

When Death Knocks

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When death knocks at our door, announcing the last breaths allowed, and after we have taken in the last views of the world as we'll ever know it, what then?

Well, from one perspective, there are of course the rites and the rituals, which in all cultures are to be respected, intricate, and involved. Intricate and involved precisely because death has always been, is and will be with us. From the moment we have life, death is a given. As the Farsi saying goes, 'It's a camel that sleeps behind all our doors.' In Iran, a predominantly Shiite Muslim country, these rites and rituals are as intricate as can be. Their extent covers the mannerisms of family members at the death bed all the way to the duties of the mourners up until a year after the death.

Most of these rituals are related in some form to the duties of a good Muslim: praying five times a day (Namaz), fasting during the month of Ramazan (Roozeh), and paying religious taxes (Khoms and Zakaat) to mosques. Also, if they can afford it, Muslims must make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Since it is inevitable that the deceased was likely not the best practicing Muslim, loopholes are provided to lessen Allah's disfavor with the deceased in the next world. Massoume Price, a social

anthropologist from London University, observes, "Many of the rites performed at the time of death are to compensate any shortcomings related to the [duties of a Muslim] by the deceased while alive. The relatives ask for Allah's forgiveness of the deceased by reciting the prayer of the dead (Namaaz-e meyyet). Mullahs are paid to perform all prayers that the deceased might have missed and fast for them. All religious taxes owed will have to be paid off to ensure smooth transition to the next world"¹.

The body of the deceased must be buried within twenty-four hours of death. First, the deceased must be washed by a Muslim of the same sex, in Islamic tradition. The whole body, including the hair, is washed and the nails are cleaned and cut. After washing the body, ablutions are performed, whereby three watery solutions made with Sedr (an ancient cleansing substance), Kafoor (camphor) and plain fresh water are used in this order: first the hands are washed, then the genitals, then the head, the right and then the left side of the body, and eventually the entire body is lightly rubbed with the solutions. Three washes are performed with each solution, so all together nine ablutions are performed. At the end, all body openings such as ears and nostrils are blocked with cotton balls. Specific prayers are said, and at the end, the



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person washing the body (Mordeh shoor) repeatedly asks Allah to forgive all the sins the dead might have committed. All the while, the body must be facing Mecca (Ghebleh).

After being washed the body is scented with camphor (which was also used by Zoroastrians, in pre-Islamic Iran). After washing, drying and purifying the body, it is placed on a large white cotton cloth called Kafan. Smaller pieces of Kafan are used to wrap the lower legs, cover the eyes, the lower abdomen from belly to knees, and to cover breasts if female. Then the whole body is covered with Kafan. Both ends will be tied with ropes before placing the body in a coffin. The Kafan should not be sewn as it is regarded a sin to sew the ends. After the deceased is wrapped in Kafan, two or four males carry the dead to the coffin, but do not place it in the coffin immediately. The body will be put down on the ground instead. It is lifted up and put down three times, before being placed inside the coffin; this symbolizes the refusal of the deceased to exit for good this earthly life. During the entire process, verses from the Koran are recited, while every few minutes everyone shouts, 'There is no god but Allah' (La ellaha ell Allah). It is regarded a blessing to touch the coffin and to help carry it. So, total strangers may and often do participate in carrying the coffin for a short while (for seven steps at the minimum). (This may shed some light on scenes shown around the world of the funeral of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, in which hysterical crowds vying for a touch and a carry of the late Imam's coffin caused the Kafan-wrapped body at one point to almost fall out of the coffin.)

The procedures for the burial (Dafn) also have strict regulations. The body is taken out of the coffin, and placed on the ground; it is then picked up and put down three times, before being placed in the grave. The body and the grave must face Mecca. The

grave shall be dug by a Muslim gravedigger if the deceased was a Muslim (otherwise the regulations are unknown to this writer). Once placed inside the grave, the body is put on its right side, facing Mecca, and a brick and a raw mosaic (Khesht-e khaam) are placed under the head. The Kafan covering the face is pushed aside so that the face is uncovered, before the grave is filled. The gravestone shall not be inscribed, unless with verses from the Koran, and rosewater is sprinkled over the grave. Also importantly after the burial, if it is daytime, lunch is to be given to all who participated in the funeral and if night, dinner shall be given. This, so that the deceased shall not have his or her first post-mortem 'meal' alone. Also, the rich, or if the family can afford it, hand out charitable foodstuffs (Nazri) such as Halvaa (caramelized flour) to the poor, which is supposed to raise the deceased's status in the afterworld. The next day, family members hand out money and sweets to the poor at the grave site, and pour rosewater on the grave.

In the Zoroastrian rituals pre-dating Islam, the first three days after a person died were very important, since this was considered the period during which the soul was most susceptible to evil spirits. Prayers were deemed necessary to fend off the evil spirits grasping to snatch innocent souls back into the dark kingdom whence they came. It is thought to be reminiscent of this Zoroastrian tradition that in post-Islamic Iran, the memorial service (Khatm) is held on the third day after the death. The memorial services are segregated by gender; men sit together, and women sit together separately. The memorial services are conducted by a mullah, reciting from the Koran, memorializing the deceased, and usually making repeated references to Imam Ali and Imam Housayn. The references to these two revered figures in Shiite Islam (both of whom died brutal deaths) are to glorify martyrdom, an important aspect of the Shiite tradition.

Usually these references result in a fierce intensification of crying by the mourners. The centerpiece of the memorial services is a very large, framed picture of the deceased, placed in between two large flower arrangements.

Other important dates related to mourning rites are: the 7th day (Hafteh), the 30th day (Maah), the 40th day (Chelleh), and the one year anniversary (Saal). On each of these days, relatives and anybody who wishes visit the grave of the deceased and place flowers on the grave, sprinkle rosewater on it, and pray for the deceased.

The degree of detail to which we may wish to delve into these matters can easily go beyond the space available here. These include, for example, intricate rituals to be observed at the death bed,- should the person be fortunate enough to be dying in bed - from the facing of the body at all times (before death) towards Mecca, to the member of the family who should be at the head of the bed, to the duties of other family members. Iranian death rites even include instructions for accessories that may be placed with the dead in their graves for smoother passage to the next world.

However, at some point questions should arise as to how many of these rituals and rites are for the benefit of the living, and how many for the benefit of the dead. Which are in the spirit of coming to terms with, and which rites are in the spirit of denial of death? To raise these questions, I believe, is as important a part of an exposition of death rites as are the descriptions given. For example, in Zoroastrian tradition, the mourners wear white, and crying or frantic forms of behavior are strictly forbidden, for these are

thought to disturb the soul of the dead. In the post-Islamic Iranian tradition, however, black is the color of mourning, and the fiercest crying is prescribed, not in any literal or written manner, but in the way that it is practiced and handed down socially.

So, the question may arise; for whom are we crying so hard? For the dead, or for ourselves? Why the vociferous references to Imam Ali and Imam Housayn in the memorial services? Why not instead honor merely the memory of the deceased? Or to take the example of paying a mullah to do the praying the deceased might have neglected: is this some invention of a class of clergy (mostly unproductive members of society) creating a convenient racket? Do we really take the Shiite Muslim god, the Allah, to be so lax as to forget the notion of personal responsibility, this most fundamental of all religious edicts, not to mention of all secular ethics and morality? Or are we indulging in wishful thinking, hoping upon hope that our good deeds too can be carried out by others after we die?

In death as in life, it is right to raise questions at the same time that we describe cultural traditions. Cultural traditions, as the Iranian poet, Shamlou, once said, are not like borrowed articles, to be preserved and handed back in exactly the same shape and form as we received them. They are to be shaped and reshaped. They are to be questioned and interrogated for their validity, for their usefulness, for their effects on us, and for their right to be. Such interrogation is the true and only sign of respect for a culture, for only in such inquisitive light will a culture continue to thrive and not yield to decay and irrelevance.

¹ For more information on the rituals of the Muslim world, please see <http://www.persianoutpost.com/htdocs/RitualsOfDeath.html> The site was visited between September 26

and October 2, 2003; The following book (in Farsi) was also used: Old Tehran (Volume 3), 3rd Edition; by Jafar Shahri; Mo'in Press, Tehran, 2002 (pages 244-283).