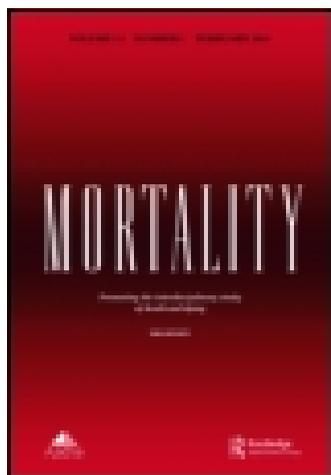


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## Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying

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### Death, paradise and the Arabian Nights

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## Death, paradise and the *Arabian Nights*

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**ABSTRACT** *The article explores the relevance of modern sociological theories on death and dying as they might apply to Islamic communities. These include several relevant important European sociological commentaries: Walter's typology of death attitudes, Seale's pseudo-psychoanalytical approach and Kellehear's important study of the social history of dying. The article is based on a variety of sources including religious texts, tales from the Arabian Nights and recent ethnographies, as well as descriptions by European travellers in the Middle East. Ethnographic detail from the Middle East includes recent and current practices among pastoral nomads (the Beja, Ma'aza Bedouin), among peasants from villages in Nubia and the Nile Valley, in the cosmopolitan cities of Ottoman Aleppo and in modern Cairo, as well as encounters with Muslim death in the West. No single Islamic tradition can be identified. In the light of practices that surround death, beliefs in the afterlife and Paradise, this article highlights the relevance of various sociological approaches to the study of dying in a variety of Muslim communities. Mirroring Kellehear's 'Ages', this article contrasts a range of orthodox religious and local Muslim traditions many of which are rarely discussed in the West.*

**KEYWORDS:** death; dying; Paradise; Islam; *Arabian Nights*

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the relevance of modern sociological theories on death and dying as they might apply to Islamic communities. In Europe, there have been important sociological commentators on contemporary death and dying. Approaches include Walter's typology of death attitudes (1994), Seale's pseudo-psychoanalytical approach to decaying and dying bodies (1998), and Kellehear's important study of the long-term social history of dying (2007); his is a Braudelian *longue durée*, wherein he aims to identify key features of dying: from ancient ideas about death in the Stone and Pastoral Ages, to those in the Age of the City and into a Cosmopolitan Age. Yet even this major review of transcultural dying (Kellehear, 2007) does not fully address the role of religion that surrounds the social experience of dying and burial: nor does Islam,

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Muslims, Middle East or Egypt, for example, even figure in his index. As a result, this article aims to provide religious and ethnographic detail on Muslim traditions which are rarely discussed in the West. As there is no single Islamic tradition, examples cited mirror Kellehear's 'Ages' but include recent and current practices among pastoral nomads (the Beja, Ma'aza Bedouin), among peasants from villages in Nubia and the Nile Valley, in the cosmopolitan cities of Ottoman Aleppo and in modern Cairo, as well as encounters with death in the West. The diverse sources on which this article is based include religious texts, the *Arabian Nights* and recent ethnographies, as well as descriptions by European travellers from the Enlightenment onwards. In the light of practices that surround death, beliefs in the afterlife and Paradise, this article aims to highlight the relevance of differing sociological approaches to the study of dying in Muslim communities.

In a world of over 1.3 billion Muslims, death is populated with a rich repository of saints, martyrs, religious jurists, and cosmologies, through a range of narratives in many social and cultural contexts (Renard, 2008), yet the sensitive topic of death in Islamic communities has been largely ignored. Gorer (1955/1969) claimed that discussion of death was the great taboo of the twentieth century. Walter (1994) asserted that an academic study of death in the West has undergone a post-modern revival, driven by experts who want to control death as well as by the bereaved who want to express their emotions freely. Although there are several useful recent theoretical writers on the sociology of death, few discuss Islamic burials and bereavement. Although concerned with the body, self-identity, and death, Shilling (1993), Walter (1994), and Seale (1998) do not refer to Islamic tradition, nor is Islam mentioned in Cruz (2004) or Kellehear (2007), yet Islam determines the way believers interpret death and provides conventional schemes on how to handle the body. Nevertheless, these theorists provide useful insights: complex agendas involved in death reflect the nature of social relationships in life. Prescription, cosmologies, and myths combine with the present to liaise with immortality through metaphors of 'eternal memory'.

### **From enlightenment to 'resurrective practice'**

Foucault recognised that Enlightenment was a time of fundamental change in the ways scholars studied the world, a new kind of seeing, 'a new field of visibility being constituted in all its density', made possible by 'natural history' (2002, p. 144). Hume (1739) placed humankind squarely in the scientifically intelligible world of Nature, in conflict with the traditional conception of the human as a detached rational subject. Recent theorists have returned to Enlightenment oppositions of Nature: Culture in the study of death, oppositions that were reinforced by twenty-century structuralists. If death belongs to Nature, life belongs to Culture, a dichotomy that is made fragile in any close encounters with death. For Giddens (1991), Nature only intrudes at birth and death and even then is controlled by experts; otherwise the body is part of the sphere of Culture: 'If human social life is an attempt to construct a refuge of meaning and purpose

against the meaningless chaos that is nature, then the study of the human approach to death and bereavement affords an unusually clear opportunity to perceive some of the most fundamental aspects of these constructions' (Seale, 1998, p. 11). The body seems to inhabit the realm of Nature (or the Real) in a world divided by a civilised Good that divides the world into Nature versus Culture, Animal versus Human: 'Within the logic of this civilized Good, the body always falls to the other side' (Oliver, 2005, p. 95). Yet, as Kellehear highlights in his discussion of Seale's psychoanalytic approach, we are not death-denying people but believe in the 'fiction of the afterlife' – if fiction it is (2007, pp. 60–61). In Islamic tradition the problem of Nature versus Culture is solved by ignoring Nature: there is no death and its existence is not mentioned; only a focus on afterlife remains: 'Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they are alive, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord' (Qur'an 3:159).

Walter (1994) identifies three historical types of dying: 'traditional', 'modern', and 'neo-modern'. Kellehear's 'Ages' (2007) with its focus on the differing experiences of dying over two million years may well provide a more useful model. Walter's types, like Said's Orientalist exotic Other which he opposes to the West ('rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real issues, [and] without natural suspicion') (1979, p. 49), are tainted by evolutionary nuances. As Walter reflects (1994, p. 6), the universal fear of death is faced only with the traditional resources of community, religion, and ritual.

Any move towards secularisation during the Enlightenment also implied affirmation of individuality. With the return of a cyclical theory, it was easy to find correspondences for all historical processes with beginnings, growth, maturity, decadence, and endings. Anthropologists continue to study the place of death within the life cycle; and by the twentieth century contemplated death as liminal, as a *rite de passage* into another world. Burials were interpreted as social drama by Turner (1969) who situated 'emotion talk' and the anthropology of the body, with all the associated scripts, actors, and dramatic paraphernalia.

The social construction of 'the body' in discourse is an important theme in modern anthropology, as seen in Bourdieu's term 'phenomenological', that is, the experience people themselves have of their world and the associated concept of *habitus* which provides individuals with a predisposed way of relating and classifying familiar and novel situations (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 190). More recently, this is reinforced by Giddens' narrative reconstruction of self-identity (1991). The body and self-identity develop from a 'complex plurality of choices that are made without any moral guidance', an approach in marked contrast to that of Durkheim for whom attitudes of optimism, pessimism, and hope in life were achieved through symbolic means, even in death (1947, bk. 2, chap. 1). As tradition fails to provide people with a stable sense of self, the more individuals need to negotiate lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993, p. 181).

Seale (1998) agrees with Walter to conclude that the *motif* of death has undergone a recent revival. *Constructing Death* is dense with social theory and analyses, the experiences of the dying and bereaved, alongside institutional

responses to death, in order to understand the place of embodiment in cultural life. Seale aims to demonstrate the great variability in social constructions that manage mortality in different societies. Building upon Giddens (1991), Seale asserts that social life, is, itself, a continual defence against the inevitability of death. 'Our role of embodiment in social life requires recognition that our bodies give us both our lives and our deaths so social and cultural life can in the last analysis be considered as a human construction in the face of death' (1998, p. 8). Western modern society is turning away from the inevitability of death towards a celebration of meaningful existence.

Dying renews the images of the living by providing the experiences of death and grief with a broader meaning (Seale, 1998, p. 92). Revivalist discourse gives the dying and bereaved a chance to transform symbolically their experience of death into an affirmation of life (1998, pp. 6–7). In a revivalist discourse of death, its celebration helps to restructure narratives of self-identity and transform the event of death into a positive experience, as 'an adventure of personal growth' (Árnason, 2000, pp. 179–180). Yet there is something very particular about death and being bereaved, namely its incomprehensibility and unpredictability.

In Islamic tradition, the Qur'ān is the source of ideas that structure coping with death. The Qur'ān also plays a critical part in generating an imagined community and writing the cultural scripts for the dying and bereaved. How do these discourses relate to communities where living and dying are regulated by Islamic tradition and local custom? What of Islamic communities in a West that is facing a crisis of control? – where death of subjective selves is an 'absolute uncertainty' (Shilling, 1993, p. 184) and everyone is seeking a secure sense of themselves?

### **Islamic tradition: from dying to the grave**

Anthropologists tend to focus on the formal, external, and general aspects of death, 'distancing themselves from the tears and the agony' (Rosaldo, 1988, pp. 425–443). Although there are many tracts in Arabic on Islamic concepts of death, on tradition and burial practice, there has been little written recently by anthropologists on death rites in Islamic societies apart from Jonker (1997). Smith and Haddad (1981) and Halevi (2007) focus on the way in which a body of rituals enabled Islam to create its own, distinct identity, while Renard (2008, pp. 130–190) discusses illness and death in the light of saints, revered sites, and ritual settings. They provide a fascinating link with modern rites and contemporary Muslim attitudes towards the body.

The juxtaposition of opposites comes from a dying person's special status as a liminal being. Islamic burial can be interpreted as a liminal experience, as a *rite de passage* between life and death that is enacted by a community as a social drama. Kennedy (2005, pp. 224–244) describes how personal and social damage is repaired through ceremonies and increased tempo to relieve emotional tensions, anxieties, and fears of bereaved relatives in Nubia, focusing on the psychology of death. The symbolic power and liminality of the burial ceremonies may transport an individual into alternative realms that transcend time and the ordinary world,

for 'liminality' includes a transformation – but without a transition in time (Turner, 1969, p. 39). In the liminal space offered to people aware they are dying, anticipatory grief occurs. Islamic tradition prescribes what should be done in preparation for death: 'A Muslim who is dying, whether man or woman, old or young, should, as a measure of precaution, be laid on his/her back if possible, in such a manner that the soles of his/her feet would face the *qibla*', that is, in the direction towards the holy Ka'bah in Mecca. When a Muslim is near death, those around him or her are called upon to give comfort, and exhort God's mercy and forgiveness. They may recite verses from the Qur'an, give physical comfort, and encourage the dying to recite words of remembrance and prayer. When death approaches those nearby either help the dying person sit up or at least turn their face towards Mecca for the last time so they can declare their confession of faith and establish a proper attitude to the future after death' (Jonker, 1997, p. 152). A Muslim's last words should be the declaration of faith: 'I bear witness that there is no god but Allah'. This reinforces the dying person's expectations that death is not the end, that they are entering the world of the divine for the dying but can continue to claim membership of a wider imagined community.

Is a person's identity lost when their body ceases to function? In certain parts of Egypt, it is the custom for those near a person *in extremis* to squeeze his/her body with their hands to force the soul out of it. If they are not sure of his/her death, they wait until they are certain. Islamic tradition postulates the existence of a soul (*nafs*). It is the self or person who continues after the body has died and continues to interact with others even after death and even in the 'anguish of the grave'. In classical Islamic tradition (*kalām*), a human is a union of body and soul, though for Sufis *nafs* is little more than a false ego; Shi'ites claim the soul is only temporarily associated with the human body. There has been endless theological debate on the definition of the soul (Smith & Haddad, 1981, p. 226). The ethereal body, spirit or soul (*nafs*), is sometimes identified with *rūh* (breath, wind, a special angel messenger), as an independent body existing of itself as intellect, whereby *rūh* is the ethereal body and intellect joined together ('Nafs', <http://www.muslim-philosophy.com/ei2/nafs.htm>). There is continuous progress of the soul in Islamic tradition from life into the afterlife and so the soul cannot return to this world after the death of the body.

Halevi (2007) provides new approaches to the treatment of a Muslim corpse and associated everyday urban practices. He explores the corpse from its deathbed, its preparation for burial to the grave to reflect on different layers of human interaction. All corpses are washed, wrapped, prayed for, and buried. For those who mourn, this helps them defy the definitiveness of death by providing the initial steps towards continuation after death (Jonker, 1997, pp. 151–152). In preparation for burial, the family or other members of the community wash and shroud the body, though martyrs are buried in the clothes in which they died.

When death has taken place the procedures are defined clearly in the Qur'an and *hadīths*. It is desirable (*mustahabb*) that the eyes and mouth of the deceased are closed, the chin tied, the legs drawn straight and laid close together (Blackman, 1927, p. 109), and the body covered temporarily with a clean sheet. If

a person dies at night, the place is lit, and the believers hasten the burial. Those who discover the body also have an obligation to notify the relatives and friends of the deceased about the death. A death certificate is issued at the hospital by the responsible physician and if a person dies at home it is mandatory to inform a physician. An autopsy may be performed, if necessary for legal reasons, but is carried out with the utmost respect for the dead. All Islamic scholars agree that, according to *sunna* (conduct of life based on the sayings and doings (*ahādīth*) of the Prophet), it is permissible to kiss the dead and to cry for the deceased.

By edict, Muslims must bury the deceased as soon as possible after death, avoiding the need for embalming or otherwise disturbing the body. The greatest service to the dead is for the survivors to bury the corpse within 24 hours. Death is not an end point but part of a transition to the afterlife, however blessed or horrible it might be. In Islam it is presumed that life continues after death, and it is therefore essential to preserve the body (Jonker, 1997, p. 152). Cremation is therefore forbidden in Islamic law. In some communities, as among the Beja of the Red Sea Hills, urgency is impelled by fears of *jinn* (Renard, 2008, p. 110) and of the soul of the dead. However, the Ma'aza Bedouin of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, dislike a lonely grave and will transport a corpse for up to three days to the cemetery at Kushmann (Hobbs, 1990).

Modern practice differs little from that described by Russell in eighteenth-century Aleppo: 'When a *Turk* dies, the women immediately fall a shrieking, . . . and continue so to do till the body is buried; which however is dispatched as soon as possible, for they never keep it longer than is absolutely necessary for acquainting the relations who live in town. The first thing done is to wash the corpse upon a large table, which every *hara(e)* has for this purpose; they next stop all the natural passages with cotton, to prevent any moisture from oozing out, as this would render the body unclean; then wrapping it up in a clean cotton-cloth, they lay it in a kind of coffin, much in the form of ours, only that the lid rises with a ledge in the middle, and at the head there is a wooden battoon, about a foot long, that stands up, on which the prepared head-dress of the deceased is placed, if a man; but if a woman, it is not her head-dress, but an old-fashioned one, flat on top like a trencher, and over it is thrown a handkerchief. The middle part of the pall is composed of a small piece of the old covering of the holy house at Mecca, the rest of it being of no particular colour or stuff. Over the pall are laid some of the deceased's best cloaths' (1756, pp. 115–116).

Funerary ritual helps to repair damaged security, and allows 'mourners to reconstruct narratives of self-identity so that they can imagine themselves to be contained within the secure bonds of a caring community, thus turning mourners away from death towards life' (Seale, 1998, p. 8). Russell describes funeral processions in Aleppo: 'When the corpse is carried out, a number of *sheiks*, with their tattered banners, walk first, next come the male-friends, and after them the corpse, carried with the head foremost, upon mens' shoulders. The bearers are relieved very often, for every passenger thinks it meritorious to lend some little help on such solemn occasions. The nearest male-relations immediately follow, and the women close the procession with dreadful shrieks, while the men all the way are singing prayers out of the Koran. Thus they proceed to a mosque; where

the bier is set down in the court-yard, and a service said by the *imaum*: after which it is carried on in the same order as before to the burying-place; of which there is but one that is public within the city, the others being all abroad in the fields' (1756, p. 119).

To assist in a burial is considered a pious act and those involved gain considerable merit. Blackman (1927, pp. 111–113) described funeral processions headed by nearest male relatives, then the female mourners who dye arms blue, plaster heads, breasts and faces and arms with mud, and wave handkerchiefs. Mourners in Upper Egypt walk in front of, in the back of, at the right of, or at the left of the coffin; transport of the coffin on a car, horse, or wagon is not recommended. As Hertz (1960) reflected in his thought-provoking classic, conceptions of afterlife and immortality are constructed on the premise that culture is ongoing and immortal, but as death only affects individuals, an individual death is a threat to culture. He described a deviant *left sacred* which he associated with death and malevolent forces and a *right sacred* associated with order and power.

Resurrective practice is formalised and organised through established expertise (Seale, 1998). Halevi (2007) explores the key religious position of Muslim prayer leaders. The community gathers, and the *imām* (prayer leader) stands in front of the deceased, facing away from the worshippers. The funeral prayer is similar in structure to the five daily prayers, with a few variations, for there is no bowing or prostration, and the entire prayer is said silently but for a few words. Funeral prayers (*salāt al-janāzah*), which differ from subsequent intercessionary prayers, are usually held outdoors, in a courtyard or public square, but not inside a mosque. The deceased is then taken to the cemetery where the body is laid in the grave on its right side facing the *qiblah*. While all members of the community attend the funeral prayers, only the men of the community accompany the body to the gravesite. After a blessing, the ties of the shroud are untied. Mourners throw a handful of earth, three times each, to the side of the grave where the head has been placed (Blackman, 1927, p. 115).

In Aleppo the 'graves lie east and west and are lined with stone. The corpse is taken out of the bier, and put in a posture between sitting and lying on the right-side, with the head to the westward, so that the face may be to the south, that is, towards Mecca: a small portion of earth being put behind the body to keep it steady, the grave is covered with long stones, which go across and prevent the earth they put over from falling in upon the corpse. The *imaum* throws on the first handful of earth, saying at the same time a prayer for the soul of the deceased, and exhorting such as hear him to be mindful of their end. After him every one present throws also a handful of earth, saying, God be merciful unto the deceased person. This done, the grave is filled up. At each end of their graves is set up a stone, upon which are written some prayers, and the name of the person there interred. Some have the upper part of the head-stone cut into the form of a turban for a man, or an old-fashion sort of head-dress if a woman; and as they never open the old graves in less than seven years, or seldom so soon, their cemeteries occupy a very considerable space round the city' (Russell, 1756, pp. 116–117).

Orthodox Islamic tradition establishes certain parameters. The grave should be raised about 20 cm and no higher above ground so that it will be recognised. The grave should not be cemented with mortar, written on, or the area around it turned into a mosque. The grave should not be kissed, perambulated, or perfumed with incense. The site should be respected, not walked over or sat upon. Graves can be marked with a rock, or a piece of wood to distinguish it. ‘The Nubians place an earthen vessel by the side of every grave, which they fill with water at the moment the deceased is interned, and leave it there: the grave itself is covered with small pebbles of various colours, and two large palm leaves are stuck into the ground at either extremity’ (Burckhardt, 1822, p. 32). Similar observations were made by Cavendish (1966, p. 154) and, in addition, quartz pebbles are placed on top of the grave, water poured over them, and grain grown either on top of the grave, or given to children who eat it from these quartz stones.

There are two different shapes of graves: *lahd*, a concave hollow dug into the wall of the grave that faces the *qiblah*, wide and deep enough to conceal the body, preventing its odour from reaching people, and to protect it from wild beasts; and *shiqq*, a rectangular hole in the ground where the body is placed with a ceiling over it that protects it from the dirt. Among the Beja, a body is buried in a shallow grave with the face to the east and feet to the north. The grave is covered with black stones as protection against hyenas, with white stones in the centre. The latter are consecrated by reading verses of the Qur’ān over them (*tasbīh*). A child’s grave only has black stones. Hobbs (1990) described nearby Ma’aza digging a grave about two metres deep and six metres long, in an east–west direction: on the north side of the bottom of the pit an extension is excavated to accommodate the corpse, which prevents the indignity of earth falling directly on it. The body is always placed with the head to the west, looking east towards Mecca. Ma’aza dig a grave near a permanent water source to reinforce bonds between living and dead. Visitors will place a few *bān*-tree needles (*Moringa peregrine*, Arabic: *al-yasar*, *bān*) or other foliage on the tomb as a sign of triumph and victory over death – a tradition also found among Greek Orthodox Christians (<http://www.greece.org/gopatalex/sa/XMLdata/OrthodoxyLessons.html>). In opposition to death, *bān* seeds were a source of edible oil for the ancient Egyptians and for the Bedouin who also use the oil in childbirth; while the tree’s slender branches represent youth. The mourners ensure that the covering stones are tidy or retie a white cloth on a palm-limb grave mast. Where cemeteries are located in waterless areas in the Eastern Desert, they are often furnished to refresh the traveller or pilgrim; even simple graveyards have at least one bottle of water stored among rocks. In the graveyard of ‘Awād Salūm in Wādī Gattār is a stone resthouse for mourners with containers of water, teacups and tea, complete coffee service including mortar and pestle, flour sieve, and rock salt’ (Hobbs, 1989, p. 65).

In contrast to Kellehear’s *Age of the City* (2007, p. 251), in Islamic tradition ‘managed death’ involves community and professionals in both urban and rural environments. Language and conversation enable resurrective practice: ‘nothing connects as affectively to the dead more than language’ (Anderson, 1991, p. 145, as cited by Seale, 1998, p. 68). Funeral laments (le Grain, 1914, pp. 213–214) and

poems may be composed and recited; professional mourners and Qur'anic reciters may be employed. These reinforce, despite the presence of death, an awareness of a common past and solidarity with the present. Language, especially poetry, is a metaphorical construction of a culture. Metaphor becomes compressed analogy through which the 'reader' has to establish connections. Tillich (1963; Hughes, 2002) coped with death and the fear of being eternally forgotten through the metaphor of the 'eternal memory'. Metaphor and memory are closely connected: the dark unfading cypress (*sarw*) is to be found in graveyards as an emblem of immortality as it is in work of the Iraqi poet, Yūsuf (2005):

... Why do the years wear lead shoes?  
And what will die if you walked at night  
behind the cypresses and the date palms ...

'The Ends of the Africa North' (1972)

Elegies (*marthiyah*, pl. *marāthī*) memorialise or eulogise the recent dead. The tradition of biographical narration in rural Egypt is ancient, found even in Ancient Egyptian texts. Indeed, there is a specific genre of Arabic poetry of *rithā'* (elegy), some by female poets for women, the poems forming part of the funeral ritual (Allen, 2000, pp. 91–98). Heroes, martyrs, and saints sustain fictive immortality of particular social groups who are bound together in an imagined community and provide narrative constructions of events. Other elegies are personal: poignantly, Ibn al-Rūmī (d. AD 896) mourns his son Muhammad: 'be generous with your tears; for I have given the earth the most precious gift I possess .../Though you [my son] may be alone in a desolate house, I am just as desolate among the living ...' (Allen, 2000, p. 97).

There is a web of complex, imagined connections between God, the deceased, and the mourners who recite Qur'anic intercessory prayers for the benefit of the deceased during the period between death and the Day of Judgement, the time when Muslims have to stay in the darkness of the grave and to suffer its tortures. The opening verses of the Qur'ān are recommended. Blackman (1927/2000) recorded that mourning or remembrance (*dhikr*) usually lasted seven days with the *faqīh* coming daily to recite Qur'ān, repeating some passages a thousand times and keeping count by using a large rosary (*sibhah*); such recitations may be repeated at intervals over the following two to three years. These intercessory prayers are associated with epitaphs on tombstones. As Halevi explains, praying to God over the grave will fill the grave with light to ward off the dark tortures of the grave. 'God had the power to make the grave more expansive or narrower, lighter or darker, in a field where the normal laws of physics were altogether suspended. His action, whether merciful or punishing, would depend entirely on the religion of the subject and on his or her record of good and bad deeds, according to the brand of orthodoxy that upheld the dogma of personal responsibility' (2007, pp. 135–136).

Seale (1998, p. 4) contends that the dying and bereaved are part of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), or have membership of a variety of imagined

communities, membership that is recalled as a narrative reconstruction by mourners of the personal biography of the deceased during the wake. For Seale 'dying can be construed symbolically as a resurrective practice via an exhibition of an intact personal narrative of self-identity' (1998, p. 171). Resurrective practice is reinforced through conversation to reaffirm social bonds in the face of dissolution and helps to restore a sense of basic security that has been fractured by death and enables the living to return to the routines of daily life (1998, p. 4).

Kellehear (2007, p. 251) concludes that in the West, the experience of dying has become more private in his Cosmopolitan Age. Yet in Islamic communities, which may also be cosmopolitan (as defined by Starkey, 2007, pp. 132–135), the otherworld journey continues to be a family and community affair. Early Islamic innovative laws were directed towards public and private gender relationships and divisions. Halevi (2007) analyses real and imaginary matters of sexual propriety and the restriction of the social space available to women. In Upper Egypt villages, women survivors met separately, sitting either in silent remembrance or talking only quietly, and often listening to a recitation from the Qur'an for the benefit of the deceased in the afterlife. The bereaved express their loss according to local custom, though its style varies between rural and urban communities and reflect expectations of different social levels and genders (Abu-Lughod, 1993), as Pfeiffer (1852, p. 335) described: 'At five o'clock in the evening of the 2d of September I commenced my journey back to Alexandria. On my arrival at Alexandria I met two Egyptian funerals. The first was that of a poor man, and not a soul followed the coffin. The corpse lay in a wooden box without a lid, a coarse blanket had been spread over it, and four men carried the coffin. The second funeral had a more respectable air. The coffin, indeed, was not less rude, but the dead man was covered with a handsome shawl, and four "mourning women" followed the body, raising a most dolorous howl from time to time. A motley crowd of people closed the procession. The corpse was laid in the grave without the coffin'. It is an important community event, as Rodenbeck (2000, p. 89) reminds us: 'So casual about other things, Cairenes are strikingly punctilious in the rituals of condolence. Friends not only will drop everything to rush to a funeral but will also mark the end of the 40-day mourning period and the anniversary of someone's passing. The death notices in *al-Ahram*, the city's newspaper, run to 30 solid columns a day and often more: the saying is that a person cannot have died if their death goes unmentioned in *al-Ahram*. Ladies of leisure often turn straight to the back of the paper so as to plan their daily agenda of condolence visits . . . every member of the bereaved family is listed, along with their place of work and relation to the deceased'.

For Seale (1998, p. 1), bereavement takes on 'the role of embodied emotionality' which reinforces 'common membership of imagined communities', though he does not clarify how membership is claimed. Graves are also sites of social memory where the narratives of death are recalled (Slyomovics, 1998). There is a tradition that the bereaved visit the graves. Fatima (d. AD 632), the daughter of the Prophet, is associated with the cult of the dead as she used to visit the grave of Medina's martyr, Hamza, which she recognized by a stone

(*hajar*) (Halavi, 2007, pp. 147–148). Russell (1756, p. 118) recorded that ‘the nearest relations go to pray at the grave on the third, seventh, and fortieth days, as also that day twelve-month, after the person’s decease; and on every one of those days a quantity of victuals is dressed, and given to the poor. The women go to the tomb every Monday or Thursday, and carry some flowers or green leaves to dress it with. They make a great show of grief, often expostulating heavily with the dead person, ‘Why he should leave them, when they had done everything in their power to make life agreeable to him?’ This, however, by the men is looked upon as a kind of impiety; and, if over-heard, they are chid severely for it: and I must say the men generally set them a good example in this respect, by a patient acquiescence in the loss of their nearest relations, and indeed show a firm and steady fortitude under every other kind of misfortune’. Egyptian Nubians believe that if certain actions are performed before the appearance of the moon that marks the beginning of a lunar Arabic month, an individual undergoing a ‘crisis’ rite, such as a burial, will come to harm (Kennedy, 2005, p. 229), as it may threaten their fertility, reflecting links between pollution and danger (Douglas, 1966). Tending the dead is a business which generates life in the topography of death.

Mourning is observed by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences (*‘azā*), and avoiding decorative clothing and jewellery. A three-day mourning period (*‘iddah*) is observed by relatives and close friends. Nubians believe that the spirit of the dead keeps a close eye on what is going on at his/her funeral (Kennedy, 2005, pp. 228–229). In eighteenth-century Aleppo, ‘The men wear no mourning; but the women put on their gravest-coloured cloaths, and the head-dress is of a dark brick-dust colour. They also lay aside their jewels, and other pieces of female finery, for the space of twelve months, if they mourn for their husband, and six months if for their father. These periods, however, they do not observe very strictly. But before the widow marries again, she must mourn forty days for her deceased husband, without going out of the house, or speaking to any person more than what is absolutely necessary; and this prohibition extends even to her nearest relations. This term of forty days does not commence from the demise of burial; but, on the contrary, is rarely observed till several months after’ (Russell, 1756, pp. 118–119). Among the Ma‘aza, the deceased is commemorated on the 15 and 40th days (*arba’ in*) after burial with visits to the graveyard, sheep slaughtered and feast given to invited guests. On the 40th day, they slaughter a sheep or goat and leave some food and water on the grave – a symbolic gesture as they do not believe that the dead will actually use them (Hobbs, 1989, pp. 65–66). Nubians believe that the soul lingers around the grave for 40 days and returns at annual feasts, may visit relatives and to receive offerings of water, food, and palm leaves. On the 15th day, relatives gather by the graveside to eat dates and sweets and recite the Exhortation (Kennedy, 2005, pp. 228–229).

As Seale (1998, p. 8) explained, all social life is defence against grief caused by the realisation of embodiment so that in the everyday we engage in resurrective practices designed to transform an orientation towards death into one that points to life. Maintenance of social bonds in the face of death is a continual resurrective practice, permeating everyday life, a practice shared by many cultures as people

turn away from death and towards life (Seale, 1998, p. 33, chap. 3, chap. 5). However, these social bonds are in 'a continual and fluid negotiation of membership through symbolic violence and resurrective practice' (Seale, 1998, p. 70). Thus a daughter's marriage arrangements may be especially urgent because the father is dying, to provide her with an alternative support network and as a symbol of continuing fertility in life in the face of death. Widows observe an extended mourning period (*'iddah*) (Qur'an 2, p. 234; Kennedy, 2005, pp. 234–235) when they cannot remarry, move away from home, wear decorative clothing, perfume, *kohl*, or jewellery; many wear black for at least three years as a symbol of sorrow.

### Death mediated by the afterlife and by paradise

As Smith and Haddad (1981) outline, there have been numerous studies on the revelations of the Qur'an and judgements in Muslim theology. Death is seen as a fulfilment of life so that Muslims prepare themselves for the continuation of a bodily existence after death. A person's shadow walks with him/her through life, and dies at death and enters with him/her to his/her tomb. The *angarib* (bed frame) on which the deceased was carried to the Nubian grave is left out in the street until the new moon (Kennedy, 2005, p. 228).

In contrast to Walter's secular medico-psychological discourse of death (1994), devout Muslims, Christians, and Jews can expect to enter Paradise after death, for these 'Religions of the Book' extend beyond any worldly utopia for the appointed time of death is known only by God. Lane (1836/1890/2003) describes customs associated with death and Paradise, traditions that are recorded in exquisite detail in the Qur'an (Smith & Haddad, 1981, p. 7). Kennedy (2005, pp. 227–228) recounts that the corpse is placed on an *angarib* covered with palm fronds, and the face and body rubbed with henna, a cosmetic considered holy and suitable for entry to Paradise. As elsewhere, Nubians believe that after the Judgement Day a soul either ascends to Paradise or descends to the Fires of Hell.

Classical Islamic concepts including purgatory, the circles of damnation, the subterranean fires of Hell, and the seven heavens (Sura 65:12) were incorporated into its cosmology from earlier traditions (Smith & Haddad, 1981, pp. 9–12). Whilst the Qur'an focuses on the Day of Resurrection, it says little about the period between death and resurrection (Smith & Haddad, 1981, p. ix). This period is the time of 'punishment in the grave' (*'adhāb al-qabr*), when Muslims are obliged to endure the darkness and 'torment of the grave' in a purgatory between death and the resurrection. Just after a person dies they have a chance to briefly travel to the hereafter and then they return to the grave to await the final judgement. On the Day of Judgement, the damned will cross the bridge of Gehenna to face seven layers of punishment in the pit of hell, each more dreadful than the next.

For the wicked, terrifying angels extract the souls after death and sinners suffer tortures. In contrast, those who perform good deeds and prayed regularly during their lifetimes experience a foretaste of Paradise before returning to the grave to

await final judgement. In Upper Egypt, the burial chamber allows the deceased to sit up in it when being thus questioned. As Lane (1836/1896/2003) and Lane-Poole (2004, p. 26) explained, on the first night of burial ‘There are also two Angels, called Munkir (vulg. Nákir) and Nekeer, who examine all the dead and torture the wicked in their graves’ and ask five final questions and expect the following answers: (1) Who is god? God is Allah. (2) Who is your Prophet? My Prophet is Prophet Muhammad. (3) What is your Book? My book is the Qur’an. (4) Who is your imam? He is ‘so-and-so’. (5) Which is your *qiblah*? My direction of prayer is towards Mecca. Rodenbeck (2000, p. 59) also described a recent funeral procession (*madfana*) he witnessed in Cairo: ‘The Koran reader in his dark grey kaftan and rounded blue-tasselled fez scuttles along with the rest. He is preparing in his mind, one supposes the instructions he will give to the deceased on how to answer the interrogating angels of the grave, Munkar and Nakeer, who will come to torment him after dark. The sombre caravan slips past. It is not numerous, the dead man is neither rich nor famous’. We are assessed after life by the way one has led life on earth. ‘Life may continue in some form either in the grave or in another condition, but we are assured the resurrection of our bodies and eternal life as fully constituted individuals’ (Smith & Haddad, 1981, p. 8).

There are obviously no complete first-person narratives of dying but life between death and Judgement Day is believed to be similar to life before death. Even though the body cannot move, it retains its intellect and, in some oral traditions, it continues to hear. The dead can communicate through the medium of dreams or *jinn* and may ask the living to perform deeds on their behalf. In pre-Islamic times, as in contemporary Islamic communities, certain places are considered to be inhabited by *jinn* especially graveyards, ruined houses, and outhouses, and when entering them a formula must be uttered to drive them away. Fearfully, Nubians tear their clothes and smear their faces with mud, ash, and blue dye to confuse *jinn*, who flock around at death. *Jinn* have great influence on earth (Kennedy, 2005, p. 225). ‘They built huge cities whose ruins still stand in forgotten places’; some fled Earth and others still roam desolate places; and they may well survive mankind. Souls have the shape of white birds, feeding on the fruits of Paradise: ‘The souls of martyrs live in the bodies of green birds who have their nests in chandeliers hung from the throne of the Almighty. They eat the fruits of Paradise from wherever they like and then nestle in these chandeliers’ (Muslim:C33B20N4651). Souls enter Upper Egyptian cemeteries in the form of small green birds (Lane, 1836, cited by Blackman, 1927, p. 121) for ‘the souls of martyrs (*shuhadā*) reside in the crops of green birds, which eat of the fruits of Paradise and drink of its rivers’.

To many Europeans, the Orient was the locus of a fairy-tale world of fantasy of the *Arabian Nights* and, as Reid (2002, p. 219) has pointed out, ‘it was a rare tourist who could write home of contemporary Cairo without invoking the *Arabian Nights*’. Russell (1756) records that the *Arabian Nights* were traditional folk tales conveyed through oral tradition and no doubt played a similar role to TV soap operas today. They are set apart from reality in a spaceless, timeless universe and explore a number of antagonisms: life versus death, love versus violence, good

versus bad, and nature versus culture. Haunted cemeteries and evil spirits including the *ghūl*, a kind of evil *jinn* that eats men, all figure throughout the *Tales*. The *ghūl* is a man-like creature with monstrous facial features who inhabits desolate and lonely places, especially graveyards where he feasts on corpses. *Ghūls* may 'appear to a person travelling alone in the night and in solitary places, and being supposed by him to be itself a traveller, lures him out of his way' (Lane, 1841, p. 36). The narration releases the readers without solving these ambiguities and without providing a moral conclusion. Fictions can provide meta-stories for people to interpret their own biographical situations, and to model their own experiences of living, grief, death, and dying. Its characters populate a fantastical landscape of death as part of imagined communities.

## Conclusions

'Modern' scientific medicine has objectified the body, for attitudes to death are no longer shaped by dogmas of religion but by the dying, dead, and bereaved themselves. Death has become a medico-psychological discourse formalised into a series of stages of dying and loss (Seale, 1998, pp. 5–6). Increasingly rational, medical, secular, and bureaucratic constraints depersonalise and hide death which becomes essentially a private or personal loss to be freely handled by the dying and bereaved in a wide variety of ways. In the 'neo-modern' 'West', authority over dying is located in 'the self'. For Walter, dying is seen as an individual project in which it is 'possible to face death without tradition, without ritual, without religion' . . . 'Within their own family, [the dying] create and negotiate their own dying role, drawing on family traditions, past experience, and . . . personal and family coping styles' (1994, pp. 188–189). Medical practice is based on a pre-eminent dying patient. Around this focus are grieving relatives and friends who are largely ignored by the medical profession. Once dead, the deceased is no longer a patient. In Western institutions as death approaches, the emphasis may only then shift towards attempts to provide meaning for the grieving relatives, a dilemma of conflicting assumptions that not only affects Muslims living in Western communities (Hauser & Lantos, 2000, p. 47) but also reflects badly managed arrangements for dying and 'shameful death' (Kellehear, 2007, pp. 191–256). As Kellehear emphasises, dying is not 'well managed'; in the cosmopolitan West there is a rise in shameful state-defined forms of dying and social exclusion: 'dying . . . is increasingly unrecognised in institutional settings outside hospital or health service settings' (2007, p. 253).

Kellehear argues that 'there has been a major decline in religious imagination in recent times'; his focus is on an increasingly godless West (2007, p. 198) but he ignores the flourishing religious imagination and traditions of Islamic communities. In contrast to Kellehear's 'shameful' Western experience of dying which is increasingly secluded, impersonal, and publicly controlled, 'traditional' Islamic family and community members are expected to care as much for the self as for the community; indeed, social marginalisation of the elderly does not generally happen in Muslim communities. Seale claims that 'As the body ages and decays

projects of self-identity are disrupted and reciprocity in social relationships becomes difficult to maintain' (1998, pp. 6–7). This may well be the case in Western cultures where the elderly are left alone but is not relevant in 'traditional' Islamic communities where the elderly remain part of the imagined community and provide an ultimate link with life after death. In contrast to the West where religion has lost its authority over death (Walter, 1994, p. 3), shared norms on how to die and how to mourn are embedded in Islamic tradition: there is no decline in the religious grand narrative. Islamic religious rules provide a framework on how to interpret death and how to handle the corpse but it also leaves space for local expressions of loss and mourning. Through mourning, values of tolerance and sympathy are promoted as desirable social virtues (Seale, 1998, p. 3).

Kellehear notes that '[d]eath attitudes in more secular societies need some comparison with societies where religious outlooks prevail in a largely uncontested social environment' (2007, p. 57). As Seale recorded, each society establishes its own constructions of death, dying, and bereavement, including its religious traditions and profane myths, which establish and reinforce self-identity. The culture of death in Middle Eastern 'imagined' communities must be understood as syncretism of Islam in its many forms, other religious beliefs and local traditions. Localised and popular Islamic traditions are to be found throughout the Islamic world but not necessarily incorporated into orthodox Islamic law as religiously sanctioned rites (Halevi, 2004, p. 123). There are tensions between popular and orthodox interpretations of Islam. There is no way that a life can return to earth, for we only have one life (Sura 23:100). Death is not reversible except in myths and legends. To return to Giddens (1991), by 'bracketing out' contingency and death we 'carry on' in life, but are still haunted by the dread of death and even, as Kellehear (2007) emphasises, dying has somehow become shameful in the West. Yet in modern society self-identity is deliberative – where identities are reinforced by the continual reordering of self-narratives – but like Islamic communities, we create myths and dogmas for the continuation of life after death to explain natural events and teach certain values in life, to explain away the extraordinary and to provide security and hope, even in the face of death.

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