

## **Islam and the Environment: Implications of Islamic Funeral Practice on Environmental Sustainability**

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### **Abstract**

*Islam recognizes the importance of preserving and conserving the environment. The Environment in Islam is sacred because of the fact that it is created by Allah. Central to understanding this view of the environment in Islam is the oneness principle. The Creator says in the Qur'an: He is Allah, the One and Only. Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none unto Him (112: 1-4). Nature is connected to the divine and must be respected; nature and its resources are sacred as a sign of God Almighty's creation and must be protected and respected for that reason. Death, on the other hand, is a very painful and emotional time, yet one that may be filled with hope and mercy. Muslims believe that death is a departure from the life of this world, but not the end of a person's existence. This paper highlights the environmental implications of funeral rituals in Islam. It looks into the concepts of environmental sustainability, and presents an overview of Islamic funeral practices upon which the implications of environmental sustainability are based.*

**Key Words:** *Allah; Environment, Islam, Funeral, Sustainability.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Environment is the sum total of physical components surrounding living organisms, including social and political factors which provide conditions for development and growth of those organisms (Ekpo, 2016). It could be viewed as a set of interrelated systems – biophysical, social, economic, and political which man transforms to meet his needs (Fien & Gough, 1996). The biophysical system provides life-support systems for all life. A social system provides rules and structures that enable people to live together. An economic system provides ways of producing, distributing, and consumption of goods and services. The political system makes decisions on structures of power regarding the exploration and exploitation of economic goods and services for the benefit of citizens. Environment is therefore a super-system which every other system on the planet earth depend on for their sustenance. Hence, whatever is harmful to the environment is harmful to humans (Bjerler, n.d).

In the middle of the 20th century, the planet was seen from space for the first time with a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery, and soils (Morelli, 2011). Humanity's inability to fit its activities into that pattern is changing planetary systems, fundamentally. Many such changes are accompanied by life-threatening hazards. This new reality, from which there is no escape, must be recognized - and managed (Cowen, 1987). Perhaps, this is one of the factors that prompted the United Nations to integrate in her Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs), at the Millennium Summit in 2000, the seventh goal tagged: to ensure environmental sustainability, with the following targets:

- i. Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources;
- ii. Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss;
- iii. Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation; and
- iv. Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

To achieved MDGs goals all hands must be on deck; every nation, individual, society, religion, and community is expected to work assiduously to achieve this goals.

Islam teaches that Muslims have a responsibility to protect the environment, as stewards of the earth that Allah, God, created. It teaches that God created all things in perfect balance and measurement, there is a purpose behind all living and non-living things, and each specie has an important role to play in the balance. God gave human beings certain knowledge, which allows them to use the natural world to meet their needs, but not given free license to exploit it (Huda, 2012). Muslims believe that all living things, including human beings, are subservient to God Alone. Thus, we are not masters who rule over the earth, but servants of God with a responsibility to maintain the balance which He has created. As Allah (SWT) says in the following verses of the glorious Qur'an thus:

*It is He who has appointed you viceroys in the earth ... that He may try you in what He has given you (Surah 6:165). O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters (Surah 7:31). It is He who produces gardens with trellises and without, and dates and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates similar [in kind] and different [in variety]. Eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. And waste not by excess: for Allah loves not the wasters (Surah 6:141).*

These and many more verses of the holy Qur'an are establishing the Islamic injunctions towards the sustenance of the environment for the betterment of the globe for all. The Qur'an not only offers a blue print for saving the environment, but Muslims are called upon to strive to protect it as part of their devotional duties (Ammar, 2005). To this end, the purpose of this article is to draw attention to the contributions of Islamic practices to environmental sustainability. Environmental implications of an inescapable practice, *Janazah* (funeral), in Islam are the focus of this article.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

According to Morelli (2011) environmental sustainability could be conceptualized as: *meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them, and more specifically, as a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity* (p.23).

Sutton (2004) is of the opinion that environmental sustainability is the ability to maintain the qualities that are valued in the physical environment. It involves making decisions and taking actions that are in the interest of protecting the natural world, with particular emphasis on preserving the capability of the environment to support human life.

Conceptualizing it from the socio-economic and political perspective, environmental sustainability is about making responsible decisions that will reduce business' negative impact on the environment. It is not simply about reducing the amount of waste being produced or using less energy, but is concerned with developing processes that will lead to businesses becoming completely sustainable in the future (<http://toolkit.smallbiz.nsw.gov.au>). This is because business activities can potentially cause damage to all areas of the environment. Some of the common environmental concerns include:

- damaging rainforests and woodlands through logging and agricultural clearing
- polluting and over-fishing of oceans, rivers and lakes
- polluting the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels
- damaging prime agricultural and cultivated land through the use of unsustainable farming practices (<http://toolkit.smallbiz.nsw.gov.au>)

It was stressed further in <http://toolkit.smallbiz.nsw.gov.au> that: *Environmental sustainability encourages businesses to look beyond making short term gains and look at the long term impact they are having on the natural world. There is need to consider not only the immediate impact business actions have on the environment, but the long term implications as well. For example, when manufacturing a product, a good environmental minded business actor, needs to look at the environmental impact of the products entire lifecycle, from development to disposal before finalizing the product designs* (p.2).

However, some of the issues pose major environmental sustainability problems (Morelli, 2011); these include:

- destruction of the living environments (habitats) of native species;
- discharge of polluting chemicals and other materials into the environment;
- emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere which cause climate change and global warming; and depletion of low cost oil and other fossil fuels.

Therefore, sustainable environment (which encompasses the components of conservation and preservation) is a necessary prerequisite to sustainable socio-economic and political systems. It also makes sense that the actions we take to remove threats to, and foster environmental sustainability enhances such a system. A general definition of "environmental sustainability" can be crafted in recognition of the linkages between human well-being and ecosystems and, in particular, "ecosystem services". Such, services according to Morelli (2011) include:

- i. Provision of services - the products obtained from ecosystems, including food, fiber, genetic resources, biochemicals, natural medicines, pharmaceuticals, ornamental resources, fresh water, and all forms of energy resources;

- ii. Regulating services, the benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes, including air quality regulation, water purification and waste treatment, pest regulation, disease regulation, climate regulation, water regulation, erosion regulation, pollination, and natural hazard regulation;
- iii. Supporting services, including soil formation, photosynthesis, primary production, nutrient cycling and dispersal, seed dispersal, and water cycling; and
- iv. Cultural services, the nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences.

### **Funeral (Janazah) Principle in Islam**

Islam is a religion of the Muslims which literally means submission or surrendering to Almighty Creator; and a Muslim is one who surrenders to the will of God. The sources of Islamic edicts are the following: the holy Qur'an; *Sunnah* (practice/hadith/the Prophet's traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW); and *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) or *Madahib* (Schools of Law). Hence, the activities of the Muslims, from cradle to grave, are being guided by these sources.

Death is an inevitable occurrence in the life of every creation; after death funeral is expected to follow. Allah (SWT) says in the holy Qur'an thus:

*Every soul shall have a taste of death; and only on the Day of Resurrection shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the Fire and admitted to Paradise, he indeed is successful. The life of this world is only the enjoyment of deception (a deceiving thing) [Surat Al-Imraan, verse 185].*

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, "*Always remember the destroyer of pleasures (i.e. death)*". The religion of Islam has not forgotten death, nor has it forsaken the rights of the dying. Islam provides us with a complete set of instructions for the one who is dying, those who are present at the time of death and those responsible for burying the deceased individual (Stacey, 2012). Muslims strive to bury the deceased as soon as possible after death, avoiding the need for embalming or otherwise disturbing the body of the deceased. An autopsy may be performed, if necessary, but should be done with the utmost respect for the dead. Below is synopsis (classified into five (5) stages) of the Islamic funeral practice; immediately after death, those in attendance should hasten to prepare the body for washing, shrouding and burial (Baianonie, 2000).

### **Washing the Body**

Stacey (2012) and Baianonie (2000) highlighted the following steps for washing Muslim corpse:

- Before washing the body place it on a clean and rinsed off platform that is inclined in such a way that the head is higher than the other part of the body and the water flows down and away from it.
- Private areas (from navel to under knees) must be covered with a thick cloth or towel
- All other clothing should be removed from the body
- Force out any waste from the stomach by pushing it with one's hand. An easy method of doing this is to sit the body up supporting the back and push the stomach
- Clean off any impurities (urine or stool, etc.) that may be excreted during the rubbing of stomach
- Perform complete wudhu (ablution) to the body according to the Sunnah (like washing three times, etc)
- Use care washing the nose and mouth by wiping them instead of pouring water into them or turn the head to one side
- Perform full bathing and washing of body
- It is Sunnah to wash the body an odd number of times (at least three times)
- If the body is not clean after washing it three times then wash it again and stopping on an odd number of washings
- Clean water must be used (scented water is preferable, if available)
- Water should be warm (not too hot or too cold)
- Apply shampoo or scented soap to the head and beard, and only soap to the rest of the body
- Turn body on the left side and pour water until it has reached the right side of the body
- Turn body on the right side and pour water until it has reached the left side of the body
- After rinsing the body a final time, dry it completely
- Apply scent (ittar) to head and beard; do not comb the hair and beard in such a way as to pull out the hairs
- Apply camphor to hands, feet, knees, and forehead

### **Shrouding the Body**

For men three pieces of white clothes should be used that are longer than the body that is going to be shrouded. Each piece should be approximately two yards long. Two pieces are sufficient for men when three are

not available. The three pieces are the Izar (bottom half garment), the Qamees (top half garment), and the Lafaafah (full piece covering the entire body) (Baianonie, 2000).

For women five pieces of white clothes should be used that are longer than the body that is going to be shrouded. Each piece should be approximately two yards long. Two or three pieces are sufficient for women when five are not available. The five pieces are the Izar (bottom half garment), the Qamees (top half garment), and the Lafaafah (full piece covering the entire body), Sadree (chest piece, one yard in length), and the Hijab (head or scarf piece, one and a half to two yards in length).

### **Steps of Shrouding**

- All the sheets should be spread out in layers.
- Roll up the front half of the top sheet towards the head – Qamees (shirt).
- The deceased, covered with a sheet (satar), is lifted and laid on her back on this top sheet (Qamees).
- The Qamees is then unrolled over the front of the body and once the body is covered then remove the satar (covering sheet).
- Some scent or perfume may be put on those parts of the body upon which one rests during prostration, that is the forehead, nose, hands, knees, and feet.
- The sinaband (loin cloth) is bound round (acts like underwear), put the head veil
- The deceased's left hand should be placed on her chest, then put her right hand on the left hand like the way in the Salat (Prayer)
- The edge of the Izaar sheet is folded over the deceased right side, then the other edge over his left side.
- Then the last (*Lifafah*) sheet should be folded the same way.
- These sheets should be fastened with a piece of cloth (tie ropes), one above the head, another under the feet, and two around the body.

### **Salatul Janazah (The Funeral Prayer)**

A divine service is held over the dead body of every Muslim, young or old, even of infants who have lived only a few minutes. When the soul leaves the body, preparations are made for bidding him the last farewell. It is highly recommended that, after washing and shrouding the body of the deceased, the body not to be kept long, but rather taken quickly, prayed for, and then buried. *Salatul Janazah* is required to be performed in congregation to request pardon and prayera for the deceased. It is preferable that *Salatul Janazah* be performed outside the Mosque or the Musalla (Prayer room), like in the Mosque, activity rooms, or courtyards and may even be performed at the cemetery.

The funeral prayer is a rewarding act and Muslims should not hesitate to participate in any funeral prayer even those of people not known to them. Prophet Muhammad encouraged this saying that "whoever attended the funeral prayer until it was finished would earn rewards as hefty as a great mountain". The number of attendees at the funeral prayer also brings great reward to the deceased. Prophet Muhammad said that if a Muslim dies and forty pious Muslims pray for him in the funeral prayer Allah (God) will accept their prayers.

### **Funeral**

After the funeral prayer the deceased should be taken to the Muslim cemetery on bier. Accompanying the deceased is a recommendable act; the Prophet (PBUH) said: "Visit the sick and walk with the Janazah, it will remind you of the hereafter". It is recommended for those following the Janazah on foot to keep behind or either on the right or on the left of those who are carrying the body (Baianonie, 2000). They should walk calmly, quietly, and not crowd or push others who are carrying the deceased. The following are ethics of funeral of a Muslim:

- In the procession mourners should walk in front or beside the bier. Those who are riding or driving should follow it.
- Silence is recommended.
- It is absolutely forbidden to accompany the body with music or crying.

The reward of Janazah prayer and following the Janazah until the burial is finished is explained in the Hadith of holy Prophet (PBUH) who said:

*Whoever attends the Janazah until it is finished, will earn a Qirat, and who ever stays until the burial, will earn two Qirats. Someone asked: What a Qirat means? The Prophet answered "It means rewards as big as a great mountain" (Bukhari & Muslim as cited in Baianonie, 2000).*

### **Burial**

Islam has a unique style of building graves and cemeteries that is characterized by humility, simplicity and economy in costs and that avoids glorifying the dead with elaborate monuments. The deceased should be buried in the locality in which he lived/died. It is undesirable to take the body to the person's own country or to

another city (Baianonie, 2000). The minimum grave requirements: a hole in the ground that would completely conceal the dead body, preventing its odor from reaching people, and to protect it from wild beasts. It is recommended to dig wider and deeper.

There are two different shapes of graves - Lahd and Shiqq, with Lahd being the better of the two. Lahd means that a concave hollow is dug into the wall of the grave that faces the Qiblah. This hollow should be wide and deep enough to house the body. Shiqq, on the other hand, means to dig the usual grave consisting of a rectangular hole in the ground where the body is placed with a ceiling over it that protects it from the dirt (Stacey, 2012).

All Muslims, rich, poor, king or commoner are all buried following the same procedure. Burying the deceased in the coffin is not allowed unless there is a requirement that must be followed in a particular area or country. Furthermore, the body is laid in the grave on its right side facing the "*Qiblah*". The person laying the body should say: "In the name of Allaah, and by the way of the messenger of Allaah - or by the tradition of the messenger of Allaah," while laying the body. He then must untie all the ties of the shroud as the Prophet (PBUH) used to do when laying a dead body in the grave, and recite aloud: "*In the name of Allah, and by the way of the messenger of Allah or by the tradition of the messenger of Allah*". It should put above the body a layer of wood or other, so that earth will not be put directly on the body when they fill the grave with earth. After the body is totally covered, it is desirable to fill the grave with soil. It is permissible to place a stone or some other to identify the grave.

It is not permissible to cement the grave or to construct on top of it, unless there is a necessity to protect the grave or the body from natural events, wild animals, looting, etc. It is also not permissible to write on the grave, or to turn the area around it into a mosque. Also, not allowed, is kissing it, going around it as if performing a ritualistic act, or burning incense to leave a nice fragrance.

This is an overview of the Islamic practice based on the traditions of the holy Prophet (PBUH). Any other practice, beyond the above summarized, is tantamount to religious innovation which is totally condemned in Islam.

### **Environmental Implications of Islamic Funeral Practice**

Having summarized the steps involved in the Islamic system of funeral, the environmental implications of this ritual are highlighted as follow:

- i. Embalmmnt is not allowed in Islam, unless required. Because of the prohibition on embalmmnt and the urgency with which the body must be buried, environmental resources which could be utilized for embalming are therefore conserved for the living, hence contributing to the sustenance of the resources.
- ii. Speedy burial of Muslim corps prevents spread of every form of diseases and viruses. For example, with the outbreak of Ebola and Lassa fever viruses, application of speedy burial of affected corpses is a measure of preventing their spread.
- iii. Transporting deceased to another country/state/town is not allowed; this preserves and conserves environmental resources involved in transportation process.
- iv. This practice also contributes to environmental health in that it prevents noise pollution. Grief at the loss of a loved one, friend or relative is normal and weeping for the dead is allowed in Islam. However wailing, shrieking, beating the chest, and pulling the hair or clothes are not permissible. These actions contribute to pollution (noise) in the environment. During the funeral procession, playing of music, crying, shouting, and the likes are also discouraged.
- v. Islam encourages simplicity in all its ramifications, the shrouding of every Muslim (poor, rich, leaders, followers) must be plain white which is devoid of sewing. Cosmetic; jewelries and the likes are not allowed to be part of the dressing of Muslim corps.
- vi. At the grave yard, woods for coffin; cement for plastering the grave and building tombs on the grave are conserved. Conserving these resources would make the decomposition process under the ground easy; hence, enhances ecological system for survival of other vital species in the environment.
- vii. After burial, mourning is allowed. Loved ones and relatives are to observe a 3-day mourning period. Mourning is observed in Islam by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences, and avoiding decorative clothing and jewelry. Widows observe an extended mourning period (*iddah*), 4 months and 10 days long, in accordance with the Qur'an 2:234. Therefore, ceremonizing burial, a situation where meals and drinks are served, is unIslamic rather charitable acts, such as digging of borehole/well; planting of trees, are highly encouraged.

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