

The understanding of funeral rituals in Turkish society and its reflection on moral teaching

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Abstract

Funeral rituals are an ancient issue that concerns all people. As each era and race are a constant phenomenon, rituals related to death have been formed. The Turkish society also has its death ceremonies. This is different from the death ceremonies of other Muslims. However, it varies according to the region's celebration in Turkey. Again, death ceremonies in Turkey also vary according to different faiths and cultures. However, the dominant character in every culture has been the ancient Turkish culture. Death ceremonies are practices that will contribute to moral teaching for spouses, friends and relatives.

Keywords: Death, Turkish culture, funerals, moral teaching.

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1. Introduction

As the evidence of burial is the only data surviving from early Paleolithic cultures, mortuary construction are often the most impressive and revealing remains of early civilisations. The importance of ancestors in the religions of the Jews, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims makes tombs and burial customs for the essential sources of data for classical and modern culture (Huntington & Metcalf, 1980, p. 6).

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' body is buried, covered in a linen cloth, placed in his tomb and sealed it with a large stone (XXVII: pp. 57–61). Accordingly, the funeral rituals are the most important cultural institutions in traditional Muslim Turkish societies like other people.

2. Turkish funeral rites

Turkish people more than 90% are Muslim, and Central Anatolian and East of Turkey are a traditionalist people. They are staunch conservative than West Turkey. Hence, traditions are significant for them. However, for West Turkey, traditions are the most important to them due to the more affected by globalisation (Mimoso, Bravo & Gomes, 2018).

In the traditional beliefs of Muslim Turkish people, death is perceived, which leaves the soul from the human body into another place. Death is considered as an act of God, according to Islamic theology.

Jews, Christian and Muslims are in accordance with the understanding of physical resurrection. According to Islamic theology, death is the second resurrection in training for the afterlife. Rather than viewing death as an end of life, Muslims view earthly death as a transition from this world to eternity. The purpose of worldly life, according to Islamic theology, is to prepare for eternal life (Zamahsari, 1947, pp. 293–294).

For Islamic theology, like other many religions, the human is sacred. Famous, a Muslim Sufi Yunus Emre (d. 1,321) formulated this belief by saying: 'We love the created/For the Creator's sake'.

For this reason, a human body, whether one is a Muslim or a non-Muslim, is sacred and must be shown respect. At the same time, another Islamic Sufi Maulana Rumi (d. 1,273) gives extraordinary value to humane and exalts the human being too virtually to the level of a sacred being. However, if death is a natural event, then, similar to all other natural events, it is also a symbol of something else. From the Islamic standpoint, death is not to be construed as merely natural events, but rather as 'signs' of the divine order of the cosmos. In turn, the last stage of life, from Islamic theology, assumes a definite character as a period of 'religious maturity' and personal transcendence.

In these agreements, Muslim Turkish people have a considerate folkway about death in the shape of pre-death, during the end and after death customs. Even though they are Muslims, this custom differs from Arabic in the Middle East.

When a person is in the deathbed, they read the 'Yasin' part of the Quran. If they do not know to read of Quran, they invited a Muslim preacher for pray (Balikci, 2007).

In villages, diplomatic means of the declaration are to ask Muslim preacher (hodja) to demand persons for a funeral rite for dead. In some cities in Turkey, a muezzin, who is an invitation described by the composed of particular words to elucidate the beginning of the prayer times for dead, announces the deceased from a mosque minaret with some religious language with his name, interment time and place.

It is a Muslim's accountability to offer condolences, well-being and considerate to the family and the relatives of the dead. When meeting with someone who has lost a relative, conversation starts by

saying: ‘will stay in paradise,’ ‘may your life be spared’, ‘may God rest his soul’, ‘God give you patience’, ‘may you be alive’ and may God’s blessing be on him/her (the deceased).

Mourning is 3–7 days in Turkey. They do not get a shave on these days, and their mourning dresses are black, dark, or grey. In the ancient Turkish people, mourning was 30–40 days.

Some believe that the deceased’s eyes accompany the soul by leaving a corpse’s body. Thus, the soul makes its way to the world of souls. Therefore, the eyes of the deceased must be shut. There is no scientific or religious base for this practice, also originating from the ancestral cult.

A foremost religious obligation is to keep the body clean and, in this, the washing of the body, notably, before performing prayer and after sexual conduct, birth and postmortem. Body wash and the use of incense are the parts of paying respect to the deceased. In this, there is an exception.

The physique of a Martyr is neither washed nor be covered but buried with the same clothes found him with. Muslims are not to offer the funeral prayer for martyrs since the Prophet. In Turkey, a martyr’s coffin is covered with the Turkish flag.

A martyr is the one who is killed in a battle between Muslims and disbelievers for the sake of their country. Turkish people are not washing a Martyr because there is a declaration of Quran verses (II: p. 154).

Women can join this service. However, in general, they are not entering this service. It is an exceptional religious attitude in the Islamic tradition. Muslim women should pray five times per diem like Muslim men. However, women fall behind the men on the pray. In the prayer performed at funeral, women pray side by side with men. There is no specific explanation in the religious sources about this behaviour.

Imam requested people what they thought about the dead man, and waiting to answers is always positive: ‘he was good, may God bless him, mercy be upon his soul’, etc.

When an imam makes questions about a deceased among people in his or her community, this is to be interpreted as advice for the community. Nobody would like a negative word about oneself, and this is the witness against himself for the afterlife.

There is no funeral prayer for suicide. Killing himself is banned as to assign murder and is a sign of ungratefulness towards God. The understanding of suicide is the opposite of the part of collective life/social life. Muslims trust that God quizzes people in this life in the world and yet does not worry a soul beyond what it can stand. To preserver in times of suffering, calling upon God for relieving and abidingness is an essential element in the Muslim lifestyle and worldview. Eventually, Muslims are to demand God’s infinite kindness and seek out the right solution to life’s paradoxes (Joao, Bravo & Gomes, 2018).

Under modern Islamic theology, at all events, the victim of suicide has faith. For this reason, the funeral prayer is a prayer for him. Hence, just to pray for him/her.

As known, Turkey’s political structure is secular. However, people are culturally and historically Muslim. Turkey state rejects Islamic laws. Accordingly, those Turkish people consider religious functionaries, but the state does not attend to them. Suicide and euthanasia are on trial in the law/adjudicator of Turkish Secular State, not Islamic/divine authority (Campina, 2018).

Another discussion on the funeral prayer about ‘euthanasia’, the exercise of resistance someone’s life to end their declared anguish, is not allowable in Islam. Muslims believe that all possessions are eventually according to God’s ruling, and discomfort and sorrow must be dispensed by prayer and penance. Besides, only God regulates the time and mode of one’s death. Muslims also trust that the grief of reasonable believers in this life is experimental, and it will be compensated by

incommensurable pleasure and prize in the afterlife (Oguz, 1996, pp. 170–171; UNN Islamic Society, 2020)

A disease implements euthanasia. It is not a religious affair. If there is a considerable problem with life, we must depend on the reports of the consultants. Hence, the theologians are contingent on euthanasia to specialists. Theologians give a fatwa, according to doctors.

Muslims have a characteristic style of building tombs and cemeteries that are considered by modesty, frugality and economy in costs. It is of excessive status that a particular cemetery is dedicated absolutely to the use of Muslims. In Turkey, Muslims are not buried in the graveyards of non-Muslims, and non-Muslims not buried in a Muslim churchyard. It is not social discrimination, but it is social and cultural discrimination. They are living together in the same community life with peace. However, many Christians do not allow burials in a Muslim cemetery alongside Muslims, caused by apparent non-Christian symbols such as the crescent and the cross.

The corpse is carried to the cemetery by people. Tombs are rectangular and planned to quarter only one person. The dead is buried and only covered with the cerement. The body is laid on its right shoulder, facing the direction of Mecca. The tombstone is on the head's side (Tugrul 1973, p. 290).

Some Turkish people are putting water, money and earth on the jaw of death. It is inherited from ancient, pre-Islamic Turkish culture as an ancestral cult. The tradition of putting coins or land on the jaw or hand of the dead is an old Turkish custom. According to these, money or earth is a token that he or she will be prosperous and happy in the hereafter or the next life.

The Imam's prayer for died is signifying the end of the burial ritual. The dead is remembered on the 7th and 52nd days of his death with a special ceremony, such as mawlid. Sometimes, big funerary meals of halwah or lokhma are offered to the poor and present people (Gercel, 2001, pp. 297–298).

At the time of the funeral or the meal after the funeral, his/her relatives give away some money to poor and charity institutions. Alike, for the Jewish people, donations to charities at the time of the funeral are an ancient custom (Lamm, 1969, p. 76). The people believe that the memorial ceremony is a concluding facility that they can do for their relatives and an occasion to remember its existence with them.

At the end of dig-in, the people left the burial place except the Muslim preacher (hodja). He prayed. Imam stands at the head of the grave and says: Now angels will come to you and ask the following questions: who is your lord?, what is your religion? and who is your prophet? And, say to them: 'my lord is Allah', 'my religion is Islam', 'my Book is the Quran' and 'my prophet is Prophet Muhammad'.

According to Islamic teaching, after burial visited for questioning by two angels. The deceased is determined to be a believer or unbeliever. They ask the questions of 'who is your God?', 'who is your prophet?' and 'what is your religion?' to a person put in the grave. For believers in God, the graveyard enlarges and comforts a heavenly garden. For unbelievers, the grave contracts so that the deceased beams are loaded upon another, and a door is opened to hell (Gazzali, 1999, pp. 136–139; Welch 1977, p. 194).

When the dead is buried, buried as lifeless. However, the Muslim preacher asks some information to be deceased. And, according to Islamic theology, two angels ask some questions. If the dead answers correctly, the grave is become wide, for the unbelievers that the grave contracts.

These sentences indicate that there is an alive person who understands the words, speeches and consciousness in the grave. However, can dead has a conscience. We know that these attitudes are from old-Turkish customs. At the same time, these are, to some extent, based on Islamic teaching. Indeed, there is no explanation for this problem in the Quran. Islamic theologians have different comments on this topic.

It appears that these ceremonies are for the people who stay around the grave, not for the deceased. Due to the strong influence of death on the people, they may be drawing a lesson from funeral customs.

According to Islamic teaching, when died, his/her soul goes to the world of souls. Some people believe that the soul comes back to the body for the questions after burying. The soul does not need a place to go back to the grave. At the same time, some people died at war and on the water. Or some people's bodies are burned. Hence, there is no one in the grave. The imaginations of people about the grave are contrary to the facts. The cemetery is a symbol of the after the state of death.

Despite there are some arguments between the Islamic sects, Turkish people have been prayed and donated for the deceased in order that they are saved from punishment in the grave.

In Turkey, there are certain days for commemorating through religious ceremonies and meals. First, consider the 3rd day – death ritual, 7th day, 40th day, 52nd day and anniversary (Aladag Municipal, 2007; Unal, 1996, pp. 161–162). According to popular belief, the soul stays at home until the corpse is buried and visits home for 40 days after death or on holy days. According to widespread acceptance, the soul of the deceased asks for dua at the dreams of relatives (Guzelbey, 1985, p. 316).

The belief of the dead's soul visited his/her relatives who are alive and disturb them is an ancestral cult (Ocak, 2000, p. 62). The ancestral worship is ancient and deep-rooted of Turkish customs. The ancestral cult is pervasive in the Asian popular culture (Lee-Zhu, 2001; Lung, 2003, pp. 33–36).

Some old ancestral traditions and cultures continued after the conversion of Turkish people to Islam. These traditions and customs are consisting of Shamanist and local culture. Hence, many of the funeral customs are mixed in pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions. Despite the non-existence of any theological text, people are committed to believe some old customs such as the Islamic states that the soul of the dead body visits the relatives.

The alteration in the cemetery culture of the Ottoman took place after the nineteenth century. In contemporary Turkey, cemeteries are located far from cities either because of meagre rations of city planning doctrines. As is the case with almost all municipally owned cemeteries, there are washrooms, mosques, a large area for funeral praying and a marble used as a table, on which the coffin is provisionally placed and kept ready for the funeral prayer.

People visited tombs after death. Especially, they visited their deceased on the religious holidays, such as Ramadan and Sacrifice holidays. Tombs are divided into two groups in Turkey: Public (mezar), cemetery, and sacred person's graves (turba), tombs of the pious. People visit holy monuments for the venerate sepulcher, immolate an animal, donate money, recite the Qur'an and mawlid ceremony, preach sermons, burn candles on the gravestones, etc. (Eroz, 1985, p. 67).

3. Conclusion

The effect of religion is seen in the Turkish tradition. Death rituals are vital customs connected to religion. Many religions, such as Islam, accepts human being as holy. Therefore, deaths are regarded as respect. The human being is made up of spirit and body. The feature of a human being is coming from his holy spirit. Due to this 'Holy Spirit', the shape of the human being is considered respectable. Hence, deaths are considered that they were alive.

The death ceremony is a vital sign of respect for human beings. In these ceremonies, respect ceremonies are made for both spirit and body. In each religion and region, there are some differences in the death ceremonies. These differences come from the fact that all religions and areas esteem human beings in different ways. For this reason, although Turkish and other people's death and funeral customs are different, those differences arise from local cultures.

In Turkish culture, the source of the death ceremony is mainly composed of Islamic tradition and pre-Islamic culture. Although there are many death ceremonies of religious practice in Turkey, most of them are dominated by pre-Islamic Turkish traditions. For example, the understanding to stay 'behind the eye' is an ancestral cult as the soul is no affair of this world. It is an unworldly body. The soul's domain is the hereafter. Consequently, some assume that the soul remains with the physical body for as long as a year after death. A ceremony on days such as 1st, 7th and 40th after someone's death day celebrates this. Such days were marked with various services by the ancient Turks. The variable is the Islamic statement. Now, the Quran will be recited in place of the elegy organised in the yug.

Turkey is divided into seven regions geographically: Marmara, Black Sea, Central Anatolia, Eastern Anatolia, Southeastern Anatolia, Mediterranean and Aegean Regions. There is little diversity in the death customs among regions in Turkey. Diversities are in the sects and ethnicity. For example, although Sunni and Alawi people are Muslims, their death customs are different. For instance, in some religions, Alawi people redecorated the tombs with flowers and vases. This manner is commemoratives of the pre-Islamic funeral customs. It is a day for people to visit cemeteries and decorate graves with flowers, vases and glasses. For the Ahl Al Sunnah (Sunni), which is most of the Muslim Turkish people sect, music and flowers are not encouraged.

The Alawi community in Turkey cherishes old Turkish traditions. There are predominantly no religious/Islamic implications. However, death customs of Sunnis affect the religious/Islamic traditions.

If we look at the subject in terms of moral teaching, all funeral rituals and death customs are done for living people. People must draw a lesson from death customs. There is no benefit for a dead person except for dua (pray and supplicate) and good deeds. Most rituals of the turba are non-theological, similar to the custom of tying trees. It is called the hurafa/superstition. This is no theological approach. Despite this, all turbas are being visited by people, especially in the central and east provinces of Turkey.

As known, the relationship between people and nature seems to be still the foundation of their rituals. For example, there is a custom of the tied of the cloth pieces to the trees of turba/shrine in the Turkish culture. According to some scholars, it is a kind of beautification. This tradition has survived to present days. The people see the light of day their needs, such as marry, recover and well-accepted of pray by God. This is a Shamanistic way.

Despite the Islamic theologians, the death customs continued very richness and alive in Turkish people's modern life as in the belief that the death customs are for human life and his/her deceased. People saw no maltreatment to compare their ancient beliefs and practices with the Islamic elements since they do not make a distinction between them as Islamic or non-Islamic. There are the effects of globalisation.

Culture is not static. It grows out of systematically encouraging respect for selected customs and habits, like burial customs. Globalisation demands some grades of structural changes in the many extents of civilisation.

Correlatively to globalisation, many of the Turkish Muslim traditions such as burial customs have the worst of the significance and attraction. Various people, especially in the Western cities, lack interest in cultures of burial customs. However, customs prevail in central and east Turkey.

Death is a human value, like life. For this reason, those who died in the Turkish-Islamic tradition are treated as if they are alive and a ceremony is held. At the same time, death is to move into another dimension. Accordingly, Turkish society treats the dead in the graves as living. When someone dies, he is not seen as a corpse. The deceased is treated with respect. As a person who died according to the celestial religions goes to the other world, he continues his life.

Funeral in Turkey is a common task that must be done to a human being. In the funeral rituals of Turkish society, the belief in Islam has a priority. However, most of the practices show the traces of pre-Islamic Turkish ideas and culture. Alawites of Turkey's application in funeral ceremonies are more evident traces of the pre-Islamic.

Funeral ceremonies include moral messages for those who live more but are applied to the dead. Care and respect in practices during the burial of the funeral are moral messages describing the respect for the living. Equipping the graves with flowers appeals to the taste of living people, not to the dead. Prayers made at the heads of graves are advice for those who read and listen. Therefore, funeral ceremonies are of great importance. However, this importance is not only because of the dead but also because it contains messages about lives.

For example, the lights of a deceased person's room are left on for several days. There is no need for light to see the dead. Here, however, the unconscious is still thought among us and should not be poorly spoken behind. Again, after someone dies, helping the poor in his name also means encouraging people to do good.

The visit to the grave of a deceased is an incentive to be a good person and to live morally in the world. As no matter how it lives, there is the message that you will eventually die.

Teaching moral education only ideally in books and lessons is insufficient. It is necessary to reflect moral teachings to life. The best method of this is taking place at death ceremonies.

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