

Society and Culture - Part I

Family :

The people of ancient Egypt held marriage as a sacred bond and highly valued family life. This has been made clear in the many statues and writings that depict men and women in an intimate relationship where both depended upon each other and statues that show the nuclear family.

Kinship marriage was popular among Egyptians in order to ensure that the spouses have close social levels and to promote the kinship ties. The bride could also be chosen from the close acquaintances of the family. Girls usually married around the age of 12. Most of the marriage costs were usually divided between both families. While the bridegroom and his family gave a proper amount of money and provided housing, the bride's family provided furniture and the movable objects. Marriage ceremonies and banquets were held where family members gathered to celebrate, and gifts were presented to the couple from relatives and friends. This tradition has been familiar to Egyptians throughout history.

Family members shared responsibilities where each had a specific role to play in order for things to run smoothly. The father was the one who would work all day. In smaller households the mother was in charge of all things pertaining to the house. Cooking, cleaning, and watching the children were all her responsibilities. In some larger homes servants served as maids and midwives to help the mother.

Egyptians treasured children and regarded them as a great blessing. If a couple had no children, they would pray to the gods and goddesses for help. In the event that a couple still could not conceive a child, adoption was also an option.

Small children used to play with dolls, toys, and games until they come of age. Young boys learned a trade or craft from their fathers or an artisan. Young girls worked and received their training at home with their mothers. Those who could afford it sent their sons, from about the age of seven, to school to study religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Even though there is no evidence of schools for girls, some were home taught to read and write and some even became doctors.

Woman always had a distinct status in the social and family life. Although women were expected to raise the children and take care of the household duties, there were some jobs available to them. Women ran farms and businesses in the absence of their husbands or sons. Women were employed in courts and temples as acrobats, dancers, singers, and musicians. Wealthy families hired maids or nannies to help with household chores and the raising of the children. Noblewomen could become priestesses. Women also worked as professional mourners and perfume makers. A woman could have separate financial assets other than that of her husband. In addition, she was entitled to possess, dispose independently with, grant, and bequeath private properties as she liked. Women were equally accountable under the law. A woman who was convicted of a capital crime in a court of law would be executed, but only after the court determined that the woman was not pregnant. If such a woman was found to be pregnant, her execution was delayed until

after the birth of the child.

There was always a need for a large labor force, since the economy and civilization of ancient Egypt were based on agriculture. People believed that the greater the number of family members, the greater the income they could have. The conditions of the Egyptian environment, with the ample, low-cost, simple foodstuffs it provides, saved poor Egyptians the high cost of having children. Thus, Egyptians always preferred to increase the number of their offspring. In return for looking after their children, parents were entitled to have the obedience and respect of their children.

In Egypt, moderation has been a prominent feature of family life, with regard to the rights of men and women, seriousness, modesty, entertainment, and joy. Family connections were deeply rooted in the minds of Egyptians.

Food and Drinks :

The rich, dark soil left during the annual flooding of the Nile gave ancient Egyptians an agricultural advantage as they were able to grow a variety of grains and vegetables in abundance. The Nile provided fish and wild birds and the ancient Egyptians domesticated livestock for meat. Common people did not eat as well as the rich, but they were probably well fed. Meals were usually accompanied by beer, but the very rich drank wine. Banquets were frequently held and food was an important part of the festivals and other celebrations. Some foods were prepared using an oven under which a fire was built. The surface of the oven had open holes and circular depressions of different thicknesses and sizes, which allowed food to be cooked at different temperatures.

From the predynastic period forward, cereal grains made into breads were the base of the ancient Egyptian diet. Flour was mixed with yeast, salt, spices, milk, and sometimes butter and eggs. The dough was kneaded with the hands or sometimes with the feet in large containers. At first, bread was cooked like a pancake. Later it was placed in a baking mold or patted into different shapes, such as long or round rolls or figures for ceremonial purposes. Thick loaves were sometimes hollowed and filled with beans or vegetables. Flat bread was made with raised edges to hold eggs or other fillings. Bread might also be sweetened with honey, dates, and other fruit. Aside from bread, ancient Egyptians ate beans, chick peas, lentils, green peas, Egyptian lettuce, leeks, garlic, and onions. Dates were the most popular fruit. They were often dried to be eaten later or fermented into wine. Pomegranates, figs, and grapes were common fruits. Watermelons and plums are referred to in New Kingdom tombs and peaches may have been introduced in the Ptolemaic period.

Meat, fish, and wild fowl were frequently consumed by the rich, but only by the common people during special occasions. Several types of fish from the Nile were not consumed because of their connections with gods. Fish were usually salted and preserved or dried in the sun, roasted, or boiled. Beef was frequently eaten by the upper classes, while the poor might slaughter a sheep or goat on occasion. Pigs were eaten, but more in Lower Egypt than Upper Egypt due to their association with the evil god Seth. Wild game such as deer, antelope, ibex, and gazelles was also eaten. Scenes depicting the production of dairy products such as milk, cheese, and butter appear beginning in the Nineteenth Dynasty.

To prepare food, the ancient Egyptians used fat from animals and oils from plants and seeds such as sesame, castor-oil, flax seed, and horseradish. Salt from the Siwa Oasis was used, but sea salt was avoided because of its association with the evil god Seth. Pepper was introduced during the Greco-Roman period. Herbs and spices including aniseed, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, dill, fennel, fenugreek, marjoram, mustard, and thyme were used.