

## **The funerary practices in Algeria: An anthropological comparative perspective on burial rituals between muslim and Jewish graves**

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**Abstract---**This research paper seeks to examine the most important rituals and practices accompanying the burial process between two cultures: Muslims and Jews. It presents the key similarities and differences in burial practices and rituals. This subject has been an extensive field, especially within religious anthropological studies, which aim to uncover what is often left unspoken, from the moment of death to the final stage of burial.

**Keywords---**death, burial, rituals, practices, graves.

### **Introduction:**

Graves are considered among the most prominent monuments, embodying both material and symbolic dimensions, whether religious, cultural, or social. They are not merely places for burying the dead but are charged with deep meanings that shape communities. In the Algerian context, where Jews coexisted with Muslims across centuries, Jewish identity, beliefs, and rituals connected to death took form. The study of Muslim cemeteries across different regions of Algeria reveals long-standing traditions, while Jewish graves provide crucial insights into religious, social, and historical interactions, granting a profound understanding of communal memory, death, and collective identity.

This topic lies at the intersection of cultural anthropology and the sociology of religion. It involves the study of burial, death, and graves through the examination of symbols, rituals, and funerary practices of both Jewish and Muslim communities. A comparative analysis allows us to recognize both convergence and divergence, uncovering meanings tied to sacredness, purity, identity, memory, and place in Algeria. Algeria experienced long coexistence between Muslims and Jews, and this was reflected not only in modes of living in ancient cities but also in burial customs. Cemeteries, appearing at different times,

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embodied Islamic simplicity in some contexts, while Jewish cemeteries often carried decorative and symbolic characteristics rooted in historical and religious traditions of the Jewish community in Algeria. This study aims at a comparative analysis of the symbolic and material aspects of Muslim and Jewish cemeteries in Algeria. It examines funerary inscriptions, architectural features, and rituals associated with burial and visitation. Moreover, it seeks to explore how death and collective memory are represented in each community, highlighting points of similarity and difference in burial traditions.

Thus, this research attempts to shed light on cultural and social dynamics that prevailed in different periods, considering funerary spaces as symbolic geographical entities. Beyond documentation, anthropology provides a lens for multiple interpretive readings of religious, historical, social, and cultural dimensions in Algeria.

Despite the growing number of studies on death, rituals, and cemeteries, Jewish cemeteries remain relatively understudied, particularly as symbolic religious spaces requiring comparative research between communities. Some scholars who have worked on cemeteries and funerary rituals include Dr. Zazoui Mouafak, researcher Fatima Fdadi, researcher Hassan Ali Abdel Hamid, and among others.

**Research Problem:**

What are the similarities and differences between Muslim and Jewish cemeteries in terms of rituals, symbols, and content?

**Methodology:**

This comparative study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, relying on both fieldwork observation and theoretical analysis. It utilizes research tools to understand practices and cultural meanings associated with cemeteries and graves.

A sample of 30 cemeteries was selected, including Islamic and Jewish sites, from two Algerian cities (Tlemcen and Nahran), both rich in Jewish heritage and religious diversity. This allows for a comparative approach across cultural, social, religious, and architectural dimensions.

**1. Death and Burial in Islam  
– Burial as a Rite of Passage**

Anthropologically, burial can be approached as a rite of passage. Arnold van Gennep, in his book *Rites of Passage* (van Gennep, (1981) p. 196), considered them as rituals marking transitions between stages of human life or social status. Death, in this framework, is understood as a passage from one state to another. Burial, accompanied by rituals, represents a transitional stage where the individual is assisted into a new existence.

Across cultures, such rites symbolize the movement from life to death, creating a bridge between worldly existence and the afterlife. Practices such as burial in the ground or cremation are infused with spiritual beliefs, guiding the soul of the deceased toward the next world.

Death signifies the departure of the soul from the body, leading to the cessation of all biological and functional activities—heartbeat, breathing, circulation, and brain activity. The recognition of death, which predates history, distinguished humans from other living beings and gave rise to diverse rituals and beliefs (Pierre Bonte, (2011), p. 881).

Thus, death has been understood differently across cultures, but in anthropology, its meanings are best grasped through rituals and practices. It is a social and symbolic phenomenon analyzed through observation and interpretation.

In Islam, funeral rites include washing, shrouding, prayer, and burial, all performed to accompany the deceased with dignity. From a psychological perspective, death is often linked to the instinct described by Freud as the “death drive” or as an unconscious expression of a return to nonexistence (Zazououi, Mouafak, (2001), p. 14).

Death means the final cessation of biological functions, and consequently, the transition from this world to the hereafter, with the loss of the individual’s place in society.

The burial of the dead is carried out by washing him with water, then shrouding him in a white shroud, followed by performing the funeral prayer in congregation in the mosque. Afterwards, the deceased is carried to the cemetery, and after digging the grave, the body is placed inside. The deceased is laid on his right side facing the Qibla, without a coffin, in a wide and deep grave. Then, the grave is covered with soil and stones. Burial in the land where death occurred is required. Burial is considered by Muslims an obligation and a duty, as well as an expression of respect and honor for the dead, and a means of seeking mercy and forgiveness for him. Almighty God said: “Have We not made the earth a container for the living and the dead?” (Surat Al-Mursalat, verse 25). This indicates the obligation of burying the dead in the earth, both on its surface and within it, for the living and the dead alike. The grave is thus regarded as the first meeting point on earth for man, whom God honored from among the children of Adam (Mustafa Wahba, Zahir, p. 6). After that, condolences are offered to the family of the deceased, providing them with support and comfort.

Burial is not merely a material act tied to the fate of the body, but a practice reflecting the metaphysical vision of man. In Islamic burial rites, it represents the principle of honoring man and symbolizes the link between worldly life and the hereafter. This is manifested in the washing, shrouding, prayer, and burial in graves oriented toward the Qibla. Muslim graves are marked by their simplicity.

## **2 – Death and Burial in Judaism:**

In the Jewish religion, death and burial represent a transitional stage, as the soul departs and returns to God. Rituals are practiced that express respect for the deceased and condolences for the living.

According to Jewish texts, death is not the end, but rather a passage. In the apparent perspective, it marks the end of human life and the body. However, Jews believe that death is but a stage leading to another stage yet to come. They affirm that the soul is part of God, that it is among the highest of angels, and that it ascends to God, the source of divine glory. Jewish tradition distinguishes between the souls of Jews, which are elevated, and the souls of non-Jews, which are described as demonic (ThabetMahdi, (2018), p. 191).

In accordance with strict religious rituals, Jewish burial is conducted at the moment of death, when the soul leaves the body. Special prayers and supplications are recited, some of which are mentioned in their scriptures. No one is allowed to touch the sick person at the moment of death, since the departing soul is likened to a flickering candle flame that should not be extinguished. Therefore, the body must be immediately covered upon the soul’s departure. At the moment of death, a candle is lit and placed near the deceased, who should utter the testimony (Shema) before dying. A portion of the garment is cut as a sign of mourning, and verses from the Torah are read (Zazououi, op.cit., p. 27).

Afterwards, the body is washed and shrouded in a white cloth, then the funeral prayer is performed in a simple ceremony inside the synagogue. The deceased may be buried directly in the earth or in a simple wooden coffin placed above the ground. During burial, verses from the Torah are recited, and the grave is covered with soil and stones. Burial should take place as soon as possible, for delaying the burial is considered by Jews a great calamity, a serious humiliation of the deceased, and a sign of divine anger (Mahdi,op.cit., p. 223).

After burial, mourning lasts for seven days, during which the family of the deceased wears black clothes as a symbol of grief and receives condolences.

### **3 – History of Jewish Presence in Algeria:**

The Jewish presence in Algeria dates back to ancient times. It is believed that the earliest Jewish settlement was linked to Phoenician merchants who came to North Africa more than 3000 years ago, establishing a Jewish community that engaged in trade. Their conditions varied under different rulers. Under Roman rule, they were organized under the authority of the “Ethnarch,” who was responsible for Jewish affairs and taxation. Some families gained wealth and prestige, while others suffered from oppression (Ibn sahrawi,Kamal(2013), p. 131). Later, newcomers joined them from Spain and elsewhere, strengthening the community. Algerian Jews preserved their religious rituals and customs, maintained their social traditions, and practiced professions such as trade and crafts (ToubalNedjwa,(2005), p. 3).

With the advent of Islam in North Africa, Jews became part of Muslim society. While some embraced Islam, others retained their religion, which guaranteed them rights under Islamic law. They were bound by specific regulations within society, which restricted certain practices such as the sale of alcohol or dealing in prohibited trades (Ibid, p. 132).

In Algeria, Jews enjoyed freedom in their internal affairs and in practicing their religious rituals and education. Economically, they were active in trade. They became an established community under the protection of Muslim rulers. The cities of Algeria, especially Tlemcen, Mascara, and the capital Algiers, welcomed Jewish settlements. They were later joined by Andalusian Jews expelled from Spain, who settled in several regions (Abd Samad Hamza,(2017), p. 3). In Tlemcen, they lived freely, practiced their religious rituals, and were among the wealthy. They established quarters such as “the Palace of the Marquis” where they resided (Ibid, p. 4).

Jews became known for jewelry craftsmanship, establishing workshops and settling in places like Bede. Despite their membership in Algerian society, the Jews did not hesitate to cooperate with the French colonial army in 1830. Some Jews, who had returned to Algeria as interpreters for the French army from Marseille, were sent with the rest to the city of Algiers before the army landed, in order to serve French interests. As a result, they became of great importance to the French when they decided to thwart resistance operations. Mordechai Durand was used as an intermediary to enter into negotiations with Yahya Agha. Despite the failure of this, they considered him, along with the Jews, as collaborators with the French campaign commander Bourmont. (Kamal ,op.cit ,p. 134).

Mordechai became the chief of the Jewish community in 1830, and the Jews continued to support and assist the French occupation. They even formed a Jewish army under the leadership of a Jewish general, headed by Mordechai himself. (Ibid: p. 134).

Colonial authorities granted Jews privileges and imposed French education, which in turn provoked violent reactions, given the prevailing conditions in which Muslims dominated society. The majority of Jews cut their ties with Algerian society and aligned themselves with French colonialism. (Jalil Ramadan Dabd Ahmed, (2019), p. 3).

After independence, many of them left the country, fearing reprisals, and stood with the French army, even though they left behind their properties. Jews witnessed continuous campaigns of repression from 1870, when the Vichy government abolished their French privileges. After the end of the war and the defeat of the Nazis in Paris, their privileges were restored, but the majority of Algerian Jews aligned themselves with France and opposed independence. Many of them joined the French in the war against Algerians, while others refused participation in the war, saying that they were French and not Algerian,

which led to their emigration to France and Palestine during the colonial period, and after independence as well. (Ibid, p. 4).

#### 4- Characteristics of Muslim graves in Algeria

The cemetery, with its opening, is a burial ground where the human being is placed along with graves. It is the site of burial, where the dead is interred, and it is made as a grave. The graveyard is a collective of graves, where the dead is buried, and where a burial is made for a person. (Qutb Abdallah Salah, The Cemetery as a Collective of Graves,( 2020), p. 13).

(1 – Muslim cemetery by context)

Burying the dead after his death is a continuous tradition in creation since our master Adam, peace be upon him. He was the first to die on earth, when his son Cain killed Abel. He remained without knowing what to do with him, until God sent a crow scratching the ground to show him how to bury the body of his brother. ( Daher ,Abd al-Wahhab Mustafa Zahir p. 6).



**Muslim Cemetery in Tlemcen(1)**

The people of the Sunnah and the community believe that the grave is the first station of the Hereafter. If a servant is saved from it, what follows is easier, but if he does not escape it, what follows is more severe. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: “The grave is the first station of the Hereafter. If one survives it, what follows is easier; but if one does not survive it, what follows is more severe.” (Ibn Abiel-korishi,Al Hafiz(2000), p. 9).

Accordingly, the grave is a place where a person is buried after his death. It is a rectangular pit with space for the body of the deceased, covered with soil. It does not exceed two meters in depth, and differs in form and shape from country to country and creed to creed. For Muslims, the cemetery is considered the first station of the Hereafter, being either a pit of Hellfire or a garden of Paradise. Burying the dead after his death is a continuous tradition



**Muslim Cemetery in Tlemcen (2)**

in creation since our master Adam, peace be upon him. Among Muslims, there are two types of graves: **al-Shaqq** and **al-Lahd**.

1 – **Al-Shaqq**: It is digging a pit in the middle of the grave, the length of the deceased, where he is laid on his right side facing the Qiblah. The sides are then built with bricks, then raised slightly so that soil and stones can be placed over him, then the pit is covered with soil.

2 – **Al-Lahd**: It is digging a niche in the lower wall of the grave towards the Qiblah, where the deceased is laid on his right side facing the Qiblah. The niche is then covered with bricks and soil, with about a hand-span of soil raised above, so the grave becomes recognizable. Construction over it is not permitted. (Hasan Ali Abdul Hamid, (1985), p. 35).



**Muslim Cemetery in Tlemcen (3)**

Thus, Muslim graves are distinguished by

The graves contain inscriptions, epitaphs that include religious texts, Qur'anic verses, supplications, poetry drawn from diverse cultural heritage, and also writings in Arabic and French. The inscriptions carry information such as the name of the deceased, his birth date, date of death, and sometimes even titles. Writing on the tombstone is usually in black, red, or green colors, making it easier for the family

to recognize the deceased. It is a continuing discourse that expresses the identity of the deceased and is also a means of protection against oblivion. (Bouchamaal-Hadi, (2015), p. 16).

On some tombstones, we also find the crescent and star, symbols of Islam. The tombstone is usually rectangular, made of stone, and placed at the head of the deceased, sometimes at his feet or at both sides. The writing is often done 40 days after the death, by relatives of the deceased. On some graves we also find the phrase “Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we shall return” or expressions such as “O Allah, have mercy on him” or “Pray for him.”

To protect the grave, carpenters sometimes place a layer of wood or about 10 cm of cement all around, which reflects the concern of the family to preserve the deceased from animals digging, from desecration, or violation.

The tomb may also carry a picture of the deceased, which indicates his social or economic status. The family may also plant flowers or trees around the grave. Scholars have disagreed on this practice: some consider it an innovation and not permissible, citing that the Prophet, peace be upon him, did not do this; others see in planting trees a



**Jewish Cemetery in Oran, Bel Hamri (4)**

purpose, since they glorify Allah, and they even plant olive, basil, or cedar trees by the graveside as a blessing or as charity. There is usually a small distance between graves, with passages allowing for visitation. For Muslims, visiting the grave includes supplicating for the dead and serves as a reminder of resurrection and the afterlife.

#### **5 – Characteristics of Jewish graves in Algeria:**

The Jewish cemetery is a religious place considered sacred for the burial of members belonging to the Jewish faith. It is known in Hebrew as Bet Kvarot or Bet Olam, meaning House of Graves or House of Eternity. Burial customs are ancient traditions, and the land is considered sacred. Jewish cemeteries were established outside cities, with graves dug deep and in a specific direction. Tombstones are erected, inscribed in Hebrew, and sometimes in the local language. The cemeteries are owned by the Jewish community or families.

On the tombstones, stones are often placed by visitors, which serves as a sign that



**Jewish Cemetery in Tlemcen (5)**

The deceased was visited, as well as a symbol for others to recognize the grave. The placing of stones is a tradition that has become widespread.

Jewish tombstones also include religious symbols such as the Star of David, the hands of the priests symbolizing the blessing, or the shield of David representing Jewish identity. The tombs are rectangular in shape, built of stone or marble, and raised slightly above the ground. The tombstone bears the name of the deceased, his date of birth and death, and sometimes verses from the Torah or religious expressions. Sometimes they are written in Hebrew, other times in Arabic.

Jewish cemeteries are enclosed by walls or fences to protect them from destruction or desecration. The funeral rites are carried out according to their customs. Visiting the grave is considered a symbolic act and reflects the social position of the deceased in the community, often associated with remembrance of his death.

#### **6 – Jewish cemeteries in Algeria:**

These Jewish cemeteries, spread across Algeria, reflect the historical presence of the Jewish community in the country. Among them we find the Jewish cemetery in Constantine, and the Jewish cemetery in Oran.

##### **(4 – The Jewish cemetery in Oran)**

Oran was one of the provinces most known for its cultural, social, and economic coexistence between its inhabitants. After the fall of Granada, Jews fleeing Spanish persecution settled in the city of Oran, especially in the district of Sidi al-Haouari, where they were received and lived in harmony. The cemetery was established near a synagogue, and among its most prominent rabbis buried there was Rabbi Ephraim Ankawa.

The Jewish cemetery of Oran dates back to 1392. (Tahar,Fouad 2014, p. 61). It became a pilgrimage site after the death of Rabbi Ankawa. The Jews of Oran considered this their first burial place, and they continued burying their dead there.

In Tlemcen province in northwestern Algeria, Jews were also present since ancient times, their presence being reinforced during the Ottoman period, although the majority emigrated later, especially during the

French colonial period. A small minority remained until independence, after which they migrated to France and Israel.

In Oran, trade and traditional crafts were practiced jointly between Jews and Muslims. The Jewish cemetery was located next to the Muslim one. Today, it is known as Saint Eugène Cemetery. (Elias Wahbi(2014 p ).

Jewish graves in Oran are characterized by their simplicity, rectangular tombstones surrounded by stone walls, with inscriptions in Hebrew and Arabic. We also find religious symbols such as the Star of David and the hands of the priests engraved on the tombstones.

### **7 – Comparison between Muslim and Jewish graves in Algeria:**

- **Aspects of similarity:**

Both religions consider cemeteries as sacred places.

Both Muslim and Jewish graves are simple and not costly.

Funeral rites are similar in their solemnity.

- **Aspects of difference:**

Jewish graves are more elaborate and distinguished than Muslim graves. The direction of burial differs: Muslims are buried facing the Qiblah (Mecca), while Jews face Jerusalem. Jewish tombstones often bear religious symbols, absent from Muslim graves. Jewish cemeteries are usually outside cities, while Muslim cemeteries may be inside or outside. The language of inscription also differs: Muslim tombstones are usually in Arabic, while Jewish ones are often in Hebrew, sometimes in Arabic.

### **Conclusion:**

From the comparison between Muslim and Jewish graves in Algeria, it can be concluded that there are clear differences in funeral practices, burial rites, and symbols. These reflect the religious, cultural, and social environments of each community. At the same time, the use of stone tombstones shows the simplicity of Muslim graves in Algeria, whereas Jewish graves are marked by greater ornamentation, symbolic engravings, and emphasis on religious identity. Thus, both communities preserved their distinct cultural and religious identities, while interacting with their Algerian environment.

Thus, we can conclude that death constitutes a unifying factor among religions if mutual respect exists between them. Accordingly, this study does not aim to expose contradictions but rather to designate specific characteristics for each religion and its rituals and beliefs. It also provides us with the opportunity to become further acquainted with religions within Algerian society and with coexistence among them.

Anthropological studies on death show that graves are considered sacred places for all religions, as they are the place of burial. These studies also show an abundance of research devoted to death and graves, in order to immortalize the memory of the dead, to honor them, and as a means of spiritual communication with them.

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