



## Moslem Funeral Customs

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Bahrein, like all other places in the Gulf, has been visited by the epidemic, Spanish influenza, and the number of deaths daily, though very much less than in some other towns, has been considerable. At times such as these we learn a great deal about their customs connected with death and burial and their belief about the future. It is difficult to get a definite idea about it all; in fact, that is not possible, for most of their practices and statements are based on traditions of which there are no end, and there are many different sects, divisions and nationalities in Islam, each of which adds its own interpretations to these traditions and alters them to suit its own particular bent or persuasion. Locally our information comes from Shiah and Sunni sources and of these the Shiahs, in this as in all things, are much more superstitious and spectacular. This article does not claim to give all the information there is to be had on this subject, some of it may not agree with the practices in other Moslem fields, perhaps not even with those in the other stations in our field, and some of the statements may seem contradictory, but that is not uncommon in the teaching and traditions of Islam.

When it is apparent that a sick person is about to die, if it is at all possible he is made to give the testimony, or "shehadeh," as it is called, which is, "There is no God but God and Mohammed is the prophet of God." Those Moslems who are at all seriously minded are very careful and faithful in the observance of this practice, and they do not hesitate to strike or pull the dying one so as to arouse the departing spirit sufficiently to repeat this creed. If anyone dies unattended the central thought of regret is that no one took the "witness" from the dead. Another thing that is done to the dying is to pour water into the mouth, which is the dying one's sustenance on his journey to the other world. Sometimes large quantities are administered so that choking results. Then before life is extinct they begin to straighten out the limbs and to stretch them, tying the two big toes together. Moslem etiquette demands that when people meet each other and stop to speak, the feet should be placed side by side with the toes in a straight line. And so at death Moslems prepare the corpse in such a way that when the departed meets his Lord his feet will be in the correct position. When death has finally come, the women at once begin to wail and to cry out in high shrill voices.

The Moslems believe that a corpse must be brought to the grave as quickly as possible in order to speed the spirit on its way to the other world, and so all preparations for a funeral are made at once and quickly. This belief that a spirit must be speeded on its way makes it a meritorious and praiseworthy act to hurry things and with all the funerals we see the bearers are always going very fast, sometimes running. A sad result of

this excessive haste is that funerals are sometimes interrupted by the supposedly dead person coming to life again and without doubt, because of this custom, many are buried alive. But especially do Moslems hurry a funeral if it is near sunset, for they do not like to bury after that time. In times of an epidemic, necessity forces them to depart from this custom, the main reason perhaps being to keep secret the number of deaths, but ordinarily they dislike evening or night burials. One reason given is that the cemetery must not be allowed to say, "It is my dinner," or it will demand a corpse every night. They do not explain, however, why the cemetery does not demand a breakfast on the same principle! Another reason they give for not burying after sunset is that, unless the corpse is watched, something called "zaubainee" will come and eat it, or that the "jinns" will come and take it away. Sometimes, if a person dies late in the evening, the corpse is carried to the cemetery and left there all night so as to be as near as possible to its final destination and someone is appointed to watch it.



FUNERAL OF A PLAGUE VICTIM

During an epidemic all corpses must be washed at the general washing place adjoining the mosque, if possible. At other times he who dies in his own house, which is his personal property, can be lawfully washed there before carried away to the grave, but if the deceased dies in a house not his own he must be washed at the general washing place. This washing of the body is a matter of great importance because the body must be thoroughly purified and made presentable for the interviews that await it. The corpse is washed and scrubbed with scrupulous care, soap and other cleansing agents being freely used. Especial attention is paid to the ears, eyes, nose, teeth and nails. There are men and women who are publicly recognized as washers of the dead and for this work they receive payment according to the financial condition of the deceased. After the washing comes the shrouding and perfuming of the body. To the words of our Saviour, "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body what ye shall put on,"

for the Moslem's benefit we might add, "Nor yet for your burial where-withal ye shall be shrouded." With some Moslems part of a bride's trousseau is a piece of cloth for her shroud and this she carefully guards lest future circumstances might leave her unprovided for. Most of the women here wear or own a special nose jewel and with many this is dedicated to defray the cost of a shroud. Some women, even though altogether destitute, can still be seen wearing this jewel and it is the last piece that they will part with in life so that they may have the benefit of it in death. The reason for all this care about the shroud can be appreciated only when we realize that the Moslems believe that the shroud is their covering in the next world. Therefore it is neither wise nor kind to provide for anyone when he dies, unless there is absolutely nothing to be realized from any of his possessions, however little that may be, because the credit for the shroud will go to him who has provided it while it will leave the one who has been provided for without any covering before his Lord. And because this winding sheet will be their covering in the next world it must be without spot or blemish, for whatever defilement is in it here will appear there. We had an illustration of this last year when in a shooting affair a man was killed. The accident happened near sunset and as usual they set about to bury the dead man at once, but he bled so long and so continuously that it was several hours before he could be properly washed, shrouded and buried.

Accompanying the shrouding is the perfuming the body, the amount varying according to different sects and wealth. Spicy herbs, incense and powders are some of the most common in use. The winding sheet is slit so as to lend itself to proper and secure winding and then the top and the bottom are tied much as we tie a sack of wheat. The Shiah's untie the winding sheet after the corpse has been placed in position in the grave so that the dead body can move about to pray. The rosary is put under the head and a cake of mud from holy Kerbela is placed near at hand. If the forehead rests on this holy mud during the prostrations in prayer the prayers will be much more efficacious. Two date branches are placed alongside the corpse, one at each side of the body, to serve as crutches to the dead for getting up to pray. The Shiah's also put some sand in the mouth of the corpse, which is its confession to its Lord that it was made of dust and must return to dust. In connection with their belief as to their covering in the next world there is a tradition that man's covering before the fall was of the material of which our finger nails are made, but when he fell this was gradually taken away from him and only the nails were left to remind him of what he once was before the fall and they are a promise to him of what his covering will again be in the next world. This very probably explains why the waste nails are so carefully disposed of. On Friday, the Moslem Sunday, nails are trimmed, great care being taken not to lose any of them, and these are then wrapped up in a piece of cloth and buried, and as they do so the Shiah's say, "Take your due, O devil, and the compassionate one will testify against you."

Then on the resurrection day God will require all these nail-trimmings, and woe to him who has not carefully preserved them.

There are no undertakers in Arabia. Near the washing place there are always several biers which any can use. These and the flat stones necessary to build up the grave are supplied by voluntary contribution by those who have the means to do so and who want to lay up merit. The bier resembles a ladder and as a rule the corpse of a man is placed on this bier without any covering besides a mat or wrap around the shroud. A woman's bier differs from a man's in that a fitted railing about a foot high, with corner posts, is placed around the bier and when the corpse is placed on it the whole is covered with a large cloth. It is great merit to help carry a bier even though but for a few paces, but there are always noticeably more bearers at the funeral of a rich and influential man than at that of a poor man. The Sunnis have no prayers or ceremony at their funerals. After placing the body in position in the grave, they put in place, at the head and feet, the two stones called the "shehadeh," witness. The Shiah, after the body has been washed, carry it to the mosque, where they have prayers outside, standing west of the building, because that is towards Mecca. In Bahrein the men usually stand in three rows, though it is said that there may also be five or seven rows, but the number must be uneven. The corpse is placed on the ground before them while the men all face west and say prayers for the dead. The numbers of these vary, as also later at the grave, according to the station and financial condition of the deceased. Prayers are the same for men and women and are said for all who are ten years and older. Women do not follow a corpse to the grave at any time except for two or three who, in the case of a dead woman, must place the corpse in the grave and undo the winding sheet. When carrying the bier the Shiah, as much as possible, try to keep the head towards the north.

As has been said, the corpse must be carried quickly. The bearers are constantly exchanging places, those who relieve beginning at the front and all are thus gradually worked towards the back, and these again in turn run forwards and begin anew there. All chant together as they walk hurriedly, "La illahu illa allah wa Mohammed er-rasoul allah," "There is no God but God and Mohammed is the prophet of God." When the grave is reached the bier is placed on the ground and the bearers sit down waiting for the body to be properly placed. Previously to this the grave has been dug, the length of the body being measured with a stick. The upper part of the grave is about four by six feet, and three feet deep. In the center a trench is dug which is about a foot and a half or two feet wide and deep. In this the body is placed on its side, facing Mecca, and the winding sheet is unfastened so that the dead man can sit up to pray and to be interviewed. If there happens to be a grave of older date where the new one is being dug, any bones remaining are carelessly put aside and when the new corpse has been placed in position the bones of the former corpse are thrown into the trench with the fresh corpse.

When the body has been placed in position in this trench, large flat stones are placed over the top of it, forming a roof, and in this roof is left a small hole about as big as an orange. Then the mullah bends down over this hole and instructs the dead as follows: "Oh, A——, when the interviewing angels come, say 'God is my God, Mohammed is my prophet, Ali is my redeemer, the Koran is my book and Mecca is my kibla.'" (Kibla means the place to which one turns when praying.) Then after a bit this mullah, personifying the dead man and speaking in the first person, replies, "I witness that God is my God, Mohammed is my prophet, Ali is my redeemer, the Koran is my book and Mecca is my kibla," and



FUNERAL OF A PROMINENT MOHAMMEDAN

Immediately when the last word is uttered a handful of plaster is slammed over the hole so as to keep the testimony in the grave. Then the grave is filled and built up, in some cases quite neatly, and the stones of testimony are put in place. Water is poured over the grave and serves two purposes, the one is to cool the departed spirit and the other is for the bearers who gather around the grave while the ground is wet, and all put their fingers into the mud while they say prayers for the dead. After this helwa, dates and bread are distributed to all present and after they have eaten they go to their homes.

When the bearers have gone away from the grave about forty paces, two angels called Nakir and Munkir come to interview the dead man. First they smell of his feet and if there is on them the smell of sacred soil, especially that of holy Kerbela, the owner of said feet need pass no

further examination. But if these feet have not gone on a pilgrimage to these holy cities the dead man must be interviewed. Each member of the body is then questioned separately as to what it has done or not done, the central thought in every question being whether the laws of Islam have been observed. If the dead man answers badly or incorrectly he is severely beaten, so much perhaps as to make the bones of the body crack, but if the answers are correct he receives no punishment. After this interview all are passed on and at this point the statements of the Moslems become very hazy, uncertain and contradictory. Some say that the dead go on to heaven and that on the resurrection morning God takes them out of heaven again, whither it is not stated, and then compels them to walk over the straight way which is as narrow as a hair and which is the bridge between heaven and hell, and those whose good deeds exceed their evil ones will pass over safely, but those whose deeds have been evil will fall off and into hell-fire, supposedly forever; but here too is contradiction, for every Moslem expects to inherit Paradise some day and this is generally taught when they say that all who have given the testimony will enter this blessed abode. There are others who believe that the souls of the dead pass on to a sort of a purgatory where they remain for shorter or longer periods according to their faithfulness in repeating their prayers while living and especially according to the number of prayers which their friends repeat for them after they are dead. All the Shiah have some definite prayers for the dead immediately after the funeral. Those who have means to pay for the same at once erect a hut over the grave and a mullah reads from the Koran as long as the relatives wish or can afford. This mullah reads almost continuously but when anyone passes by he must wait till this party is out of hearing, otherwise the credit of those words will go the passer-by and not to the dead man. If there are no prayers at the grave some one or more pray for the dead at the house and many all during the year visit the cemetery, particularly on Thursday, and pray at the graves of their own dead, or if they wish to obtain merit, over any grave, such a prayer securing a double blessing, one for the living and one for the occupant of the grave. The graves are usually decorated with small white shells, the kind which they use to beautify their compounds, and others bring food, spices and perfumes to the graves because these will give pleasure to the departed spirits in the other world. Also water is poured over the graves which cools the spirits which are in torment. This deed is in support of the theory that there is a purgatory and though the Sunni Moslems do not do these things, they do say that it is not good to weep for a child of eight years or less because each tear is as fat to the fire to that soul in torment. All Moslems have some prayers for the dead at some time or other and they also have distribution of food in the name of the dead. There is a set day for this in the Moslem calendar which is called "yaum el-nafeleh," which is "the day of supererogatory deeds." Such prayers and almsgiving are additional merit for the dead who may perchance be a bit short in their account with God.

Mourning is not strictly observed by any except widows and that is an act of necessity rather than choice. They are not allowed to come out of the house for a period of four months and ten days and during all that time they are not allowed to see any man except an immediate relative; their dress is of blue cloth and no jewels or other decorations are worn. This is a very strict law in Islam and is generally observed whether the husband who has died was faithful or unfaithful, according to the Moslem interpretation of that term. A man consoles himself after the death of his wife or wives by taking unto himself another, sometimes within a week. The usual mourning of the family is from three to seven days during which time friends are expected to call on them. If they fail to do so the family is deeply offended. For all but widows, black is the usual color for mourning.

The following is quoted from Hughes' Dictionary of Islam, on the burial of a "wali" or holy man. "Very often, it is said, a 'wali' impels the bearers to a particular spot. The following anecdote, describing an ingenious mode of puzzling a dead saint in a case of this kind, was related to me by one of my friends. Some men were lately bearing the corpse of a 'wali' to a tomb prepared for it in the great cemetery on the north of the metropolis, but on arriving at the gate called Babu'n-Nasr, which leads to the cemetery, they found themselves unable to proceed farther, from the cause above-mentioned. 'It seems,' said one of the bearers, 'that the sheikh is determined not to be buried in the cemetery of Babu'n-Nasr, and what shall we do?' They were all much perplexed, but being as obstinate as the dead saint himself they did not immediately yield to his caprice. Retreating a few paces and then advancing with a quick step, they thought by such an impetus to force the corpse through the gateway, but their efforts were unsuccessful and the same experiment they repeated several times. They then placed the bier on the ground to rest and to consult, and one of them, beckoning away his comrades to a distance beyond the hearing of the dead saint, said to them, 'Let us take up the bier again, and turn it around several times till the sheikh becomes dizzy; he then will not know in what direction we are going, and we may take him easily through the gate.' This they did; the saint was puzzled as they expected and quietly buried in the place he had so striven to avoid."

