

Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University.
Abdurahman Juma

Muslim Burial Customs on the East African coast


Today the majority of the people living on the East African coast and the off-shore islands (Swahili) are Muslims, pursuing the faith of their progenitors, who converted to Islam over a thousand years ago. Muslim communities observe the principles of burial enunciated by Islam and differences manifest in the details of accomplishment, say according to sects or routine prevailing in some places. This paper does not discuss this variance among the Muslim community but concentrates on the customs and protocols generally observed among the Swahili people occupying the coastal area.

Keywords: Muslim burial customs, African archaeology, Swahili traditions.

Abdurahman Juma, Department of Antiquities, Museums and Archives, P.O. Box 116, Zanzibar, Tanzania.

Islamic influence

The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, lived in Arabia during the seventh century AD and urged his followers to propagate the divine message to the world. The faith began to spread after his death and from around the ninth century onwards, it became an important influence in the towns and especially in those maintaining trade links with Arabia and Persia.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Islam became a widespread religion along the East African coast. This notion is reinforced by the presence of tombs and many large mosques on the ruined sites. The hinterland communities were least affected by Islam until the nineteenth century when the European missionaries arrived and found them suitable for conversion to Christianity. Early Christian families on the coast came from elements rescued from slavery when the British campaign
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against the slave trade began. Until now, the coastal area has been dom-
inated by the Muslim population. Some concentrations are also found in
the interior, these largely resulted from the activity by local members of
some religious orders which developed on the coast about the late nine-
teenth century.

The Muslim as well as the Christian spiritual ideas altered most of
the indigenous African beliefs and cultural traditions, including the
manner of disposing of the dead. Traditional burial rites are rarely
known today. Oral traditions preserved no information as to whether
cremation, for example, was ever practised. This custom is known from
recent times only among the small minority Hindu communities. Most
African oral traditions appear to support the view that the deceased were
buried.

Approach to the burial activity

The world famous religious institutions, Islam and Christianity, have in-
fluenced the tenets of burial in many parts of the world and in some so-
cieties, urban influence has altered the approach to burial activity. In the
latter, the effect is manifest in the religious institution assuming the role
of performing the burial rite rather than the public. The preparation of
the deceased has become the work of specialists. It may be observed that
in most Muslim communities, including those dwelling in urban areas,
the burial activity is less institutionalized; this knowledge penetrates so-
ciety. Elders encourage young people who come of age to participate
and learn the ritual, so that they may gradually take charge. The case in
point is the East African coast, where the basic preparations required for
the dead such as washing and dressing take place at home rather than in
a mosque. The mosque is a convenient option for preparing the dress
and for saying the general prayers to the deceased. Likewise, the
mosque may be used by men, some days after the burial, for the con-
cluding supplications and remembrance of the dead.
Muslim burial customs

Washing, dressing and prayers

When a person dies, the body is covered with a simple sheet of cloth, the normal dress and all other things worn are immediately removed. Islam teaches that before removal for burial, the body ought to be washed and dressed and the public ought to say prayers of well-wishing to the deceased. In washing, the deceased is not usually attended by members of the opposite sex, except when members of the same sex are not available. On the East African coast, the body is normally supported on a rope-bed in the east–west orientation and covered on top with a white cloth. Around the middle of the bed the netting is pushed away to make an opening and let the waste water into a hole dug in the ground. Washing is done under clothing because seeing nakedness is considered obscene. The washing hand is "gloved" and the operation engages the attendants to rub down the bowels on the outside and let out the contents and then purging the body thoroughly with water. This is finally followed by the wash of purification and ablution. A mat is placed on the bedstead on which the corpse is dried and dressed.

Dressing the corpse consists of wrapping the body in three or more pieces of white cloth. Pieces of cotton-wool, usually mixed with material like kiafor and saffron, are placed in the apertures of the body (the mouth, nostrils, ears and rectum), beneath the private parts, by the eyes and armpits, as well as between the fingers of the right hand. The shroud is then scented and later there is fumigation on a bier. The dressed body is wrapped in a mat, and loosely tied with khangas or pieces of cloth and entered in the bier. It is taken to a place for the prayers; as already pointed out, it may be in a mosque or other place agreed. The burial site is usually agreed upon soon after death of a person occurs and grave-diggers receive the message in good time. The corpse is taken to the graveyard in the bier, normally with a procession. This is the time when most of the entourage can get involved. Participation in the funeral activity is considered a virtuous act.

A Muslim grave is oriented towards Mecca (in Saudi Arabia), called qibla. It is the direction in which the body faces in the grave and also the orientation of the mosques in which worshippers face for the routine prayers. In East Africa, the qibla orientation is a few degrees west from the geographical north. The grave is about 2.5 m long, 1 m wide and 1.2 m deep. At the bottom and to the northern side, a narrow inner cavity
(about 45 cm deeper and about 25 cm wide) is also dug, running the length of the grave.

Two to four people enter the grave for burial. They receive the shrouded corpse descended into the grave head first, having been removed from the bier and the mat. The corpse is disposed in the inner cavity and placed on its right side. It faces north, the head to the east and the feet to the west. The legs and the arms are aligned straight with the body. The left arm rests at the side on top of the body and the right arm beneath the body. In this position it may be supported by balls of earth. The shroud is loosened and absolutely no objects are placed in the grave. The cavity is finally covered with a wooden board to protect the body against the earth coming over it. Ephemeral material, such as vegetative material cut from the nearby bush, may be further used to block the sides of the cavity and prevent the penetration of the earth when the whole grave is back-filled. The filling is done by people who have attended the burial. Markers, usually stumps, are set at the four corners of the grave and on top some water is poured in at the side where the head lies. Before people disperse, more supplications to the deceased are made. Muslims do not usually place flowers on the grave.

Muslims may bury contrary to these rules, as for instance when the body is already decomposed and is inconvenient to carry or deal with it. For victims of warfare and epidemic, mass burial is also sanctioned and rules are observed only if convenient. A viable instance of at least two war victims interred in one grave according to the normal practice, is illustrated in the picture below (Fig. 1), taken from an archaeological excavation conducted in the southern part of the main island of Zanzibar.

A ruler or an eminent spiritual leader may have a tomb constructed to mark his grave, although some orthodox Islamic opinions prohibit such elaborate edifices and insist on simple grave markers not higher than about 25 cm. The idea is certainly to discourage veneration of the dead personalities but monumental heritage of the East African coast bears evidence of this practice. In formal religious groups, the belief in saintly intermediaries is a common practice among Shia sectarian group. Historically, this group dismembered from the mainstream Muslim community that has largely remained Sunni on the issue of leadership of the Muslims following the death of Prophet Muhammad (632), and later this disparity crystallized in doctrines. The bulk of the Muslims on the East African coast belong the Shafii religious school (Sunni); people of
Oman origin belong mostly to a small Imamate group (moderate Kharjite branch) famous in Oman, Yemen, and North Africa and which has come to be known at least in East Africa as Ibadhi, after the inspirator Abdulla ibn Ibadh (†749). The latter are sometimes seen as puritanists. The first Oman Arab to rule Zanzibar and the East African coast, Said bin Sultan (†1856), belonged to this sect. A mausoleum was being constructed over his grave, when Ibadhi scholars protested, so the roof was left unfinished to the present day. This puritanist opinion is also held by a much later reformist movement nicknamed “Wahabi” after its mentor in Saudi Arabia.

Post-burial gathering and concepts

Following the death of a person, womenfolk also congregate at the place of funeral and engage in recitations but do not mix with men. They do not usually accompany the bier to the graveyard. Men and women, espe-
cially the relatives of the deceased, may remain at the place of funeral to deplore. For other people, this stay also implies provision of emotional support to the people who have lost their beloved. People may subscribe money and food, although this tradition is now becoming less common. On the day agreed to be the last, more people turn up for recitation and asking God’s mercy on the soul of the deceased, and the occasion usually ends up with feasting.

There is a custom of visiting graves which is also enjoined by the Islamic faith. It involves proclaiming compliments to the souls whose bodies are buried in the place and wishing them good in the Eternity. As already mentioned, tombs entice some people to use the context for making pleas to the dead. Death is considered a detour; although the orthodox Islam rejects the view that the dead is able to respond to the pleas of the living, it is not uncommon in the Swahili world as among members of other societies in Africa to actively maintain such communication. The proclaimed belief in resurrection is associated with a complete divine control and wrecks the idea of a person who has passed away being able to live as in this world, for instance feeling the need for diet and self-defence. This doctrine of monotheistic religions appears to be effective and underlines the denial of any goods in the grave for the deceased.

Conclusion

The paper describes in detail the beliefs and customs of a Muslim burial in today’s Swahili communities, based on traditional religious instructions. It is pointed out that this type of burial has been common on the East African coast for more than a thousand years, since Islam was introduced into these communities, supplanting the indigenous African beliefs and burial customs. Muslim burial traditions do not include either grave goods or flowers on the grave.

Understanding the burial customs of the Muslim communities on the East African coast is not only an elucidation of a people’s culture, but the facts are significant to anthropological studies.

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References

Allan A. Lund

Lidt om arkæologi og racisme


During nearly the first half of the 20th century German archaeology was nationalistic and racialist and had thus chosen a German “Sonderweg”. This was a consequence of the construction of a Nordic (German or Aryan) race which at that time constituted the scientific paradigm. This non scientific conception was developed mainly by the archaeologist G. Kossinna and the racialist H.F.K. Günther. The present article is thought as an explanatory note to S. Welinder in 1994.

Keywords: racism, history of archaeology.

Allan A. Lund, Institut für Nordische Philologie und Germanische Altertumskunde, München Universität, Amalienstr. 83, D-80799 München, Germany.

Stig Welinder har for nylig publiceret et absolut læseværdigt essay om grundlaget for racistiske eller rettere protoracistiske forestillinger i svensk arkæologi (Welinder 1994, s. 193–215). For at føre denne nødvendige diskurs videre skal jeg her blot bringe et par små, men næppe uvaesentlige supplerende bemærkninger til Welinders inspirerende essay.

Welinder indleder sine betragtninger med at fastslå, at ”begreippet ‘rasism’ er mångtydig” (Welinder 1994, s. 193). Det har han naturligvis ret i. Men Welinder synes i den forbindelse ikke at være tilstrækkelig opmærksom på, at denne konstatering blandt andet skyldes, at han i sin fremstilling ikke tilstrækkeligt klart skelner mellem en videnskabelig diskurs og en ikke-videnskabelig diskurs. Der er således, når vi taler om racisme, grund til at benytte den ”klassiske” definition af begrebet, nemlig at racismen ikke hører hjemme i en videnskabelig diskurs, fordi den bygger på forestillingen om eksistensen af forskellige racer (Miles 1991, passim) (med forskellige ydre og indre karakteristika, der korre-

Svensk och dansk arkeologi var inte rasistisk, och kanske inte heller ens den tyska, under 1900-talets första decennier, därför att den använde begreppet ”ras” och sociala, eller kulturella, rasbegrepp som ”folk” och ”stamm” i sin historieskrivning.

Set i sammenhæng med den moderne engelske racediskurs, der føres på baggrund af den britiske kolonialisme (Miles 1991, passim), må man hertil sige, at i al fald det tyske racebegreb — uanset at dette var konstrueret ud fra det dengang gældende forskningsparadigme — indeholdt en racistisk ideologi. Man postulerede (fra ca. 1900) eksistensen af en speciel nordisk eller germansk eller arisk race med udgangspunkt i den ”germanske” bronce- eller sogar stenalder. Nordisk er i den racistiske litteratur et rent ”racebegreb”, der i princippet ikke (som hos visse moderne danske historikere) må forveksles med nordisk som geografisk kategori (Conte & Essner 1995, s. 65–116, Breitling 1971, passim). Og Kossinna og hans talløse tilhængere instrumentaliserede dette ideologiske postulat med henblik på erobringer af nyt land og undertvingelse af ”arstfremmede” ud fra den forestilling, at disse var mindre værdige individer. Kun den germanske race var kulturskabende. Det var således ikke uden grund, at Kossinna, der var død i 1931, i Det tredje Rige fejrede som proto-nazi. For Den anden Verdenskrig, specielt krigen mod Sovjetunionen, var ikke nogen traditionel krig, men et racistisk ”germansk” felttog rettet imod slaviske, jødiske og andre såkaldte ”under-

I sit knappe overblik over den racistiske arkæologis historie savner man i en svensk fremstilling en henvisning til, at det var Anders Retzius, der indførte den grundlæggende ”vigtige” skelnen mellem lang- og kortskaller, og at Linné forinden grundlæggende havde bidraget til en systematisk opdeling af ”racerne” (Fetten 1991, s. 5–15). Videre savner man et par ord om, at Montelius utvivlsomt havde påvirket sin ven Kossinna, hvis nationalism og racisme er en uomtvistelig kendsgerning, således at han også delvis opererede med Sydsverige (samt Danmark og Nordtyskland) som germanernes Urheimat (mens Montelius satsede på Sverige af nationale grunde). Det er endvidere et spørgsmål, om Kossinna, som påstået af Welinder, var en ”respekteret person” (Welinder 1994: 202). Han, der var en kolerisk og aggressiv person, som ledede redaktionen af det arkæologiske tidskrift Mannus i overensstemmelse med det ”germanske førerprincip”, fik således aldrig det Ordinariat, den ”ordinære Professor”, han havde drømt om hele sit liv, hvad der rimeligvis også hænger sammen med, at den forhistoriske arkæologi i Tyskland først med Det tredje Rige’s germanerideologi fik en rigtig anerkendt akademisk status i Tyskland. Først ved sin begravelse opnåede Kossinna den ”offentlige” anerkendelse, som i live aldrig var blevet ham til del.
Summary

During nearly the first half of the 20th century German archaeology was nationalistic and racialist and had thus chosen a German “Sonderweg”. This was a consequence of the construction of a Nordic (German or Aryan) race which at that time constituted the scientific paradigm. This non-scientific conception was developed mainly by the archaeologist G. Kossinna and the racialist H. F. K. Günther. The present article is thought as an explanatory note to S. Welinder in 1994.

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