

Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Religious Beliefs About Death

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People the world over have historically had different perceptions of death and ways to deal with the loss of a loved one. People across different races, religions, ages, and cultures treat death or [deal with grief](#) in diverse ways. Grief is an individual's or a group's reaction to the loss of someone or something, particularly one people tend to have a bond with. People respond differently to grief, whether socially, emotionally, physically, or through how they behave. The different reactions people exhibit also depend on what they have lost, which result from people's diverse cultures, ages, personalities, spiritual beliefs, and religious practices.

People's attitude towards death is greatly shaped by their faith and religion, either positively or negatively. Religious people tend to exhibit a more consistent attitude toward death when their level of fear of death is measured by them. A belief in the afterlife leads to a coherent understanding of situations relating to death. In this paper, we will compare Islam and Ethiopian culture with the way people treat or react to the death of someone.

Ethiopian Culture

The Ethiopian people have elaborate and intricate traditions concerning bereavement and death. People take death seriously and personally even though it is a part of life, just like famine, war, and disease. In Ethiopia, when someone dies, there are particular characteristics that people in Ethiopia's rural region have that are unique, in addition to other signs of grief that are convenient to their society. The reaction to grief is generally the same, but there are a few culturally sanctioned rituals that may differ across different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups in the country. The rituals of the dead in southern Ethiopia, for example, are a long process where different ethnic groups co-exist together. There are culturally prescribed rituals for managing the funeral process, handling the body, and commemorating death (Seyoum, 2015).

When someone dies in the neighborhood, one can immediately notice it. One person has the job of blowing a horn and letting people in the surrounding area know that a person has died so everyone can donate money for it. The funeral costs are covered by money collected from the surrounding community. The horn is blown even if someone dies at midnight, without any exceptions. Death is a big deal in Ethiopia. No one is allowed to go to work if his father, mother, sister, or uncle dies for at least a week. The colleagues will respect when one takes time out from work and will collect money to donate to the family to deal with difficult times (Cacciatore, 2015).

In Ethiopia, people are supposed to cry out loudly in the morning. It is a sign that you were adored

during your life if people cry at one's funeral. At some funerals, there are special funeral singers who will sing songs or tell stories about the deceased if people are having difficulty finding tears. In parts of Ethiopia, some people are expected to cause themselves physical pain in mourning; it can be beating the chest or scrapping the face with thorny fruit. This prolonged grief and intense initial reaction help families cope with the tragedy; they go through all these phases of mourning in order for families to accept reality and bring healing that may otherwise come after a long journey. If some people fail to express grief or deviate from the norm, then feelings of guilt may arise.

The funeral in Ethiopia is considered a significant event in both rural and urban communities. It follows strict customs and rules and is a big public affair that may be attended by thousands of people who follow the procession to a mass gathering at the burial site. Prayers are recited for the deceased by the priest, and a choir sings to pay their respects. This mourning can continue for several weeks or even months while acquaintances or remaining distant relatives continue to arrive to offer condolences. The tent remains up for at least a week, and neighbors often make repeated visits to sit with the deceased's families and sit together with them on the floor. Some close relatives stay overnight with the family to give them company (Kihlström, 2015).

Unlike in many cultures, the wife and the husband are not buried together; they are buried in a place that is more relevant to them or their family. A monetary donation is made by community members to help them with their funeral expenses. There are local community groups designed to raise funeral funds, of which families are members. There may be about 50 to 100 families in a group that holds monthly meetings to make decisions regarding the fund. They also assist in supplying chairs, tables, funeral supplies, cookware, and other items (Goldade, 2017).

Following a funeral procession, there is a gathering that leads towards the burial location, which is often near the cemetery or church. Ethiopian coffins are usually very colorful, with an outer lining made of purple, red, yellow, or green fabric embroidered. Orthodox Christians often choose their own location for burial, which may be an ancestral location. Due to these conditions, they may not eventually be buried by their spouse.

The deceased's family usually hosts guests for three days after the funeral. The guests come and bring bread and Injera. The typical food includes a container of wot (a type of stew), a container of Injera (a type of pita bread), and homemade bread. The bread is cut by the priests and passed to the beggars or to the church. Giving food to the poor is considered a good thing and forgotten in the deceased's honor. They put a tent in their garden if they don't have space in their house or in the outer portion so people can drop by. The visitors are to be fed for three days at least according to the customs, or sometimes even longer, and there is usually a strong social pressure on the family to do so.

Feeding visitors is also one of the most prominent customs, which takes at least three days, and it can get even longer at times. It has been found that families are normally under great pressure from society to perform all these activities. A tradition of washing the feet of a family or the ones who are

in pain is also commonly practiced. Through this activity, they believe they bring a sense of sincerity to the mourning or grieving souls (Salambo, 2014). They have a tradition in Ethiopia that once a woman gets widowed, she can never get married again. The food is brought to the church by the middle or lower-middle-class families at the funerals, and that food is shared among the poor people. On the other hand, rich families arrange funeral ceremonies in their homes. In these ceremonies, livestock or goats are butchered and made for the guests. These ceremonies are more or less similar to the other religions (Bladen, 1999)

Islam

Islam has been the world's fastest-growing religion, with an adult population that has doubled just in the US in less than two decades. Death in Islam happens by the Will of Allah (God) and is a part of life. The basis of Islam's view of death is the belief that one should take comfort in the fact that life and death happen in accordance with the Will of Allah. The Souls depart from the body and return back to God. The community is very supportive during the death of a fellow member. The formal mourning period in Islam is three days. During this, relatives and friends visit the deceased's family to offer condolences. Islam stipulates many rules during the mourning phase; however, some variations in cultures can be observed. Most of the time the expressions of grief are restrained and quiet. It is allowed to cry; however, screaming, wailing, tearing clothes, or striking cheeks are not allowed because they suggest that one is displeased with Allah's Will and Decision and that performing rituals of *Jahiliyyah* (Pre-Islamic period in Arab lands, the Period of Ignorance) such as wailing or hurting oneself actually causes the deceased to suffer. It is also viewed as a test from Allah, who may test a believer's faith through the death of a loved one. The loss is to be born patiently, and Muslims are expected to accept Allah's decision. This patience is part of the good deeds that the believer accumulates in his Book of Deeds. The one with faith and more good deeds will enter *Jannah* (the everlasting abode or paradise) after the Day of Judgment. Children who have not reached puberty will go directly into *Jannah* without being held accountable for their deeds (Farooqi, 2018).

If a Muslim child has died, people respond in different manners. It is required to recite the following verse from the Quran:

“To Allah, we belong, and to Him is our return”
(2:156).

Non-Muslims usually express condolences by expressing their sorrow and may sit silently with the deceased's family for a while. It is encouraging to prepare food for the family of the deceased and

welcome practice. People who know the person mention and cite his good qualities to inspire others to be good and follow the straight path in order to lead a righteous life and hence attain a good reward in the hereafter (Abugideiri, 2010). The Quran is often recited and can be comforting. Those who experience the loss of a child may take comfort in studying the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (May Peace and Blessings of God be upon him), those who promise rewards and the pleasure of Allah for the parents who are patient at the death of their Child and accept Allah's decision.

Muslims have a ritual in that they do not wait to bury the dead body once the death is declared. They quickly start preparing the body for burial. Close relatives can take part in giving wash to the body, which is also considered the ritual that purifies the body and prepares it for a long and never-ending journey. Muslims keep the body pure and without any makeup, enhancements, or other embalming products. The body is covered with white cloth, and a Janazah, known as a funeral prayer, is made at the mosques or on open ground. A huge number of community members and relatives participated. All these people must do wudu, also known as ablution, in which hands, feet, and face are washed. The women are liable to keep their heads covered with hijab, and they do not participate in this prayer, as only men are allowed. Just after the prayer, the body is shifted to the graveyard where the body is buried, keeping the head towards the qiblah and feet in the opposite direction. The body is buried without the coffin in more cases, and only in a few cases in which the body's condition is not good the coffin is buried with it (Mohammad Monib, 2013).

Congregational prayers and other communal activities at the Mosque also provide comfort to Muslims that serve as the community center for religious or social gatherings. The Friday congregational services are held at Mosques as well as the five daily obligatory prayers. Prayers are a source of comfort for the believer in general and especially for the bereaved family as it helps them connect with Allah and feel assured by his presence. They are reminded that, ultimately, they and the other people, too, will meet their Creator.

My personal views are exactly according to the theological beliefs of Islam. There is indeed a heaven and a hell after death, and we are answerable to Allah for the deeds we do in this life. I strongly hold that my belief in Allah, along with good deeds, can take me to Jannah after death, when all humans are raised up to stand before Allah, accountable for their deeds. The belief particularly helps me deal with difficulties in life, grants me a purpose and meaning, and allows me to deal with the acceptance of death for myself and others as the Will of Allah. For people who do not share my beliefs, I respect them as human beings and am obligated by my religion to deal kindly and justly with them. But the fate of one's afterlife depends on the correct belief in Allah and good deeds.

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