MAY HER NAME LIVE

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Candles and Ceremonies for a Coptic Child

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It is believed by many that Belly Dance traditionally accompanied the birth of a child in Arabic countries. It is my own belief that many accounts of midwives dancing with the family and friends of the new mother refer not to the moment of the child's birth but to the naming ceremony which may have followed the birth, but could be held anything up to seven days later.
I would like to share with you two accounts of naming ceremonies, one from Ancient Egypt, and one from the early part of the twentieth century. In both accounts dancing women come to the house of a woman who has recently given birth; they bring gifts and carry out rituals to protect the mother and child from harmful influences. These rituals culminate in rewarding the midwife who has successfully negotiated the survival of the mother and child through this chancy time, and in conferring upon the child the most fortunate of names.
It is possible – and tempting – to regard the early account as a direct ancestor of the later, but it should be remembered that the strongest element of any tradition, however, old, is human nature. Tradition, pared down to its simplest expression, is simply what people do. Time, perhaps, to make up your own mind…

It is an archetypal fairy tale. An ailing king, seeking to learn which of his three sons shall inherit his throne, sets the young men a series of challenges, which leads in turn to further adventures. It is a story-construction almost as old as time, and one of the earliest surviving examples dates back three and a half thousand years to Ancient Egypt.
The Westcar Papyrus contains tales of famous magicians, as told to King Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid, by his three sons. The old king presses his sons for more tales of wonder, until one of the princes, Hordjedef, resolves to settle the matter by taking his father to meet a real magician, an old man named Djedi. Of course, when dealing with magical situations, one always gets more than one bargained for. When pressed for proof of his powers, Djedi tells the king about Redjedet, the wife of the priest of Heliopolis, who is about to give birth to triplets. These three children are each sons of the sun-god Ra who will one day take the throne of Egypt from Khufu's line. In seeking to discern the future, the prince and his father have merely learned of their own finality.

As the story continues, Ra sends four goddesses to attend the birth of his sons, and Isis, Nephthys, Meshkhent, and Heqet arrive at Heliopolis disguised as dancing girls. The goddesses claim to be midwives and are welcomed into the house. Isis and Nephthys take up their positions at Redjedet's head and feet, recalling the positions they adopt in their funerary duties. Meshkhent, a birth goddess, and Heqet, a fertility goddess, assist during the birth.

It is the duty of Isis to give the boys their names. There appears to have been a strong linkage between Isis and the magical power of names. One remembers the tale of how Isis learned the secret name of Ra by means of magic, and how the life of the chief of the gods was bound up in the magical power of his name. The words uttered by Isis at this point are, in effect: tell me your name that you might live. This recalls the poignant wish of all Egyptians that their name should continue to live after their death.

Another story links Isis with royal children. When searching for the body of her murdered husband, Isis came to Byblos where the disguised goddess was appointed nurse to the youngest prince. The other servants found her passing the child through a magical fire, and her true nature was revealed. The ultimate fate of the baby prince of Byblos is uncertain, but there is a parallel tradition from the Graeco-Roman corpus of myth. In these tales, Ceres-Demeter, searching for her daughter Proserpina-Persephone, fetched up at Eleusis, and performed the same burning ritual on the baby prince Triptolemus. Triptolemus grew up to be a devotee of the goddess, bringing the skills of agriculture to mankind. In the Egyptian tradition, these skills were taught by Isis and Osiris. Of course, much of what we know about the myths of Isis comes from the writings of Plutarch and other late authors, so it is impossible to tell which story influenced which.

Above: Frieze of the Seven Hathors at Dendera Temple

What we can, however, deduce from these tales is that infancy was believed to be a chancy time, where unseen magic could hold the fate of a child. Midwives were mistresses of magic and ritual, and names linked children directly to the old magic of the gods. It seems that the naming of Ancient Egyptian children took place at birth, or shortly after it, and that this was a female-orientated task, with the name of the child often coming directly from the mother. In some instances, for example where a child is named after a particular festival day, we can make an educated guess at *when* a child received its name, but there is very little evidence, outside of stories, to provide other clues of celebrations, or other customs directly attributable to the act of naming children.

In 1912, Mrs E L Butcher produced a little volume entitled "Things Seen in Egypt" for the discerning English traveller. Mrs Butcher seems to have spent some considerable part of her life in Egypt: she wrote a history of the church in Egypt in 1897, and one of the themes running through her later book is an observation of customs then prevalent amongst the Copts which could conceivably have been handed down from far more ancient times. Mrs Butcher pressed her Egyptian acquaintances to relate domestic rituals practised by to their families, and dutifully recorded these for the benefit of her English readers. One of her narrators details an extensive account of a naming ceremony:
"Four months ago my sister Sophia brought forth a female child. The seventh day after that of the birth was celebrated by the usual ceremony. On the night preceding it, many female visitors came into our house, and we all sat in the drawing-room. Sophia and her baby child were amongst us. A basin full of water was brought and put in the midst of us. In that basin an empty goollah decorated with all the jewellery and ornaments of women that were at that time in our possession was placed. The goollah was clothed in a piece of rich silk cut and made to its shape. Beautiful necklaces made of gold, diamond earrings, bracelets, were all hung round its neck. Our women believe that the more richly the goollah is dressed, the more fortunate the child will become. They spare nothing that they are able to lend for the adornment of this goollah. They intend by doing this to woo Fortune to come and smile over the child in its cradle, and when it is in the wide world."

Mrs Butcher explains at this point that a goollah is a porous earthenware jar used for carrying water and keeping it cool. Before the advent of the ubiquitous plastic Baraka bottle, earthenware vessels were used to carry drinking water, since the time of the pharaohs. To

continue: "The act of dressing the goollah was accompanied by the sound of native drums and shrill quavering cries of joy called *zaghareet*. Then all people present began to choose a name for the new-born child. We brought three candles of the same material and of equal, length, and stuck them to the edge of the basin. We then gave each candle of the three a name which we had, after our long discussion, chosen. At the time of naming the candles my uncle offered a short prayer, after which all of the candles were lit exactly at the same moment. We then entertained all our friends with a nice supper, as usual on other occasions of festivities. Supper over, we all gathered round the basin, joked and foretold a thousand happy things that were to happen to the child, until the three candles were nearly burnt out. We watched them as they were dying away, and waited with impatience to see which candle would burn longer than the other two, for the name it represented became the child's name. The midwife of the family was present all through the ceremony, and when the name was decided upon she took the goollah, put it upon a tray, and presented it to each of the women, who put their *nukoot*, money for her, into the tray."

Above: "Bes pots" in the Manchester Museum (photo JEH)

Above: Egyptian amulets in the Manchester Museum, many featuring the demon-scaring dwarf-god Bes (photo JEH)

In visualising the decorated goollahs, one cannot help but recall the fat earthenware "Bes pots" known from antiquity. Given that the dwarf-god Bes was believed to protect new-born children from demons, it is possible that these rounded jars with their stylised clay faces were once used in the same way by the ancient Egyptians. It is also easy to imagine that the adorned and venerated jar was some sort of surrogate baby to confuse the attentions of the evil eye. In other African cultures harmful spirits are charmed into empty pots and bags which are then sealed and buried, burned, or broken. A Jewish fairy tale tells of a pottery baby made to confuse a magician who has come, like Rumpelstiltskin, to demand a child in return for a promise made by its mother.

"In the morning the midwife brought the child wrapped in a handsome shawl, and put it on her knee. Then one of the women present took a brass mortar and struck it repeatedly with the pestle as if pounding, to accustom the child to noise, that it might not be frightened afterwards by the music and sounds of mirth. After this the child was put into a sieve and shaken, it being supposed that this operation is beneficial to its stomach, The mother was then ordered to step seven times over the sieve. Each time she did so the midwife struck the mortar with the pestle once and addressed the child, saying: "Don't cry when your mother is busy in cleaning the house; let her cook easily; don't trouble her while she is making bread; when she has handwork to do, close your eyes and sleep;" and many other valuable commandments and instructions, each sentence being hammered home with a blow upon the mortar.

"This being done, we began the procession. The object of this procession was to carry the child through all the apartments of the house so as to make its spirit at home in these places. The procession was conducted in this way: the mother bore her child in her arms and stood in the middle. She was then surrounded with women and children, each of whom bore several wax candles, of various colours, cut in two, lighted, and stuck into a small lamp, or a paste of henna upon a small round tray. The midwife at the same time carried a grate on her head with fire in it, and walked in front. She sprinkled upon the floor of each room and threw into the fire some salt, saying as she did this: "The foul salt be in the eye of the envier!"
"This ceremony of the sprinkling of the salt is considered a preservative, for the child and the mother, from the Evil Eye."

Dancing with lighted candles or a fire-bowl formed part of ceremonial processions, particularly wedding processions, throughout North Africa and the Levant. The fire-dancer is the first to enter the future marital home, thus ridding it of evil influences before the newly-weds cross the threshold. In Palestine, Israel and Lebanon the candle-dancer can call back to their loved ones the spirits of the dead, or of absent family. Whilst her small flames burn love flows back and forth, and then the spell must be broken by blowing out the candles, one by one.

"On the door of every room that had been visited by the procession a cross was painted. The children cried at the top of their voices, saying: "Thy hands and thy feet, a golden ring in thine ears," etc. When the procession had completed its round in the house, it came again into the room from which it began. The child, wrapped up and placed on a fine mattress, was shown to each of the women present, who, looking at its face said, "In the name of the Cross! In the name of the Father and the Son! God give him long life!" And they put an embroidered handkerchief with a gold or silver coin tied up in one of the corners, on the child's head, or by its side. The midwife then distributed cakes, dried fruits, and sweetmeats to all of us. Some hazelnuts had been put in the water of the basin the night before this day; each member of the family kept one of these hazelnuts in his purse of money to preserve it from being empty. This ceremony is now going out of use, after it has been practised for a long time by nearly all Egyptians, both Copts and Mohammedans. But still we practise it; old customs are still living in our house."

In a footnote, Mrs Butcher adds: "I remember that this ceremony was once performed for the child of an English woman in Egypt. She was so much beloved by the native servants that they broke through their

usual reserve and insisted that their *sitt*'s baby must be properly welcomed into the world. They were all Mahommedans, so that this custom is one of many which has come down to Christian and Mahommedan descendants of the ancient Egyptians. But in the case of the Mahommedans it was the men, and not the women who made the procession. They came into her bedroom at the due time, and the English woman smiled trustfully at them as they bore away the precious babe, and carried it up and down, in and out of every place in the great house with the proper ritual necessary for its happiness in a strange world."

So, what do you think?

Could this be an ancient tradition that may still survive in the modern world? Certain elements are indeed as old as time, but not exclusively ancient Egyptian. Many cultures seek to woo good fortune by the display of wealth; and jewellery, with its intimate and personal nature is a recurring motif. After all, jewellery is not just worn for adornment - it has magical properties and is often connected to long lines of family history. Borrowed jewellery adds magical weight to a special occasion - even today's bride still opts for a spell containing something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

Left: The goddess Hathor plays the frame drum in the mamisi, or birth chapel, at Edfu. Right: Female musicians in Thebes

It is tempting too to see the dancing goddesses, shaking their sistra at the bedside of the Lady Redjedet, as the great-grandmothers of Mrs Butcher's Coptic midwife, leading the assembled women with her wild ululations and drumming. But then it is only modern medicine that has taken the magic out of midwifery.

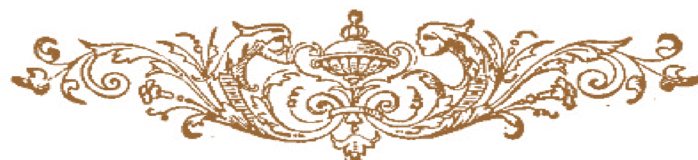
Burning candles and lamps feature in household rituals across the globe. When you can have electric light at the flick of a switch, you tend to forget the magic of lighting and extinguishing lamps, and how one flickering flame becomes a powerful weapon in the nightly battle against the dark. So just think about that, next time you blow out the candles on your birthday cake.

I really would like to see the business with the brass mortar as being long-remembered from the time of the dwarf-god Bes, when music and dancing in the god's name warded off the harmful spirits that gathered around a new mother and child. Could the mortar be the Late Period (700BCE) bronze bell used in the rites of Bes? And could the sieve be the sieve-shaped Sa-symbol of his consort, Taweret, hippopotamus goddess of childbirth? Both bronze bells and sa-shaped sistra rattles survive in the rituals of the Coptic church.

And then I would really like to imagine some unknown royal woman carrying the infant prince Tutankhaten from room to room in that long-lost palace at Tell el-Amarna, calling upon the *genius loci* of every shadowed corner to protect her new-born son. Or maybe Ramesses II and Nefertari introducing the walls and passageways of Karnak to yet another princeling, maybe stopping awhile to say hello to grandfather Seti in his chariot. But then, I could show you similar rituals from Scotland and Scandinavia.

So maybe only one thing is certain – we're all human, we all fear for our children, and, then as now, all we have ever sought from the magic of names is a way to find happiness in a strange world.

The dancing goddesses of the Westcar Papyrus are a joyous chance survival from a time which can only live in our imagination; and it is almost a hundred years since Mrs Butcher's midwives danced in a Cairo that has itself been lost to fire, and concrete, and conurbation. They are each, in their own way, legends of traditions long past. In choosing what to make of them, we are, as dancers, making our own traditions for times that are yet to come.



Above: A selection of frame-drums and tambourines (photo JEH)