

Society and Culture - Introduction

The Egyptian civilization was one of the great civilizations that had deep-rooted values and persistent traditions. Despite the succession of different political rules, the Egyptian people kept their customs and traditions, most of which are still prevalent in daily life and social behaviors.

Being religious and acknowledging God's grace is a common phenomenon in Egyptian society. Religious rituals are habitually practiced at home. In ancient Egypt, there were special mihrabs, or prayer niches, for the pictures of idols. In the Coptic era as well, pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary were found in every house. During the Islamic Age, verses of the Holy Qur'an, written in beautiful Arabic calligraphy, were popular in the homes. Adherence to religion, however, does not mean the Egyptians avoided the pleasant things in life; on the contrary, Egyptians joyfully embraced life, as evident in their jokes, songs, love chants, and folk arts.

One of the most important characteristics of Egyptian society since the dawn of civilization is the cooperation among society members, resulting in a sort of allegiance with the authorities to face common dangers. Usually, relatives, family members, and friends congregate in times of hardship, death, or illness. Standing beside the afflicted person and his or her family was an unavoidable duty. The Egyptian was faithful, deplored vice, and held ethics as the standard by which people were appraised.

Feasts and festivals played an important part in Egyptian life. In every age, there were new feasts to be celebrated. In the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman ages, there was a particular feast for every god, in which clergymen carried a statue of the god in a great procession that all people attended and at which clowns, singers, and dancers performed. Theatrical plays depicting myths were also performed. Celebrations for friendly gods such as Bes were held by the people rather than the priests. On the day of Bes, no work was done on the pyramid and people would parade down the street dressed in masks of Bes, while dancers and tambourine players followed. The townspeople joined in the singing from their rooftops, while the children would run along beside the dancers singing and clapping their hands. The whole town enjoyed the festival and feast.

Other occasions were New Year's Day and various feasts for the beginning of the seasons. There was the feast of flood tide that is known in the modern age as Nile Flood Day. In addition, there is the feast of spring, which is currently called Sham El-Nassem. Egyptians still celebrate these two feasts. In the Christian age, there were Saints' Days, Epiphany, Christmas, and Easter. These feasts are still celebrated by Egyptians and some of them are celebrated by both Muslims and Christians, such as Epiphany and Christmas.

In the Islamic Age, particularly in the Fatimid era, the rulers added some processions to share with the people when celebrating their feasts. These processions were headed by thousands of horsemen and lines of camels, upon which brocaded howdahs, or seats adorned with flowers, were fixed. Banquets were also prepared. Certain dishes,

traditions, and customs connected to feasts and ceremonies are still celebrated, among which are the Prophet's Birthday, the Outset of Ragab, the Middle and Outset of Sha'aban, the Tenth of Moharam, the New Hijri Year's Day, and the Outset of Ramadan, in addition to the two Islamic feasts, the Lesser Bairam and the Greater Bairam.

Animals were very important to the ancient Egyptians. Unlike other ancient cultures, whose gods looked somewhat like people, most ancient Egyptian gods had animal heads. Any person who killed a sacred animal could pay for that crime with his or her life.

Since Egyptians believed in an afterlife, they believed that people enjoyed many of the same activities after death as they did in their current life. They prepared for their afterlife by filling their tombs with small and large statues of friends and family, and with other items they might need to keep them company and to help them have a good time in the afterlife.

The ancient Egyptians enjoyed their life to the fullest. They worked very hard, but saved time to enjoy family, friends, music, parties, swimming, fishing, hunting, sailing, and especially their children, all of which were very important to them.