

Introduction

Historical and contemporary issues in Islamic funerary practice

FAEGHEH SHIRAZI

In this special issue we explore the unifying effects of death and its associated practices and rituals. The collection focuses on ritual and local funerary traditions in Islam and examines historical and contemporary issues dealing with the concept of death and the rituals and material cultures associated with it.

The funerary practices of any culture reveal much about its religious belief systems, including ideas about the afterlife. To a certain degree, rituals connected with mortuary rites and burial grounds evolve with the times. Death rituals are an expression of cultural and religious attitudes that incorporate the values and ideals passed down by parents and previous generations, and can evolve with the times or remain constant despite societal changes; or entirely new rituals can be adopted to replace earlier ones. In such cases, the modifications are indicators of evolving ways of life and cultural practices accepted by people within an organized set of rules and regulations. The time of the death of loved ones is a painful and emotional for the living, yet it can be filled with hope and mercy for the departed ones. Many believe that death is the beginning of a journey into eternal life and therefore not the end of a person's existence, and so they ask for the creator's mercy to protect the departed ones and wish for their happiness and peace in their new existence (Smith and Haddad 2002). To perform burial rituals accurately is, for believers, one of the most important aspects of the final religious rites. For Muslims, the second life journey starts on the Day of Judgment, the *Youm al Qayamat*.

The articles in this volume focus on funerary rituals and local traditions in Islam, examining historical and contemporary issues dealing with the concept of death, burial location and material culture associated with death. The ways of mourning through rituals and the placement of monuments are diverse, yet all are connected by the core elements of Islam and are practised in various Islamic communities and cultures.

The article by Dağyeli discusses differences in mourning practices between local traditions and globalized Islam. Many immigrant Muslim families and their descendants still have a close affinity to their ancestral lands and culture. Those Muslims who live in non-Muslim majority lands require special religious

consideration and due to the growing population face a paucity of burial facilities that can accommodate Islamic rituals and religious obligations.

Razavimaleki and Martinez examine these issues for Muslims in Austin, Texas. The researchers explore the tension between the observance of Islamic burial traditions and statutory city codes and regulations. In the rapidly evolving world, Islamic burial rituals must encompass more efficient and innovative ways to bury loved ones within local codes while maintaining the integrity of the religious belief system.

The article by Shirazi relating to changes in the graveyards and memorial gardens of the Islamic Republic of Iran points to the politics involved in memorial garden and grave-site maintenance, and how technology plays an important role in changes within the mortuary organization. It is worth noting the importance of valid and reliable mortality data in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that a multi-source death registration system has been established and improved since 1998 (Jafari *et al.* 2009:127).

Because of rapid population growth and an increased rate of urbanization, many traditional Islamic mortuary rituals are changing to accommodate and better serve the people. Environmental considerations such as space allocation and energy conservation as well as health concerns are some of the new realities affecting Islamic death and burial rituals. In Iran, for example, the use of double-decker graves is a common practice to alleviate the lack of space. In most cases, a husband and wife are buried in this manner, and only one tombstone is used to designate their identities and for supplications to honour either of the deceased.

In conclusion, from the theme of the research articles in this special volume, it is evident that while Muslims do have common and shared burial and gravesite practices, they are subject to cultural or regional interpretation. Additionally, some ritual practices have over time been modified to accommodate aspects of contemporary global lifestyles such as social media, and because of the increasing scarcity of natural resources, dwindling land allocations in the planning of new graveyards. Yet all these changes have not modified shari'a regarding burial of the body, which is washed and wrapped in simple white cotton or linen sheet, facing Mecca, underground. The funeral prayer, known in Arabic as Salat al Janazah, is always recited, requesting Allah to bless and forgive the sins of the deceased, and all join in to recite the Qur'an 20:55 (Surat al Taha): 'From the earth We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time.'

REFERENCES

Smith, J. and Y. Haddad. 2002. *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Faegheh Shirazi
 University of Texas at Austin
 fshirazi@austin.utexas.edu