 and T23). All these grave goods can be said to be symbols of a kind.
[34] Case and Payne, "Tomb 100: The Decorated Tomb at Hierakonpolis", *JEA,* (48), 11-16.
[35] Kemp, "Photographs of the Decorated Tomb at Hierakonpolis", *JEA,* (59), 28.

The internment of the body is itself the development of a belief that it has to be preserved. Initially to seal off the smell of a decaying corpse but in time this rationale became subsumed under the concept of commemoration (dismemberment at least from Naqada 1C onwards makes multiple arenas of commemoration possible), and mummification, which became the standard funerary treatment for elite bodies through the dynastic period and into Roman times. This is a progression from the pre-dynastic funerary beliefs, which possibly led to the development of mummification.[36] Mummification became common practice during the Old Kingdom among members of the royal family and the elite, the earliest evidence being the viscera of Queen Hetepheres found in her canopic box.[37] Just like tomb iconography mummification was meant to preserve the 'youthful appearance' of the tomb owner as someone who would live in the hereafter in a high status.[38] This process transformed the body into an image and then stands for a symbol. The explanation of this symbol is provided by the initial belief (since at least Dynasty 1) that the body had to be preserved so that through it, the owner's 'K^3' or spirit could emerge from the burial chamber to partake of the food offerings. Later from the New Kingdom onwards the reasons for body preservation also include its recognition by the 'b^c', the psychic forces of the deceased depicted as a bird with a human head.[39] This very fact would then point to the reality that both the levels of expenditure as well as the practice of formal burial, were in themselves progressive socially determining symbols.[40]

Bodies without any grave goods have also been found in mass graves, and this should not detract from the body being used as a symbol. All it shows is that these 'others' of society (i.e. the non-elite) did not even have a burial, and is suggestive of the fact that levels of hierarchy were well developed at this stage.

• The vast majority of the bodies found by Petrie at Naqada are placed with head to the South and facing West. While we do not have any texts from this period, the symbolism asserts that the ancient Egyptians understood their place in relation to the points of the compass and of the West being a place of the dead.[41]

• Monumental graves were necessary for the well being of the tomb owner in the afterlife, and as a place where the living could perform the necessary rituals,[42] emulating to some extent the interplay of text, image, and architecture, which is evident from a study of the royal graves.[43] If this hereafter is modeled on similar concepts as pertaining to the now, then it is reasonable to expect to find in the graves the very elements which were essential to the tomb owner in this life on earth, and which he thought would be essential to him in the hereafter. The symbols could represent tangible objects, as well as the abstract sentiments found in the literature, which would underpin its communal/ state integrating function. If certain goods occur frequently they are likely to be indispensable, and accordingly imply cultural importance in view of their repeated presence, their ostensible use, as well as the class of people assisting in this process. In this view all the biological, psychological, and social processes even though they may appear to be discrete, should be seen as symbolizing different aspects of the human being. Seen in this light it becomes obvious that the different symbols represent our personal and collective identities. The way we transmit these memories to others is a way how humans make themselves, i.e. it is a study of what we are and how we want to be understood by other humans. In addition, the tomb and its contents reflect a continuing cultural discourse, which would have had some influence on the understanding of the tomb for all sections of the society.[44] Textual evidence of this cultural discourse in the Old Kingdom is sparse and restricted to the king (the Pyramid Texts). From the First Intermediary Period (FIP) onwards it was extended in the Coffin Texts to include the elite and the non-elite of which there is evidence.[45] The real value of this approach of equating symbols with cultural significance will depend on the cumulative effect of the analyses of the underlying themes and their application to certain selected motifs which forms the contents of the case studies in Part 2.

Significantly this evidence, judging from the brick lined chambers, and the variety of grave goods found (e.g. foodstuffs, body ornaments, cosmetic palettes, jewellery, tools, flint, knives, ceramics, and stone vessels), implies

---

[36] Mond and Myers, *Cemeteries of Armant I*, 12. Here two burials were found covered with animal skins and others covered in reed matting. Similar observations by Petrie, "Diospolis Parva", 1901: 35, who writes that evidence was found at the cemetery at Semaineh where the burials show that limbs were disarticulated, covered in bark and then rejoined. It would appear, that the advancement of a belief in total protection of the body led to another way of preserving it, namely mummification.
[37] Lucas and Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials,* 271.
[38] David, "Mummification", in *OEAA,* vol. 2, 439-44.
[39] D'Auria, Lacovara, and Roehrig, *Mummies and Magic,* 29. Although the relationship between the ba and the body is known from the FIP (Simpson, ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 157, l. 52-53), no depiction of the Ba exists prior to the NK.
[40] Baines and Lacovara., "Burial and the dead in ancient Egyptian society: respect, formalism, neglect", *JSA,* (2)*,* 9.
[41] Bard, "Analysis of the Predynastic Cemeteries of Nagada and Armant",

Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 143.
[42] Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration", *Sociology,* (9), 291. He defines ritual as a "rule governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance".
[43] Brinks, *Die Entwicklung der königlichen Grabanlagen des Alten Reiches, HÄB,* (10), 157-58.
[44] Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 1-5.
[45] Baines, "Communication and Display", *Antiquity,* (63), 476. This is not meant to imply a sequential encroachment of the royal powers by the non-royals but simply a pointer to change as a continuous phenomenon, and to the implication that the non-royals probably had knowledge of the cultural discourse, although the evidence for this may now be lost or is at best circumstantial.

that the preservation of the body in a specially prepared place, and the inclusion of specific grave goods in the burials, reflected a belief in their usefulness following death. It is further a pointer to the slowly emerging status of certain tomb owners by grounding them in a shared understanding of an entire way of life, as opposed to the non-elite.

One may argue that some of these examples are of the functional kind, but evidence from five burials at Abadiyeh where jars with scarab beetles were found,[46] would point to the symbolism behind the placement of grave goods (i.e. beliefs which are expressed as material symbols and which existed since pre-dynastic times). This is of added significance especially in light of the beetles' relationship with the sun god and immortality, albeit in later times.[47] While the primary evidence is from Upper Egypt, it is evidence of a trend towards increasing disparity in burial form and content between the elite and the non-elite. They are the visible expression of complex concepts and relationships,[48] which pre-existed in the Old Kingdom and which, with increasing societal complexity, had the additional purpose of the creation and maintenance of both individual identity and intra/interregional relationships.

The focus of this study will not be on style in art but in the way the iconography can be used to deal with the tomb as a system of transferring knowledge, tradition, and communication (read information) between the living and the dead based on communal values and belief systems during the Old Kingdom.

We can never know the exact intention of the ancient protagonists and advancements in understanding will therefore depend upon the accumulation of facts and ideas, their order, and in the way these are interpreted and analyzed.

This book is in two Parts:

Part 1 addresses and expands on the important concepts of the generics and shows that these have existed since the pre-dynastic times right up to our own. In order to do so it will cut across the underlying nature of Egyptian society and culture during the relevant periods, including the questions of: how, and by whom, were the ideas, skills, and beliefs of the ancient Egyptian transferred and communicated into the content of the iconography? Considering the fact that ancient Egypt had no modern means of transport/communications, state power and control over the population could only be accomplished by the use of legitimated ideology, and accepted beliefs, which transcended the everyday. The interconnection of nearly every aspect of society in this process means that

the process had to be simplified, and easily understandable by all, if absolute transmission was to be achieved.

The methodology will also impose a theoretical framework of linguistics and radical pragmatism that relates both to the symbols, the pattern of evidence and changes to this as proposed both by Wittgenstein[49] and Van Walsem.[50] It also take into account the "intellectual aesthetic" which these reliefs must reflect.[51] While this book is primarily about funerary culture, nevertheless an attempt is made to bring in contemporary examples, which add a flavour of reality.

Part 2 analyzes three case studies of Old Kingdom elite tomb iconography, for evidence confirming the generics. It applies the conceptual framework to the chosen individual motifs and their constituent iconographic examples in depth and extends their implications, sometimes utilizing statistical analysis. The goal is twofold:

1. To apply the identified generic aspects in the selected motifs and textual material of the known elite tombs, keeping in mind how the extant social conditions accompanied or facilitated the creation of iconography.
2. To identify the ways the protagonists broadcasted the ideas contained in the generics.

This will establish any corresponding patterns, which may exist. By identifying common features that expose the cultural generics, wide spread aspects of cultural significance can be isolated. Possibly it might also assist in the understanding of other ancient mortuary cultures, which like the ancient Egyptian were based on remembrance, and mortuary art.

The iconographical drawings/figures that form part of Part 2's case studies appear in Appendix "I", where reference to tomb names mentioned in the motifs chosen for analysis in this book can also be found. For ease of reference these are also included in Appendices A, B, C, and D.

[46] Petrie, *Diospolis Parva: The Cemeteries of Abadiyeh and Hu*, 33.
[47] The god Khepry is depicted with a beetle in place of a head and the word means "he who is coming into being", understood as the morning manifestation of the sun god.
[48] Bard, *An introduction to the archaeology of ancient Egypt*, 4.
[49] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 83-87.
[50] Walsem, *Iconography of Old Kingdom elite tombs,* 17-65. Based on previous work "The Interpretation of Iconographic Programmes in Old Kingdom Elite Tombs of the Memphite Area. Methodological and Theoretical (Re) Considerations", ed. C. J. Eyre, Orientalia Lovaniessia Anatecta.
[51] Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* 72. See pages 135-137 for examples.