

Funeral Rites in Algeria: A Sociological Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Death

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Abstract

Death is considered a social and cultural phenomenon as much as it is a biological event. It cannot be reduced to the cessation of biological function of the person, as it holds several symbolic and semantic dimensions in society, owing to the fact that the inevitability of the event is accompanied by a number of rites that differ based on religion and the perception of the concept of death and the afterlife. These rites regulate social behavior and affirm social values in the community, as religious traditions, social practices, and customs intersect with the cultural and symbolic structure to produce a system of rituals that reflects the special relationship between death and sanctity. This paper aims to analyze the rituals related to the phenomenon in Algeria through field inspection and analyzing its symbolism and social meaning, guided by the fact that the method by which individuals interact with death produces a number of practices and beliefs reflected by the religious and social structure, and has several symbolic connotations. This study relies on the descriptive-analytical method, using the technique of direct observation of the most important rites and expressive practices that accompany the event of death from a sociological perspective. More than mere random cultural habits or cultural activities, these forms of actions and practices hold many psycho-social meanings that attempt to restore a lost balance.

Keywords: Death, rites, practices.

1. Introduction:

Death has been a constant in the history of human consciousness and an integral part of human nature, despite the differences in its interpretation and methods of coping with it. In order to contain this shared eventuality, several cultures and religions have created practices and funeral rites to express the transition of a person from one stage to the other. It can be observed that all people perform different rites related to the phenomenon representing behaviors and forms of expression that repeat with each death. These rituals have gained an increased interest by anthropologists and sociologists alike, due to the fact that they represent a direct source for understanding social acts and their apparent and subtle consequences.

Funeral rituals show a resistance of the individual or the group to the grief and fear, and their need to control and contain the event of death, thereby becoming ready to accept the event and move on. These practices are subject to a number of complex and repeating rituals and rites translated by the symbols of the group, which can be oral, kinetic, individual and collective, religious, and hereditary, and which aim to eventually keep the tradition and religious beliefs of the society and reproduce its values.

Death rites are practices held and observed by the Algerian community. They are part of the transitional rites that still respect old traditions. Control and containment of death is manifested in the handling of the deceased from the moment of death to the last phase of the rite, and in containing fear and complex reactions of the living and affecting their behavior, which is apparent in their expressions of grief, such as crying, mourning, and 40th day memorials.

In this context, this paper aims to study the symbolism of death rites in the Algerian community and uncover its dimensions, considering it is an important context in which the social act of the death can be understood, and later the dynamics produced by this biological and social event that carries deep connotations.

In order to set the scientific and methodological framework for this work, we have begun with the following queries:

How can funeral rites be understood from a sociological perspective?

What are the most important practices living persons do for the dead?

What are their symbolic, social, and religious dimensions?

2. The method and research technique:

This research paper uses the descriptive-analytical method, which allows the description of the circumstances of the phenomenon and a profound analysis of its data. The research tool used is the direct observation of the different rites, practices, and forms of expression related to the phenomenon of death in the Mascara territory in Western Algeria.

3. The concept and meaning of rites:

The concept of rite refers to “the way in which sacred activities are conducted and organized in a ceremonial context, and from an etymological perspective, the word “rite” comes from the Latin “ritus”, which refer to the group of activities and organized acts conducted by a group during a ceremony” (Mahwachi, 2010, p. 7). Rites are defined as a group of rules that regulate the practices of the group, either by performing the sacred rituals, or by organizing symbolic activities and regulating them according to specific rituals. These ritualistic practices are subject to a group of complex ceremonies translated by the symbols of the group, which can be oral and kinetic, and through which communicational goals and basic symbolic needs are met.

Terminologically, the concept of rites refers to “the symbolic expression of feelings and ideas by treating the act as a means of this expression (Fromm, 1950, p. 100), which Durkheim defines as having a uniting quality in its essence that results in the strengthening of the social unit... On the other hand, it is a symbolic, oral, or kinetic act by which a person attempts to connect with creatures or supernatural powers. The rite is also distinct from other utterances or movements due to having four characteristics: “shown, repeated, codified, and conducted with the goal of affecting the subject or the self.” (Boudon, 2005, p. 202)

Rites are classified as permanent and transitionary, i.e.: relating to passage. The first is compatible with individuals’ lives, such as daily rites, which are the utterances and actions performed by the individual on a daily basis, e.g.: Dua and Salat in Islam. The second is a sign of the individual’s transition from the relatively constant and continuous states that are recognized from a cultural standpoint, including: position, status, and name.

Among the distinguishing features of the rite is that it is conducted according to three tenets: First, rule setting, where the rite is subject to rules that are regulated and agreed-upon by the members of the group. The second is repetition, where the rite is performed in specific times in the group's lives according to a set schedule, and the third is the symbolic charge it carries, which lends it a special symbolic power. (Mahwachi, 2010, p. 20)

Also, the content of the rite includes the significance of the belief, represented in the sacred practices that induce in the believer a state of sacredness and allows them to perform ritualistic worship, and the ceremonies performed under religious teachings to enter the experience of sacredness, such as in the case of believers of obligatory worship and the rituals of death and animal sacrifices. The domain of rites also includes non-religious practices and activities, such as communication acts and exchanges that occur between individuals in their daily lives. (Mahwachi, 2010, p. 19)

Anthropologist Arland Van Gennep was the first to contribute to the study of the formation of rites, with the focus in one of the chapters in his book "*les rites de passage*" on rites of passage. He was the first anthropological thinker to introduce the concept, which he used to describe certain rites. He refers to the group of rituals that distinguish in general the main transitionary processes in the life of the individual from one phase to the other, which he summarizes in three types:

1. Incorporation rites: When an individual acquires rights and duties related to a new stable status.
2. Separation rites: Rites related to the process of separation, where symbolic behavior indicates leaving the status. This type is apparent in the phenomenon of death.
3. Intermediary rites: These refer to the state of ambiguity or the beginning of sensing a distinction between the old and the new status. (Abd-Albaqi, 1981, p. 217)

Death rites are rites of passage related to important changes in the life cycle of the individual. They refer to the rituals and symbols that generally characterize the basic processes of transitioning from one phase to another. The preparation of the corpse of the deceased is subject to a number of ritual practices, some of which affirm their departure from the world of the living, and others maintain their connection to religious social life. Among these practices is ritual washing, shrouding, and burial. In his critical analytical study of funeral practices and rites, Binford argues that funeral rites vary according to the structural complexity of the community and should be viewed as a complex system that interacts with the social, economic, and political structure. All dimensions that create the social character and represent the identity of the individual, which are recognized in funeral rites, differ based on the degree of organizational complexity of the community (Binford, 2017). Funeral rites are complex because, not only do they relate to a natural phenomenon, but to a change in the social structure as a whole.

4. Death rites in Algerian society:

As a theoretical framework of the phenomenon studied, Van Gennep's study has provided an important perspective of the nature of death rites, their implications, effects, and meaning. The core idea in his theory is that all rites that involve a passing and transition from one state to another share a structure that is determined by the necessary function of the separation from a single status and a re-incorporation into the new status with an intermediary position in-between.

Rites related to the phenomenon of death as a social phenomenon are part of Algerian culture, as they reflect the dominant religious and social values in the community. They are handled in a specific manner that carries a group of special ritual practices, and a sociological analysis of this phenomenon aids in the discovering of symbolic meaning and social function as relates to these rites

that are part of the religious and social practices inherent to Islam, and that refer to the concept of death as the transition or passing from the Dunia (life) to the Barzakh, an intermediary place, to finally arrive at the afterlife. Therefore, death is considered a transitional event that requires several rites.

1. Religious rites:

Religious plays a major role in the formation of funeral rites in Algerian society, where religious beliefs intersect with local customs and traditions to create death-specific rites.

1.1 Pre-death rites:

Also called dying rites, they are practices and symbols performed by the family or group for the dying in their last moments, such as receiving Shahada and reciting Quran with the belief that it facilitates the departure of the soul from the body, signifying the preparation of the dying to transition to the other world, thereby affirming their religious and social identity and re-producing the cohesion of the group by accompanying the patient in their last moments.

1.2 Washing and shrouding rites:

Washing is a chief funeral rite in cultures and religions. It consists in washing the body of the deceased according to specific rules that differ based on religious and cultural references, and is manifested in practices and behaviors performed by the living in order to move the deceased into the sacred space. "The washing of the deceased is not a new rite. Washing corpses is one of the oldest methods of after-death care and it differs from one society to the other. Take for example the Egyptian theology: before the mummification process, they begin with the rite of washing with Nile water" (Al-Majidi, 1999, p. 238)

Based on our observation, when an individual dies, they are directed towards Qiblah, a sacred direction in Islam, then they prepare for the washing and perform it according to Islamic rules. The body is washed with water and soap until the filth that has accumulated is removed. We also notice that the steps of ritual washing do not differ to a significant degree from the steps of Wudu, where the right side of the corpse is washed first, then the left, until the it is fully washed. The purpose of this ritual practice is cleansing the deceased and removing the filth of death that has clung to them. Water in this process symbolizes cleansing, and its significance is due to the fact of being the source of life, a method of purification, and a center for regeneration. Ritual washing is therefore a type of purification that prepares the deceased for a symbol of a new life, giving the body meaning and determining its symbolic structure. "Religious rites took in consideration the symbol of purification, which drove them to assign to the process of ritual washing a sacred importance, given that funeral washing is a rite of passage that allows the deceased to appear before their creator in a clean and pure state" (Thomas, 2012, p. 130)

In the second phase, there is the rite of shrouding. A shroud is what the deceased wears after washing and cleansing. This ritualistic behavior is due to the common belief that the soul returns to the body after burial to be judged. "The processes of passing to the new status necessitates a recognition and validity allowed by the efficacy of the rites of passage or legitimization rites" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 121). The motive for this ritualistic behavior is a "purely psychological domain that aims to induce mental relief after fulfilling a duty" (Toualbi, 1998, p. 21). The importance of this rite also consists in the covering of the corpse with a robe that they maintain until they are resurrected in the afterlife. White also signifies purity and cleanliness.

Most studies show that the washer is the one who enshrouds the corpse, assisted by the family of the deceased. This contribution is seen as a collective service that reflects the spirit of cooperation

and support, as the shroud is bought ready-made or tailored manually, with the condition of being colored white and scented with a few perfumes. White is considered a symbol of chastity and purity, while perfumes serve two functions that culminate in taking care of the body: to keep it in the best way it was created, and to prevent the leakage of foul smells that can escape the corpse.

For men and women, a visual difference in shrouds can be observed. Women are enshrouded in five robes, while the men are only enshrouded in three. This can be seen as a symbolic representation of the strict adherence to covering the female body. This dimorphism is connected to the common belief that a woman, even after death and becoming a corpse, retains the symbolic status she had in life. After the process of enshrouding, the family of the deceased is called to take a final look at the corpse and say their goodbyes before burial. The deceased is then placed inside a coffin, which is a wooden, often green, box in which the corpse is carried to the grave.

According to Van Gennep, these rites (washing and enshrouding) are classified as separation rites, because they accompany the process of separating the corpse of the deceased from the collective of the living and preparing it for burial.

1.3 Procession and burial rites:

This phase can be classified under Incorporation Rites, where the deceased is incorporated with the group of the dead. These rites include the phase of moving the deceased to the grave when the time of burial is determined, which is usually affixed to Duhr or Asr prayers. The deceased is seen-off by a group of men, and in those taking part, an adherence to a few behavioral rules can be noticed, such as: keeping silent, reciting Quran, walking with poise, and giving the situation its due respect, which reflects the sanctity of death in Algerian society.

This rite often includes weeping and wailing from women, due to several complex emotions induced in the psyche by the phenomenon of death. It combines grief and sorrow for the loss of the deceased on one hand, and fear of death and the desire for life and continuity on the other. These emotions can lead to contrasting behaviors, such as screaming, crying, face-hitting, and changes in facial expressions. This rite is often connected to women and femininity, which can manifest as a lack of self-control and patience in such circumstances.

The rites of weeping are also function as a show of the support and degree of social cohesion between individuals through the unification of their emotions during the period of death and burial. "Through collective attendance, individuals gain a kind of intense collective emotion that cannot be attained in their individual states". (Durkheim, 1985, p. 370). In his study of funeral rites, Durkheim also argued that when a death surprises a certain group, they feel the loss, then attempt to find one another until they gather and restore the feeling of cohesion by reforming themselves symbolically and practically (Durkheim, 1985).

In the next phase, the rite of funeral prayer at the cemetery, which is one of the most important and oldest religious practices known by Arabs. Ibn Al-Habib says: "They used to enshroud their dead and pray for them, and the prayer consisted of carrying the dead on a bier, then, the guardian would rise and mention all his good qualities and praise him, then say "May Allah's mercy be upon you", and then, he would be buried. (Ben Hetira, 2008, p. 335)

The funeral prayer is characterized by its lack of Ruku (bowing) or prostration (sujud) to avoid any suspicion of worshipping the dead. Instead, the Taqbirs replace Ruku. This prayer is seen as a declaration of the deceased's belonging to the Muslim community." (Soualmia, 2022, p. 51)

As for the rite of burial, it is the covering and final destination of the corpse as it returns to earth where it came from. It is a rite that, according to Islam, goes back to the beginning of creation, where Allah sent to Cain a crow to teach him how to bury his brother. From this point, burial has become the primary method of honoring the deceased and has been linked to human dignity. Additionally, it reflects the idea of universal justice and equality in death between all members of society.

Burial practices are characterized by cooperation and support in every aspect: the digging of the grave, the burial, receiving condolences, and performing prayers and ceremonies. It can be observed that this rite is restricted to men, fully excluding women as they are considered elements of chaos and disorder and putting the onus on the men, which is in line with the societal structure, and is compatible with the concept of masculinity and femininity and the resulting affirmation of the status of the man and his authority.

After the burial, adaptation and acceptance of the event takes place, which is reflected by the common belief that emotions caused by death fade after the burial, and with each passing day, the dirt in the grave grows older, and the deceased is forgotten.

To summarize the above, the resistance to grief and the desire for control over the event of death can be seen in the overwhelming attention given to all religious rites related to the deceased, from the moment of passing to the burial, in order for the living to feel contentment and satisfaction, as they have fulfilled their religious and social duty, as “full application of the general rites is further proof of the population’s connection to the religion. Therefore, it is religiously accepted as a collective desire towards keeping tradition” (Toualbi, 1988, p. 123), with the goal of keeping balance in the community and keeping tradition by repeating it to avoid its erasure from the collective memory.

2. Social rites:

A group of rites, practices and activities related to the event of death, which Van Gennep referred to as intermediary rites; the phase whose power is in its symbolisms and sacredness, as each ritualistic act is linked to a symbolic meaning specific to the social group.

Not all funeral rites are a response to religious discourse. Most are related to values and social discourse, such as habits, traditions, and customs that underline all that is spiritual and doctrinal. They are practices that, despite the different styles of performance, were and remain a method of containing grief, reducing fear, and achieving adaptation and social incorporation, as they generally aim to reorganize social life and stabilize it.

2.1 The rite of offering condolences:

Offering condolences is a form of support and sympathy with the family of the deceased. Durkheim argues that ritualistic practices strengthen the bonds between the believer and the creator and, at the same time, the bonds between the individual and the society.

Based on field observation, the rite of offering condolences is performed traditionally, where a tent is erected to serve as a meeting place for those offering condolences on the first days of the funeral. Offering condolences is a social behavior and obligation performed by the family, the neighbors, and loved ones for the family of the deceased to console and incite patience. These rites play a major role in creating a safe environment wherein negative emotions can be expressed.

Attending funerals is an opportunity to connect with others who share the same experience, thus bolstering social bonds and creating a sense of belonging through these interactions. Individuals can feel less alone in their suffering, which contributes to improving mental health. These rites are part

of the psychological development of individuals, as they help to face the challenges related to loss in their lives.

From another perspective, it can be said that ceremonies of offering condolences express a social organization, where tasks are split between men and women, each committing to their own duties until the end of the ceremony. Condolences are received inside the house for women, and inside the house or cemetery for men. They are expressed with the following phrases: May Allah magnify your reward; May Allah confirm your reward.

It can also be noted that we find among the intermediary rites the rite of preparing the food, which is a collective rite that incorporates feelings of grief, cooperation, and the linking of the world of the living to the world of the dead through the act of giving (feeding the guests with a special food, e.g.: Couscous) and considering it a form of Sadaqah (charity) for the benefit of the soul of the deceased, which reflects a symbolic philosophy of turning grief into action, where eating can be considered a symbolic eulogy.

This rite is usually specific to women, who are considered a crucial element in the funeral event and a link between the different generations inside the family, contributing to the transfer and consolidation of customs, traditions, and practices related to death.

The function of the rite of offering condolences is shown here, where “it was not only for the deceased, but it relieves grief and keeps social relationships between the living” (Snare, 2020, p. 25), which was confirmed by cliff brown, that rites solidify and strengthen bonds, manifest cohesion, and consolidate the values of the group.

2.3 The rite of mourning and the 40th day memorial:

After the rites of offering condolences and burial, the phase of mourning, which is the incorporation of the death event into the world of the living and the attempt to adapt to it, begins. Mourning is one of the most important practices performed by the family of the deceased to express their grief and loss of a family member, which manifests in wearing black and abstaining from all practices that indicate joy, such as avoiding related clothes, e.g.: dresses and jewelry, to indicate grief and express the feeling of loss, which link the mourning to a clear cultural symbolism, which can be seen as a farewell for the deceased by showing a symbolic respect to them. Mourning also includes Dua and Sadaqah (charity) as a method of asking for mercy for the deceased. More than a psychological state, it is considered a social institution that regulates the feelings of loss and holds a social function where individual sadness becomes a collective experience that serves as social support. This is what Malinovsky focuses on in his study of death and its relation to society and social loss specifically. He shines a light on the manner by which death constitutes a partial destruction of social cohesion until balance is restored or a new balance is formed. (Hussein, 2021, p. 122)

Mourning allows individuals to deal and cope with loss, thus contributing in relieving grief and starting the process of mental healing. More than crying and grief, this practice reflects the individual's commitment towards the deceased and their interaction with the idea of loss to begin the phase of coping with the situation and living with it without forgetting the lost person. “According to ethnographic narratives, funeral rites allow a sensory space where the process of mourning the deceased takes place and where social memories are created, reformulated, or confirmed, and social bonds are renewed or created (Chesson, 2001, p. 1). According to Gudme (2018, p. 360), the mourning period, which the family commits to, confirms that the period that comes directly after death is a time of transition and transformation in social status. (Gudme, 2018, p. 360)

The 40th Day is a memorial day that occurs 40 days after the burial, where another eulogy ceremony takes place, during which the family of the deceased gathers and prays for their mercy and forgiveness, cooks food to be given away, and calls a group of people who have memorized the Quran to recite it in a form of charity for the deceased.

The 40th day period, before Islam, has been performed by a group of peoples before Islam, which specified the period of 40 days as a period of mourning the deceased, such as in old Pharaonic traditions which believed that the soul continues its journey to the other world in 40 days. This shows an attempt of the group to control the symbolic time by formalizing grief and directing it. Thus, the 40th day memorial represents the closing of the official circle of mourning and the symbolic incorporating of the deceased into the collective memory.

The social and cultural significance of the rite is shown in the 40th day memorial's purpose of paying respect to the deceased and an opportunity to meet family and loved ones to remember them on one hand, and to keep family cohesion and strengthen its social bond on the other. This is confirmed by Durkheim, who considers it a unifying rite in its essence that results in the bolstering of social unity.

5. Rites of death and social change:

Rites as a social and cultural practice contribute with their symbolism and socio-cultural significance in highlighting the way of living of individuals and understanding the actions within social contexts. They are an expression of a transferred heritage between generations, where society stores its values and standards to be transferred to other generations by repeating the practice. This is apparent in customs and traditions that can be considered an adequate representation of the ritual act in the context of the death event, either religiously or socially. The latter expresses cultural specificity and serves as a basis for the concept of identity for individuals and groups.

"A rite is a symbolic and physical act that provides the system a way of releasing pent-up emotions, de-stressing, and expressing several aspects of buried desire. These needs are only satisfied through calling for a special mythological ritual period revived by the collective memory through repeating rites, in order to escape the linearity of a physical, universal time with an ever-expanding universal culture." (Mahwachi, 2010, p. 38)

However, through simple sociological observation, we find that some death rites, through their manifestation in daily life, have taken a different turn in light of social and cultural change experienced by today's society, which has led to a turn in the methods of expressing grief and consoling the family of the deceased. Under globalism and the emergence of social media, funeral rites have experienced notable changes.

Some death-related rites are characterized by adherence based on the nature of the cultural and religious belief, where we notice a sort of continuation or removal of some rites based on the conviction of the practitioners and cultural changes in expressing grief and mourning. For example, where announcing a death used to be followed by the screaming and wailing of women, or the method of "Barah" (herald or announcer), who announces the name of the deceased, their father, and the time of burial, the announcement is now restricted to social media posts.

Technology and its tools have contributed in the changing of some rites, such as the rite of offering condolences, where special pages are created to announce death and offer condolences and pray for the deceased in various forms. Several practices have been reduced to virtual interaction, such as images or written expressions, which are shown on social media sites. New approaches describe a "technology of rites", where the rite is recreated through digital media, i.e.: images,

Facebook condolences, and live-streaming of procession and burial rites, which transform the nature of the rite from a direct physical one to a symbolic virtual one, which reflects an undeniable turn of values from collective to individual, from sacred to symbolic, and from physical attendance to virtual space.

On the other hand, we find that Covid, and its relation to death, has shaped an obligate turn in the cultural and symbolic structure of the society and halted several traditional funeral practices. Rites that used to require direct communication with the corpse were forgone and treated as a biological hazard, which lessened its sacred aspect. Laws and health protocols in that period had also prevented public gatherings during offering condolences, burial, or prayer for the dead in favor of digital alternatives, contributing to the dissolution of the traditional social support network of the family of the deceased. "The impact pandemics have on funeral practices have led to cases where rites are performed in absence, altered, or transformed, which results in the construction of mourning paths and new perceptions and manifestations." (Egrot, 2022, p. 3)

The pandemic allowed the formation of ritual alternatives that are able to adapt with social turns and opened a new domain for understanding the relationship between rite, technology, and society.

Conclusion:

Given its nature as a universal truth, the relationship between humans and death is characterized with many paradoxes, making it a subject of infinite perceptions of hope, fear, and belief. Different human cultures faced death with the aid of various ritualistic acts and ceremonial practices even inside the same cultural system. This has been proven by this study, as funeral rites are not only considered as traditional practices, but as a manifestation of human relationships bolstering social cooperation. Some funeral rites represent the concept of cooperation and social support, as customs related to the phenomenon of death reflect the degree of cooperation and cohesion between individuals, resulting in a group of values and constant standards that form a reference frame for their behavior. This is expressed through a group of customs, such as giving away food for the family of the deceased and helping to feed the consolers, in addition to the participation in the funeral and visiting the grave each morning. These rites have contributed to the reproduction of social cohesion and the expression of social manifestations of existence, sacredness, and the borders between life and death.

Through practicing death rites as the last link of the rites of passage, the individual aims to move closer to the world of the sacred, serving to restore psychological balance and allowing them to accept the loss and guarantees the unity of the group. Death is a psychological crisis experienced by the deceased's close ones; therefore, rites aid in maintaining cohesion and adaptation with the loss, then the restoration of the social relationships of the living, where organized practices are performed, through which roles are distributed with the goal of the continuation of society's survival, then confirmation of the beliefs and general meaning imposed by culture on life in its totality and its relation to the sacredness of death.

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