

Cultural roots of some funeral habits in Maghreb societies:  
symbolic images aimed at facing the fear of death

الجذور الثقافية لبعض العادات الجنائزية في المجتمعات المغاربية، كصور رمزية  
لمواجهة الخوف من الموت

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**Abstract (English):**

In this article, we discuss the common and widespread social and cultural funeral customs among the societies of the Arab Maghreb countries, and their historical origins that go beyond the dominant religion (Islam) to certain customs inherited from paganism, Christianity and even Judaism. The study relied on the method of qualitative analysis, and the observation with participation of the rituals and customs prevailing in the aforementioned societies, and concluded that these rituals have a human origin, which is the expression of the anguish and fear of death, which remains a secret that has not been revealed and the verification of life after death. We have also concluded that these rituals are an attempt to overcome this fear by adopting symbolic customs that take place during mourning and burial ceremonies.

**Keywords:** Anthropology of death; Psychology of death; Maghreb societies; Funeral rites; Symbolization.

ملخص باللغة العربية

يتناول هذا المقال بالدراسة أهم العادات الاجتماعية والثقافية الجنائزية المنتشرة والمشاركة بين مجتمعات دول المغرب العربي، وأصولها التاريخية التي تتعدى الديانة السائدة (الإسلام) إلى بعض العادات المتوارثة عن الوثنية والمسيحية وحتى اليهودية. اعتمدت الدراسة على منهج التحليل الكيفي، والملاحظة بالمشاركة للطقوس والعادات السائدة في المجتمعات المذكورة، وتوصلت إلى أن لهذه الطقوس أصل إنساني واحد هو التعبير عن القلق والخوف من الموت، الذي يظل سر الم يتم كشف كنهه والتحقق من حياة ما بعد الموت. كما توصلنا إلى أن هذه الطقوس هي محاولة للتغلب على هذا الخوف بتبني عادات رمزية تقام خلال الحداد ومراسيم الدفن.

كلمات مفتاحية: أنثروبولوجيا الموت؛ سيكولوجية الموت؛ المجتمعات المغاربية؛ الطقوس الجنائزية؛ الرمزية.

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## 1- Introduction

The concept of death remains, despite all the great progress that humanity has known, an almost taboo and enigmatic notion both for science and philosophy, and for medicine in recent decades. At least in developed countries, insofar as medico-surgical progress has succeeded in sparing us many causes of "arbitrary" and avoidable death, namely developing children (through vaccines and preventive treatments), maternal mortality during childbirth, or those of young individuals affected by acute infectious diseases.

Faced with the fear of dying, and this ambiguity of human finitude and the questions that human beings have been asking themselves for millennia (where does man go when he dies? Is there really another life after death?...etc.), man has adopted certain funerary habits, which vary according to the society, culture and religion to which he belongs.

To this end, we find certain common funeral habits among Maghreb societies, which are not totally Arab-Muslim despite the dominance of the Islamic religion and Arab culture in these countries. We have therefore wondered (on the occasion of this article) about their cultural origins, since these societies have known several cultures which have left their traces during their history, as well as what is universal in these habits, since certain customs represent a reaction unconscious in the face of death, which we find in almost all human beings.

Before talking about these societies, we will first discuss the definition of death, its psychology, and the history of the funeral rites of the different cultures that have passed through the Maghreb.

## 2- Definition of death:

Death is a "cessation of life, considered as a phenomenon inherent in the human or animal condition" (Le Robert)

It is also "a state of non-life, of sudden and total cessation of all physiological and mental functions; knowing that life depends on the proper functioning of a number of functions, including breathing (in the broad sense, including the distribution of oxygen through the bloodstream), digestion and excretion (kidneys, liver). According to which of the three systems is altered by multiple causes.

Death is a concept qualifying the state of a biological organism having ceased to live. This state is characterized by a definitive break in the coherence of the vital processes (nutrition, respiration, etc.) necessary for the homeostatic maintenance of the organism in question, which distinguishes death from a temporary alteration as in the case of hibernation or certain freezing.

### 3- Psychology of death

Several authors have worked on death (Samuel L.-2019, Kastenbaum-2006, Baqué-2011, Josée Jaques-2002, ....), in order to explain what happens in humans in their relationship with this phenomenon undesirable and enigmatic. According to **Freud**, the human being believes himself to be immortal and doesn't unconsciously believe in his own death, by the mechanism of denial. Psychologists often study psychological grief, as people's attitude towards the death of someone close to them, or even the death anxiety aroused by an announcement of serious illness or an obvious death in the near future. This can lead to a most complicated psychic state which is psychic amazement. An amazement event according **Didier-Weill** is sudden and unforeseen (like thunder) and causes speech to be suspended. The provisional character of this suspension is specific to astonishment, while in amazement the subject settles in for the duration. The word (speech) is then engaged in a loss of speech from which he can no longer recover. He is (the speech) then engaged in a loss of speech from which he can no longer recover. He is therefore in amazement and bewilderment. Stunning is thus given as the subjective time by which the signifier, by proving to be because of the jouissance of the Other' (**Lacan**) translates such an abduction of the spirit. The staggering event (the announcement of a probable death for example) weighs traumatically, confronts the subject with the unthinkable end of his life. This weight of the traumatic real will expel the subject from his desiring dynamic. The subject will obey an injunction imposing on him to reduce himself to waste: "You are just that, a being going towards your end, towards death! "

Faced with all this, man adopts certain symbolic rites in order to appease his anguish, his fears and his sadness, as well as to express his will to come out of the state of amazement. These rites have always been developed throughout the history of humanity.

### 4- History of death and symbolic rites

Since the end of the Middle Ages, historians have often tried to draw a portrait of death through the centuries. They analyzed ancient writings on death, pictures and paintings, cemeteries with their monuments and their epitaphs. They wondered what had been the evolution of the experience, the feelings, in particular the anguish, the funeral rites and the grief.

In antiquity, life on earth was considered as a passage preparing for eternity (ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, etc.). The face of the deceased is exposed, uncovered, then, from the 1st century, it is hidden from view, sometimes represented by a statue, especially if the latter is a prince or a noble. At this time, death is experienced as impotence, everyone is destined for physical

destruction and must renounce wealth and honors, which leads to melancholy. In the Middle Ages, a passionate love for life and the world is expressed; the sermons and poems express a feeling of fragility and the painting represents the decompensation of bodies.

## 5- Death in Sub-Sahara Africa

The Maghreb countries have their African dimension, since they are located in North Africa. Since the dawn of time, the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa have interacted mainly because of trade.

L.V Thomas, specialist in death in black Africa, recalls that the populations located south of the Sahara experience the lowest rates of life expectancy (20 and 25 years) and the highest rate of infant mortality. They have experienced deportations, genocides and multiple epidemics (currently AIDS is wreaking havoc there). Death is present everywhere. It arouses a curious mixture of fatality and anguish. "Death is thought, above all, in terms of passage, of transition, either that the deceased becomes an ancestor, or that he reincarnates, or that the constituent elements of his person are redistributed differently in the flow of life". (Thomas, L.V, 1975, 108)

When the funeral ceremonies, which can take on the appearance of a celebration (to entertain the dead), are over, when you have freed yourself from your anguish, from your grief by expressing your feelings, it is important to bring the dead back to life. by making sacrifices, by working on his crops, by assuring him of offspring, by washing and watering the statuette representing him.

What is striking in its cultures is that the anguish of dying-badly seems stronger than that of dying in itself. To die well is to die at home which will allow the realization of all the funeral rites; die very old or in the prime of life if one is a warrior; having had many children, dying in front of his own; having lived in accordance with the law of the ancestors, having prepared for his death, for example, having amassed enough goods to have a rich funeral. Certain circumstances are infamous (accident, illness like leprosy, being the victim of a sorcerer if he is not punished). The worst is that of the young woman dying in childbirth of her first child: she is not mourned and her widower will have to purify himself sexually (by rape) to be able to sow a new wife. Real therapies are put in place to combat anxiety and guilt, where the imagination is put back in its preeminent place. (Ibid., 109)

The grief that admits that death is not so much individual as collective, affects the whole village community, the family, the surviving spouse. It is important that he expires his real or imaginary crime; did he not have death wishes on the deceased? The practices of grief preserving

the following from the possible vengeance of the dead. These practices are also an accompaniment of the deceased by the widow or widower who retires to his home as in the grave. Social grief invades, in a way psychological grief without always worrying about whether the latter is real or simulated. "This deceased sublimated and found will maintain with the group privileged contributions ensuring the reproduction of the community: observance and durability of the Law, fertilization of maternal mortality during childbirth, herds and fields". (Ibid., 112)

## **6- Death in Judaism**

The presence of Jews in the Maghreb dates back more than two millennia, while their cultural imprints are obvious, especially after the refuge of the Andalusian communities driven out by the Spanish at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century.

Death in Judaic culture is considered inevitable, it is the divine presence, which manifests itself, it is the "kiss of Death" which takes the soul to God, this soul which God has lent to the body, which comes dust, and eventually returns there. Death is an integral part of Creation, opening the way to new life and making Creation continuous. Death is a way to be forgiven for one's faults and, after this ordeal, to enter into eternal life. In other words, in Judaism, the fault of Adam is not in question; death is not the consequence, it is part of creation. After Death, man enters a better world, the eternal soul goes back to God by admitting the resurrection which must occur at the end of time, when the Messiah will have come to earth. He who confesses his faults to God before dying already has a share of eternal life. (Thomas, L.V., 1975, 51)

In the Talmud, it is said that this world is like a vestibule next to the world to come (4-16). Death is the door that separates everyone from a perfectly good world. Death is the price paid for a new birth, for the continuity of generations. It involves the rise towards God of the incorporeal soul where it will be judged. The righteous will be in paradise, the wicked in hell, but above all, at the end of time, the soul will once again be returned to the body by the resurrection of the dead who will then be able to enjoy the world to come. (Ibid., 56)

## **7- Death in Christianity**

Admittedly, Christianity was banished with the arrival of Muslims in the 6th century, but the Byzantine era nevertheless left its mark on North African societies. Period known especially by the spread of Christianity as the dominant religion at this time in the history of these societies.

For Christians as for all other men, death is a tragedy. It leaves in the solitude of absence. Unlike the animal, and this is what founds his greatness, his dignity, man knows he is destined to

die. Death gives the price to life. All the gestures of man, the least of his choices, find there, in their irreversible character, a weight of eternity.

The dead are invisible beings, but not absent. Their life isn't taken away from them, it is changed. Their death is not an end but a beginning. It is for each, a certainty of eternal life, that also of being in connection with all those who have possessed it. God full of tenderness forgives sinners; the dead are in Him and through Him present to the living. For the baptized, a central datum of revelation is its belief in the Resurrection of Christ. God, for Christians, is a Father who loves all men; only those who have refused, in complete freedom, this love will not be able to have access to Him. The Catholic Church, which formerly refused religious funerals to certain categories of people (suicides for example), has considerably relaxed its position, considering that only God can judge. Life is a gift from God for eternal life, it is the originality and foundation of Christian Faith, Hope and Love. It is for this reason that she refuses the termination of pregnancy, that she condemns euthanasia. She is very reserved about therapeutic relentlessness, which is a way of stealing her death from the patient since it most often occurs in unconsciousness and the supervised solitude of a resuscitation room. (Aries, P, 1975, 63)

This Christian vision of death which should nourish hope is currently confronted with a secular vision of death from which hope is absent and which undermines traditional beliefs, even if the vast majority of people still say they are Christian.

## **8- Death in Islam**

We now come to the dominant religion of Maghreb societies in this contemporary era. It is a notion that differs notably from Christianity in Islam is that the notion of sin (original, individual, redemption) is not central. We find in the Koranic exegeses a discourse taken up by the popular representatives, on good and evil, promise and threat. What is first is belief in Allah and the text (Koran), fidelity, justice.

Death is not denied, it is inevitable, written (obligatory). The believer has certainty about his post-mortem future based on his actions towards good or evil. It is between the opposition: believers and unbelievers, faithful and unfaithful, that the apprehension of death takes place. The latter is not conceived as an ultimate end, a total separation, but a transition, a passage to a beyond. (Elaroussi, K, 1989, 14)

Human must adore his creator and give him thanks continually. Man is not free, he becomes so; its future is actualized in a present always open to the dimension of the future. The Muslim is entirely responsible for working for Good or Evil. God is omnipresent, omnipotent,

omniscient and the believer owes him respect and submission, praise and adoration. The "shahada", profession of faith in God, the Unique, is essential. Death will therefore be perceived as communion, a fusion with the Unique and, in the mystical imagination, as absolute desire. It is only an avatar of life, a progressive event due to the separation of the soul and the body, to be considered as completed when the dissolution of the body has come to an end.

In the imagination, death is filled with intoxicating beverages, luxury, various satisfactions. The idea of eternity is consolidated by the following Quranic verse: "Every soul will suffer death. You receive your rewards on the day of resurrection. He who will have avoided the fire and who will enter paradise, that one will be very happy, because life here is only a deceptive enjoyment. (Qur'an-sura III, 185)

In Islam, the remains of the dead person will be buried after having benefited from the funeral (funeral prayer).

### **9- Death, North African societies and singular symbolization**

A cultural reading of funeral habits in the face of death in North African societies (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya), and an analysis of funeral rites in the societies of these countries, led us to put our finger on the work of symbolization which is made in this respect, in the light of course of the different cultures associated with it, namely: European (Christian) since these countries experienced Byzantine occupation for centuries, African (Sahelian and sub-Saharan Africa) because no one can neglect the Maghrebian heritage and its geographical and historical belonging to the African continent, and of course: that of the Jewish community, which has been part of these societies since the dawn of time (and still was for certain countries such as Morocco).

Death in the countries of the Greater Maghreb (namely: Mauritania, Kingdom of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) is not only apprehended - like several regions of the world - as a strictly individual event, but placed at the heart of reality social. The community resorts to a system of symbolic and codified rites which opposes the destructive disorder created by death and which allows it to manage its anguish.

The idea of defilement of impurity for the corpse and the household requires a purification which joins other recommendations concerning the health and the protection of the social body. A final toilet that is done, even in hospitals, will be purifying and will allow us to meet God in a state of purity.

A number of lavish expenses will be incurred as in other rites of passage (circumcisions, marriage) and families will sometimes go into debt for a long time, which **L.V. Thomas** explains by the "need to atone which would be only a form of desperate desire to overcompensate for the dissolving power of death, the expenses incurred attesting to the social weight and indirectly enhancing the reputation of the lineage and of the whole community". (L.V. Thomas, 1985, 84)

We can therefore say with **K. Elaroussi**, that death "is indeed the support of social ethics and of believers; by studying the practices and rites with regard to death, we can discover a part of the social experience.". (Elaroussi, K, 1989, 12)

As for customs in most Maghreb countries: a dying person should not be left alone. We must remain at the bedside of the dying until the departure of the soul. A soft light (candle, night light) recalls this departure after death all night spent on earth and before the burial of the body.

When death is certain, one of the relatives, an Imam if possible, must close the eyes and the mouth of the deceased; his arms must be extended along the body lying on the ground, and the deceased must spend the night clean (undergoing a final toilet) and dressed in white, covered with a sheet. If there are mirrors in the room, they are covered as well as in all the rooms of the funeral home. Out of respect for the deceased, silence is recommended to all those present around him. No coffee or food will be served; as long as the deceased is at home. The deceased must be taken out of the room, towards his burial; at the exit door with the head first; for fear of being followed by another member of the family if they are taken out in the opposite direction (by the feet). A candle is lit in the room where he has been.

It should be noted that there are some customs in common between North Africans and Jews, such as: the color of bereavement (black), the covering of mirrors, and the luminescence of the mortuary room... the origin of this resemblance is, obviously the influence of the Jewish community, chased out of Andalusia in the 15th century, and which found refuge in North African societies by integrating easily.

To this effect; we can clearly see the "obsessive" aspect in these rites and mores, namely:

- magical thinking (lighting the candle, etc.)

- the ritual imposed by the culture and the social mores inherited from the ancestors; such as having the corpse "compulsorily" leave a room by the head first for fear of being followed by another dead person from the same family, i.e. this mores prevents death from touching a other member living in the same house, while it is not at all logical and even the executors of this rite do not necessarily believe in this reliability, but they do it as the same. On the other hand, there is no relationship between these mores and religion (Islam) because the latter determined the



"official" funeral rites from the "ultimate cleaning" of the remains until their burial, including his position (lying on his left side, face towards Mecca).

These "illogical" mores are intended to comfort and allow people to face their anxieties aroused by the death of a loved one, which constitutes an anxiety-provoking event for all family members, see all those who knew him. (friends, neighbors, work colleagues, etc.); in order to satisfy a fundamental and early need, the need for security in this case.. these acts allow the assurance that this primary psychological need has been met. In this case, the subject feels protected by having performed these acts, and believes he is in control of his own destiny; after having felt threatened by this "death" which has visited the "abode" and which will therefore be able to revisit it once more.

We also note the manifestation of splitting as a primitive mechanism, because according to several authors: death is not representable for the unconscious. The subject (whoever he is) feels threatened by the terrible outcome, his ego inexorably confronted with an anguish of death, very often increased when the person sees a loved one die. The natural cleavage between knowledge and belief which is built against this fear of death and which inhabits everyone – by saying to oneself that "I know very well that I am mortal, but deep down I am convinced of my immortality" – will be modified. with assistance at the death of a loved one or at their funeral.

These troubled funeral moments where the social and the intimate are poorly differentiated, the borders between the inside and the outside of the Ego, had formerly required a framework by rites (L.V. Thomas, 1985, 114), these latter will be adopted, improved and adapted to the culture specific to the country of the great Maghreb over the centuries. The individual did not have to decide this, but would have to submit to it. He could let himself go. This allowed people and communities to experience their dying and bereaved state. What is evident now is that these rites constituted safeguards and guides, a kind of transitional envelope between oneself and others (Chouvier, B, 2000, 19), a collective support echoing the fantasies and the work of singular symbolization. (Aubert-Godard, A, 2006, 225)

### **\*-Conclusion**

Life and death are part of the world's destiny plan. Life, like everything that exists, is a gift of nature, and life being the most precious thing, man has the duty to preserve it and to procreate to ensure the survival of the human species. Man must therefore maintain good health. As for funeral customs (in the Maghreb), they are divided into necessary and objective acts (the final toilet; burial, etc.), and other arbitrary ones (candle lighting, position of the body when it leaves

the room, etc.) which find their roots in the different cultures and religions that have crossed its societies during their long history: monotheists and pagans, African, Middle Eastern and European etc.

These customs are certainly arbitrary, but often make it possible to appease the anguish of death in people having a relationship with the deceased. Moreover, satisfying their need for security, by constituting safeguards and guides, or rather a sort of transitional envelope between oneself and others, or again: a collective support echoing the fantasies and the work of symbolization, the within the group which is none other than the society to which it belongs, assuming all its ambivalences.

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