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Until We All Rise: Aspects of Traditional Muslim Burial Practices and Ceremonies in Tajikistan

Abstract: Islam, which spread out to Central Asia after its conquest by the Arab armies in early 8th century, has expanded and taken roots in the spiritual and everyday life of each ethnic group of the region in its own way. In its Central Asian geo-cultural contexts, similar to other regions where it came to be the faith of majority, it is more prone to integrated characteristics, including traditional ethnic beliefs and ritualistic elements. The study of Islam among other things in the context of local traditional rituals, particularly the funerary traditions and observances, which has also kept many cultural elements pre-existing the arrival of Islam, has profound meaning in many aspects; such as re-interpretation of the afterlife views and development of cycle of observances and ceremonies that are performed in the hope of earning merit on behalf of deceased and a hope for the day when all who died rise again. The focus of this paper is to present the funerary ritual cycle of Tajik Muslims. The limits of the contribution are set to Tajikistan; but also refer to corresponding and parallel ceremonies observed among the Tajiks living in other neighbouring countries. The impact of this contribution is both in its inventory of the literature on the topic but also on discussion of the importance of these rituals and how the communities feel about the reasons and performance of these ceremonies. The ceremonies that provide merit for both deceased and their kin award them with a sustaining hope that they all will rise and unite in the Last Day. The material for this contribution was collected through group and individual interviews of people from various regions of Tajikistan (April-September, 2014), personal observations and from previous studies on the topic. In what follows I will provide a short literature review on existing studies on funerary traditions of Tajik Muslims and also a descriptive compendium of all currently practiced cycles of funerary ceremonies.

Key words: Tajikistan, funerary customs, death, ethnography, traditions, Islam, eschatology, re-interpretation, religious

Introduction

Tajikistan is one of the Muslim-majority countries of the former USSR. In its historical past the geography of modern-day Tajikistan was part of Sogdiana in the North and Bactria and Tokharistan in the South and East occupying the cen-

tral junction of the Silk Road connecting and dividing multiple ethnolinguistic, geopolitical and cultural zones. Accordingly, the religious traditions and customs of people living in modern Tajikistan presents a lot of features echoing the religious traditions that was current in the area before the arrival and establishment of Islam. The dominant religion in the area was Zoroastrianism, but there were also other religions, such as Manicheans, Buddhists and Christians each having its own social and cultural influences (Ashurov 2019; Foltz 2010). Islam began to penetrate the territory of modern-day Tajikistan in the second half of the seventh century and perhaps the defeat of the last Sogdian king Dēwāštīč in ca. 722 can be assumed as a start point of implementation of the Islamic faith and traditions in the area (Bogoliubov and Smirnova 1963; Grenet and La Vaissière 2002). As observed from historical writings and material culture studies, the socio-political condition of the region and the conversion of the local elite to the new religion helped Islam in the ninth-tenth centuries, under the Samanid Dynasty to attain the status of the ‘state religion’ and from then to now it remains the religion of majority both in Tajikistan and the rest of the Central Asian region (Goibov 1989).

The local Islamic practices of the Tajik people have developed over many centuries in tight connection with already existing diverse local spiritual practices and sociocultural customs. Thus, however recent the current Muslim practices of the Tajik people may be their roots go back deep into ancient history. Close-up examination of the currently practiced religious customs among the Tajik Muslims show the complexity and diversity of the ‘evolutionary’ and dialogical processes between canonical Islamic as prescribed in hadith or Quran and the local religious norms. The final product then came to constitute a whole new ritual observance that are specific to local Tajik context with certain parallels with other ethnic groups. Amongst the vast array of ceremonial religious practices, those related to the burial, funerary customs and other death-related ceremonies have unambiguous contrasting elements demonstrating peculiarity and localized view of death, after death and relationships between the living and the dead in their hope of resurrection and reuniting in the eschaton. What is significant to note is that the local practicing Muslims, despite the knowledge that certain practices cannot be attached to any specific Quranic teachings, still have strong sentiment and convictions that these are *rasmu oini ajdodi / rasmu odati boboi* [tradition and customs of our ancestors or forefathers] and that kinship and ancestral association legitimizes the discrepancies. The elements of pre- or non-Islamic practices and rites have been preserved in all regions of Tajikistan, but they are not homogenous. There are some practices, which are common across Tajikistan and some which are unique only to certain regions or areas. In addition, the practices and ceremonies are conducted differently based on the age and gender of the deceased. Further these practices have distinction on basis of confessional affiliation of the community; there are differences between Sunni and Shi’a – Ismaili practices. Whilst the Ismaili funerary practices have

isolated forms specific only to the Badakhsan Province or among the Ismaili communities living elsewhere in the country; the Sunni Muslim practices have similarities and differences that have much larger spread areal. Furthermore, there are also practices current among the Sunni Muslim Tajiks in Tajikistan that differ from those Tajiks in Uzbekistan or other Central Asian states.

In general, it is safe to assume that the majority of the death customs of Tajik people are based on some local Zoroastrian practices, however with an Islamic outlook. In addition, due to the absence of collectively accepted rules on performing funerary rituals and conducting ceremonies, the very same ceremony or ritual may be observed in completely different ways depending on its geo-ethnic context. Nonetheless, irrespective of the difference, overall the burial customs and imagination of the afterlife are interpreted and perceived in two distinct ways: *musulmoni* (Islamic) and *urfi* (traditional). The funerary customs, ceremonies and rites are observed over 365 days in at least 5 specific stages and after the conclusion of the mourning period of at least one year small commemorative ceremonies are then celebrated during the Islamic festivals, on the dates of deceased's birthday and death anniversary.

The importance of the study of the funerary rites and customs is its close connection with other life cycle events marking significant transitions in human way of life and activities. In particular, the ceremonial and ritualistic connection of the funerary rites find parallel with the maternity and wedding cycles where the distinction can be made only in emotional and sentimental overtones. Thus, the birth and death find much commonality in how the living perceives the death and what responsibilities are assumed by the family members of the deceased as to continuing the legacy and providing sustainability in connections looking ahead towards the resurrection of all who died and received appropriate rites. Analysis of these relationships sustained on ritual and ceremonial grounds allows us to gain a deeper understanding of both individual and collective worldview on the death and afterlife. Further the delineation of archaic layers of the ceremonial knowledge in performing funerary rites allows reconstructing some of the ancient ideological worldviews forgotten by now, but significantly influential in ethnogenesis processes. Different ritual and ceremonial events serve as markers for identity, individuality and belongingness in the broader frame of the laws of human existence and formation of cultural heritages.

Brief survey of existing studies on the topic

There are many studies, ethnographic, anthropological and historical, devoted to the beliefs and rituals of the Tajiks, including their burial practices, rites and ceremonies. Some of the earliest studies on this topic belong to Mikhail Andreev, who recorded the traditional burial rites and customs of different regions of mod-

ern Tajikistan, including the northern territories of Afghanistan. His first research (Andreev & Polovtsev 1911, 17–19) was devoted to the ethnography of the Iranian people of Central Asia where the author, in particular mentions the traditions of the people living in the Ishkashim and the Wakhan regions of Tajikistan. In his next study, (Andreev 1949, 3–19) devoted to the subject of traditional family and matrimonial relationships of the Tajiks, the author also discusses the burial rites revealing how certain relationships were sustained and demonstrated in observing and performing burial customs and rites. Andreev's other two important ethnographic researches (Andreev 1953, 185–202; Andreev 1970, 128–145) are devoted to the ethnography of the Tajiks of the Khuf and Yaghnob Valleys.¹¹ In these works author provides comparative assessment of the ways of life in family and larger social contexts as well as for the first time he records and analyses the mortuary customs of the people from these regions of Tajikistan. In one of his contributions published in 1923 (Andreev 1923, 52–55) he has considered valuable comparative material on ethnography of life style and social customs of the Tajik communities in Panjsher region of the North Afghanistan. It should be mentioned that Andreev's research was not exclusively focused on burial customs and rites, but covers a wide range of aspects of the way of life of the Tajik people and their sociocultural customs, such as weddings, birth, agricultural festivals. The next group of ethnographic studies covering the topic of burial customs belongs to Antonina Pisarchik (Pisarchik 1976, 118–164), who wrote on the burial customs of the Tajiks of the Rasht and Darvaz Valleys (central and eastern part of Tajikistan).¹² In the study of funerary customs in the Southern Tajikistan an important contribution was made by (Rakhimov 1953, 107–130). In this essay, the author provides detailed analyses of death and burial related customs in Kulob district. (Babayeva 1993) in contrast has focused on several major mountainous regions of the Khatlon province highlighting differences and uniqueness of their funerary traditions in contrast with communities living in the plains or urban centres. Aspects of the funerary customs of the Zarafshan Valley of the Northern Tajikistan had been studied by M. Khamidzhanova (Khamidzhanova 1980, 287–293). This author in her study particularly focused on the archaic elements preserved in the traditional customs of the mountainous regions of Mastchoh, Yaghnob and as well people from these regions who settled in Istaravshan, Ayni and Zafarabad districts. Considering the proximity of these regions to Uzbekistan and prevalence of the Turkic-Uzbek culture in the area, Khamidzhanova considers a lot of comparable aspects of the funerary customs observed in these borderland territories. This author particularly highlights the alteration and adaptation of certain elements of the burial customs and rites as

¹¹ The last study based on the Andreev's personal field notes and records were edited and published by Pisarchik.

¹² This research also includes very rich literature reference on the topic found in pages 176–193.

a result of people migrating from their native regions. In one of her essays (Khamidzhanova 1985, 54–58) has recorded and examined the funerary dance *dzhakhra* performed in upper Zarafshan, which finds parallel with other mortuary dances known in Badakhshan province. Considering that this form of funerary dance is lost by now makes the author's records extremely valuable. The topic of post funeral customs in the Northern Tajikistan in the example of Isfara and Khujand cities are discussed in (Ershov 1985, 48–54). (Mardonova 1998) provides great details on funerary customs of the central Tajikistan, including the Faizobod district and the Hisor Valley. This work also includes expanded records of her earlier studies providing many comparative examinations of the funerary ceremonies of Tajiks from Bukhara, Samarqand and Qarshi regions of Uzbekistan.

The funerary customs of the Badakhshan region have their own distinct features. The individuality of funerary customs of the Badakhshan is conditioned by both its geographical and confessional situations. Majority inhabitants of the Badakhshan are followers of the Ismaili sect of Shi'a Islam and their funerary customs are exclusive to their confession (Elnazaov and Aksakalov 2011, 45–75). In addition to the earliest above-mentioned works by Andreev most recent studies on funerary customs of the Badakhshan region include (Yusufbekova 2001). This monograph focuses on the family traditions and relationships of the Shughni people of Badakhshan. This author in particular considers the interrelatedness of the funerary customs within broader spiritual customs of the Shughni people and how family ties and communal belonging plays significant role in observing ceremonies. She had recorded many aspects of the burial customs and death-related rites and beliefs of the people of Shughnan region, some which are lost by now, such as commemorative feasts observed while the person is still alive (Yusufbekova 1987, 182–190). Furthermore, there have been at least two doctoral dissertations produced in recent years (Shoinbekov 2007) focusing on Western Pamir comprising regions of Rushon, Shugnon, Goron, Ishkoshim and Wakhon and (Lashkariev 2007) devoted to the funerary tradition of Bartang region of Badakhshan.

Cycle of the funerary customs, rites and ceremonies of Tajik Muslims

Main components of the funeral (stage by stage)

1. AT THE DEATHBED (VAQTI JONDODAN)

If someone is ill and near to death people try to be as quiet and peaceful as possible so they do not *jonsarak shudan* (cause disturbance to a departing soul of a dying person). When the person is going through an anguish and struggling

to die this condition is called *jondihi qin shud*. In such circumstance, family members perform a series of rituals to facilitate the transition. For example, in the regions of Hisor and Regar (located west of Dushanbe) and in parts of Varzob Valley (north of Dushanbe) people would make a special sacrificial ceremony called *khomtalosh* (distributing raw meat of sacrificed animal). This ceremony is conducted only when a person has been *nimjonu nimmurda* (in partially dead and partially alive) for two or three days. The members of family discerning that the soul is demanding an atonement would take a lamb or a goat and slaughter it *ba niyati xalosi* (for the sake of deliverance) and then distribute the meat uncooked around the neighbourhood. The goal for this ceremony is to help the dying in his struggle and agony of passing away and to please the spirits allow him peacefully transit from this world to the afterlife. The ceremony will be performed either in the mosque preferably during the prayer time, or some holy places nearby, but also in the home of the person for whose sake the ceremony is performed. Those receiving the sacrificial meat must cook it the same day in water and those who eat must pray for the deliverance of the person.¹³

Another ceremony performed on occasion when a person is struggling to die is giving away his or her personal belongings. According to (Murodov and Mardonova 1989, 110–134) this ceremony is observed identically among Tajiks in Samarqand and Bukhara regions of Uzbekistan and in Tajikistan.

Interview report. Chorbogh village, Varzob country, North of Dushanbe (May, 2014)

My grandfather had cancer and his condition became critical all of the sudden. It was three days since he was not eating or drinking and occasionally would open his eyes. He was struggling to breathe and everyone saying *jonush dar halqash rus mondast* (his soul got stuck in his throat). Once the whole family were gathered and waiting for him to pass peacefully; my mother who is an oldest child in the family brought my grandfather's cloak, hat and shoes. When she brought these in a loud voice begun calling our neighbour's name and saying *mana saru-poi hamosata gir; hamsoyat safaraki shudaj biyo chizu-chorasha gir* (come and take clothing of your neighbour; your neighbour is set to his journey to afterlife come and take his possessions). The women in the house than explained that this is done to dishearten my grandfather from his belongings and assure him that his earthly thing will go to good people, so he could transit to the other life easily and in peace.

The philosophy of this rite is based on the belief that people have strong attachment to their possessions. Therefore, a person's soul cannot depart and is tangled in the net of desires of this world and his or her possessions. Accord-

¹³ Should be noted that the *khomtalosh* ritual is not strictly observed in occasion of death agony, but also to honour protective saints for their guardianship. This is usually after when some bad accident occurs and those who survived or come out unharmed will perform this rite – as symbolic manifestation of their life had being spared.

ingly, this ceremony is performed to show the temporality of the assets of this world and that they are going to be passed on or taken away. The ceremony related to this is *tarakai meros* (distribution of the deceased's belongings or inheritance) is performed after the funeral day with all legal and blood related family members present.

The reciting of the Quran, particularly Surat Yā-Sīn is also compulsory at the deathbed, with the sblings of the dying person repeating aš-šahādah on the dying person's behalf (especially if that person is not able to communicate). According to (Shoinbekov 2007, 9–10) the Ismaili in Badakhshan at the deathbed would recite quotations from “Ta'wez” (Written Spells) and “Tole'noma” (Book of Destiny), which are referred to as *kalima* (word) or *kalimai din* (word of faith).

In the northern areas of Dushanbe, in the Varzob region, there is also a ceremony called *hasher dam* (collective praying and breathing out prayer), which involves 4–5 persons reciting Surat Al-Ghāshiyah (The Overwhelming) over the person, who is in anguish of death until he passes away. The Surat Al-Ghāshiyah (The Overwhelming) otherwise is recited in the healing ceremony known as *damkhoni kardan* by one person (a mullah) for deliverance from various diseases (for the deliverance occasion this surah is recited not more than 10 times). The magical event in performing *hashardam* at the deathbed is that it is performed by several readers who specifically call on the soul to come out and not to torment the dying person; whereas for the event of someone who is ill they would plead for the healing and illness to come out.

The *pihil kardan* (giving forgiveness) is another ceremony performed for someone suffering in his/her last hours of life. If this is an elderly widower, one of the daughters, usually the eldest, will come and declare *ai nomi ocham pihil kardam* (I forgive you on our mother's behalf) or his sister will come and pass on forgiveness on behalf of other relatives who are not present there or who have died long ago. The deathbed suffering among Tajiks is associated with sinfulness and also with debt. Thus, the eldest son or a brother will come and say *har qarz ki dori dar gardanam, ba rohat rav* (any debt you owe is my responsibility, go in peace). This event is unique, as it is also being repeated prior to the *saloti janoza* (funeral prayer) being performed.

2. ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEATH (RUI MURDA KHABAR KARDAN)

As soon as the person is announced to be dead,¹⁴ the *khabari janoza* (funeral news) goes out immediately to relatives far and near. As a custom, women do not go out to community or relatives to announce the death or call for the

¹⁴ This is done by the medical personal only if someone dies at the hospital; otherwise it is those present at someone's deathbed that bear witness to his last will (*vasiyat*), as well as to how he died and so announcing the news.

funeral; however, their pivotal role is in informing the surrounding neighbourhood by loud wailing in the court yard. Through the wailing the women will call out to the neighbourhood on their grief and tragedy lamenting through deeply emotional phrases calling on heavens and God.

For understanding this episode of funerary cycle, I have talked with a group of my female colleagues at the National Museum of Tajikistan. The group consists of 5 females between the ages of 25 and 55, representing three regions of Tajikistan. According to the narrative presented by these group it appears that the wailing when someone passes away is a ceremonially structured act, although it may appear to be a spontaneous reaction. The actions take place in an orderly and interpretable manner. It has to be noted that in Tajik society wailing or crying in a loud voice is not an honourable act for men. Thus, in lamenting the passing of a family member, women play chief role. It is through their motherly distressed and emotional lamenting wail that surrounding neighbours are informed of the tragic news of someone's death. After the initial wailing for a short period, women immediately start the setting up of the room where the body will be placed; they arrange mattresses to be used for the deceased and fabrics covering the deceased body; if its winter they find scented dried herbs, such as peppermint and basil or fresh herbs if they are in season; women are to find the fabric to be used for making burial garment and mobilize the younger females in the household to approach the neighbours about preparing the funeral day meal. Once these organizational matters had been taken care of then they surround the deceased and or stand outside in the yard and continue to wail. By this time in the villages members of the community will be coming and usually the close neighbours or relatives who live nearby join in wailing. This joining someone in wailing during the funeral is called *sari ovoz griftan* (helping a person to voice her grief). The traditional response by those who hear someone making a loud lamenting wail, is that people will know to say *khudo rahmat kunad* (May God forgive him) or say a short prayer.

When a person dies almost immediately his clothes are taken (cut) off of the body with scissors by a close family member of appropriate gender e.g. male or female. They tie the deceased's chin up with a piece of muslin, or any other white fabric called *manahband*. The body is put in the middle of the room on a mattress, but without a pillow under the head. The time for burial is determined instantly, with consideration for the deceased's family's situation. The room where the body will be placed has to be big enough to accommodate the mourners during the funeral. In addition, no portraits, mirrors or food items are to be kept in that room. Usually if the deceased is an elderly person the body is kept in the same room where they were bedbound ill, or used as bedroom.

3. GUEST FOR ONE NIGHT (MEHMON KARDANI MURDA)

Traditionally Tajiks buried their dead considering the time is needed for all relatives to gather and have chance to say goodbye. However, recent legal changes dictate that deceased has to be buried the same day, only next day if the death occurs at night. The situation when the deceased is kept overnight is referred to as *mehmon kardani murda*. Sometimes this event is conditioned by the fact that a person dies in the late afternoon and it is not possible to dig the grave in the dark. Another example is when someone dies suddenly and only a few of his/her relatives, particularly sons or daughters, are away and cannot come within 3–4 hours. In this event the deceased, sometimes is given a bath; and this ceremony is called *ba obi mahram giriftan* (covering with the sacred water). The purpose of this ‘pre-wash’ is to make sure that if *malikaho* (guardian angels) or *arvohoi guzashta* (the spirits of ancestors) or even Munkar and Nakir (two angels responsible to interrogate the dead about their deeds on earth) come to visit the deceased person that night; he would be found ceremonially clean and worthy. However, rarely, is the dead person put in burial garments, as this is done only after the final bathing called *ghusli mait*, which takes place just prior to taking the body out for burial prayer. The reason for reserving the shrouding to the last moment is that once the body is wrapped in burial garments his face is not shown to anyone; this would make the deceased ceremonially unclean. Accordingly, to allow visitors to look at the deceased person for the last time during the lamentation ceremony the shrouding is kept for the last moment.

During this night, the body is placed facing eastward, towards Mecca. The doors and windows are kept shut so that animals (pets) and evil spirits or fallen angels will not come to disturb the dead. If there are mirrors and photos in the room, where the body is placed these must be covered. To ward off the evil spirits a staff or the Quran is placed next to the body. A few people will sit next to the body to guard him/her, but the rest of the family will be busy preparing for the funeral day and the guests who start coming for the funeral sit in another room or housed with the neighbours. Usually people will take turns guarding the body whole night. To delay the decay of the body, a chunk of salt or earth is placed on the deceased’s belly. This chunk of salt or earth is buried with the deceased. In surrounding districts of Dushanbe there is also the belief that one must refrain from chewing gum and eating grains; presumably this also affects the condition of the body.

There is ceremonial food prepared for the guests and the family at the *mehmon kardani murda* evening. This meal is called *oshi siyohi* (dark meal) denoting that it is cooked for the mourning not the joyous occasion. The pregnant, children and newlywed couples have to refrain from eating the *oshi siyohi* as it will have negative effect on these categories of people. Those who are permitted

to eat must not eat full stomach, it is considered to influence the diseased negatively. When I inquired about this from my great-aunt, she said “the deceased will be upset to see people enjoying meal and eating full stomach whereas he is going to the underworld *tagi zamin*. Also, people who eat must recite prayers and *ishkami pur* (full stomach) signifies heaviness.”¹⁵ At this night usually close family members also refrain from sleeping or take turn staying awake called *mur daboni* (guarding the dead). During this night men and women in separate parts of the house sit in circles and those with religious knowledge will narrate traditional *arvohnoma* (stories of the spirits of the ancestors) or *amri ma'ruf* (short homilies) related to the death and afterlife.

4. FUNERALS

The funeral day, unless the deceased was kept overnight, usually lasts for 3–4 hours and the funeral procession always takes place before the evening prayer. If the body had been kept overnight usually before the afternoon prayer if the death occurred in the early hours of the morning than between the noon and the evening prayer time. There are a set of events that take place on the funeral day, which can be categorised based on the activities performed.

Preparation of the 'room for the dead' (murdakhona)

The room where the body will be placed is chosen on practical grounds, i.e. easily accessed from the entrance, has a big door and window and enough space to accommodate 30–40 people. In addition, the set-up of the *murdakhona* space is based on the gender and age of the deceased. The room for an elderly, middle-aged person or children below the age of 9 is usually set up in simple way and only the bulky items will be removed from the room and temporarily placed elsewhere. However, if the deceased is engaged or single between the ages of 18 and 30¹⁶ the room will be set up as a ‘wedding chamber’ where the clothing and other items acquired to be used for the wedding will be displayed. The clothing and other personal belongings of the deceased is usually hang outdoors and washed thoroughly after the funerals. Most of these are than given away to family members and people who were involved in the ceremony, such as those who dug the grave, helped to structure the coffin etc.

Preparation of the body

The deceased will be laid in the middle of the room and covered with white fabric. The hands will be straightened along the sides of the body and the toes will be tied together. Two or three layers of different fabric will be used to cover

¹⁵ This conversation was recorded in Sheykhak village, in May 2014.

¹⁶ In Tajik culture people get married early, anywhere between the age 18 and 30.

the body up to the chest. Usually the household will choose the most expensive fabric for the covering, which after the burial prayer is given to the mullah as an 'honorarium' for leading the *janoza* (funeral prayer). To differentiate the gender of the deceased, a male or female hat will be placed over the place where the head is. Over the body, usually shoots of the basil plant will be spread and for unmarried young people flowers are also placed. The female relatives who come for the funeral will also bring different kinds of fabrics, and these also will be spread over the body or put at the feet. Some people will also bring money and this is placed at the feet of the deceased as a donation for the household to use in the funerals.

There is also a tradition called *arus kardan/shah kardan* (dressing up of the bride/groom), which is performed on the occasion of the death of an engaged girl or man or also a newlywed. As recorded by (Murodov & Mardonova 1989, 116–118) when preparing the body, prior to the lamentation ceremony, the deceased are dressed in traditional wedding attire (gender appropriate). However, the clothing is put on 'inside out', as are the decorations, around the room will be also put up inside out. The deceased's living bride or groom (if the tragedy occurred before the wedding) and family members are also invited to the preparation and burial.¹⁷

Lamentation in the home of deceased (nolakuni)

The lamentation process in Tajikistan differs greatly from region to region and it is one of the central rituals of the burial cycle.¹⁸ The lamentation is mainly a 'women only' ceremony, although men too can participate. Especially just before the *murdashui* (ceremonial bath for deceased) and *kafan pushoni* (putting the funeral garments) sons, brothers or other male siblings and family members will come into the room to say goodbye, in which occasion they lament by wailing.

The main participants are the immediate and extended family members of the deceased. In addition, in Dushanbe and major northern cities, like Khojand there is also tradition of inviting a *nolagar* (wailers) to the funerals. The *nolagar* to a certain extent was a profession similar to that of traditional singers. These ladies usually charge a small amount and also after the funerals some of the clothing of the deceased are given to them in exchange for their 'service'. The repertoire of lament songs used by them also draws from the folk songs including lullabies.

¹⁷ However, this ritual is not a common and widely practiced. In Tajikistan, this ritual was recorded in Fayzobod, Hissor, Khonakoh, Norak and Romit districts.

¹⁸ The term lamentation is used here to mean 'crying for the dead' (*nola kardani murda*). There is a literary genre in Tajik folklore that is called 'marsiya', which are lamentation songs.

Sarvinoz-oiti. Nolagar in Dushanbe, Shohmansur district. Interview, June 2015

I heard about Sarvinoz-oiti from a colleague at National Museum. She did not want to meet initially and after a few months I received a phone call. She said if it is ok I could ask her my question by phone. Below is summary of our conversation.

Sarvinoz-oiti (52 years old) has inherited the *kasaba* (vocation) of *nolagar* from her grandmother. Her grandmother was born in Samarqand and she got married and moved to Tajikistan. She had a singer's voice and knew many spiritual poetries like *oitin* (other spelling *otun* a female with religious education; preacher). She served in small festivals and ceremonies like *beshek-toy* (putting an infant into cradle) and other women ceremonies. But when our relatives did not return the war she began singing sad songs and had become a wailer. She would go to other people's homes during the funerals to lament and wail her own family members. My grandmother knew about the vocation of *guyandak*; *qushukchi* (Uzbek terms for wailer/lament or ceremonial singers) in her village Bogi Shamol, Samarqand. So, her personal circumstances packed with the grief and tragedy of loss led her to become a professional wailer. I followed my grandmother's destiny. I lost my brother in the civil war and my husband died young. I help people in their grief by wailing with them and for them. I voice the emotional tragedy that I have gone through which overlaps with the emotions of many. When I attend a funeral of elderly men, I remember my grandparents, my father and wail and lament for the 'client' same as I would for my own. Similarly, when I'm invited to a funeral of a woman, I recall my own tragedies. This personal experience makes me popular. I do not have a fixed price, but wailing is *hurmati mait va obod kardani ruzi murda* (an act of honouring the deceased and elevating his funeral day), accordingly *sohibi murda* (funeral owners/ the family of the deceased) pay me 100 to 400 Somoni.¹⁹

The reason Sarvinoz-oiti did not want to give an interview was that although in the past the *nolagar* was a profession, similar to healers, fortune-tellers presently in Tajikistan this vocation is stigmatised. The mosque and community leaders propagate that wailing is contrary to the authentic Islam and especially the Hanafi madhab. In addition, the recent legislature and decrees has outlined and prescribed the order of the funerary customs imposing limits to traditional observances and ceremonies.²⁰ The new law is governed by both Tajik government's agenda to purge local Islamic expressions from its alien (Non-Islamic) rituals as well as it is supposed to serve as a poverty reduction mechanism since funerary customs involves many expenditure and ceremonies. The members of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in all districts, cities and townships closely monitor the social events and those found guilty in

¹⁹ This is approximately 40 US dollars.

²⁰ <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/tajikistan-law-prescribes-observation-of-national-traditions/> (Accessed on May, 23, 2019)

breaching the law are heavily penalised.²¹ The current situation surrounding the wailing and loud lamentation of deceased and women's participation in many ways reminds us about early Islamic social developments outlined in (Halevi 2004, 3–39).

In the view of the current legal conditions a few remaining *nolagar* professionals attend or accept funeral invitations with great care about not being harassed. Historically, the profession of *nolagar* was also known in Rasht Valley, predominantly in Qarategin and Obi Garm, Eastern region of Tajikistan. The *nolagars* in these areas were called *qushovoz* (leading voice). In the regions where the practice of invited wailers was not current; it is usually the elderly ladies in the family who perform most of the lamentation reciting. Lamentation takes place in the room where the body is laid and also outside in the front yard, but not in the same area where the men usually gather or sit.

Similar to other world cultures, in Tajik culture, lamentations as a public demonstration of grief has two representations; wearing special clothing (see mourning section below) and chanting loud *surudi motam* (songs of grief) either from the repertoire of the local folklore or improvised. The lexicon of lamentations and *surudi motam* are determined by the age, gender and marital status of the deceased. For example, the following quatrains represent folklore lamentations of the young men:²²

I ru tokai i ru niholi tokai
Rukhsorai surkhi bachajon dar khokai
Khokai, khokai ochayus ghamnokai
I ochai nosudash irebonchokai

There is a vineyard, here is the vine
sprout
The radiant face of my son is on earth
His face is on earth his mother is
saddened
His mother has no rest and her soul is
split by grief

Im sol chi soli futabandon omad
Ai qari khudo margi juvono omad
Ei khok tu shod bosh ki mehmon omad
Sadbargi shukuftai purarmon omad

This year is the year of wearing futa¹
It is God's anger bringing death to the
young
Earth rejoicing to receive a guest
A guest-like a blooming rose, who had
a great desire to live

²¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/tajikistan-funerals-religion-671536> (Accessed on May, 23, 2019) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5aaa4c274.html> (Accessed on May, 23, 2019)

²² A ceremonial turban-like head covering of a grey or dark colour fabric worn in the mountain regions of the South Tajikistan during the mourning period or funerals.

Tajiks usually do not hold loud lamentations for an old person. In contrary the death of the elderly, 80 years and above, is considered to be *tuy-i tobut* (coffin wedding) and when the coffin is brought out the family members will throw candies or even money; a celebratory action which is performed to welcome a new bride or groom. The *tuy-i tobut* finds its parallel in *gahvorabandon/beshik-tuy* (a ceremony observed for the occasion of a new-borns). On the other hand, the death of unmarried, engaged (soon to be married), newlywed is lamented greatly. The family members and relatives in many occasions will wrap themselves in clothing or other items of the deceased when lamenting them. The lamentation ceremony lasts until the grave is dug and ready. As soon as the *qabrkan* (grave digger) informs the family that the grave is ready, they will start warming up water for the final bathing ceremony and everyone leaves the room and waits in the court yard. While the bathing ceremony is in progress, loud wailing is prohibited. Because, those involved in the bathing ritual may get confused with the ritual or get distracted. As a subset to the lamentation event, there are two other ceremonies, which reveal regional variation in Tajikistan and should be mentioned.

Singing and dancing

In Vanj and Darvoz districts, as well as among the displaced communities from these regions, living elsewhere in Tajikistan e.g. Dushanbe, there is tradition of singing *ruboi* (quatrains). This is performed by an aunt or a grandmother of the household, who will stand by the entrance and greet people with quatrains lamenting their loss and thanking those who come for sharing in their grief. In the Qarategin, Hisor and Faizabad regions the lamentation songs include the traditional folk genres of *falak* (song of fate), *hai-daregh* (songs of sorrow and regret) and *alla* (lullaby song). The pattern in these singing is that there are usually up to three leading female voices, usually close relatives (daughters, mothers, sisters, aunts). In the interval between each loud sobbing they sing a portion of song from the genres mentioned above. While the main section of song is sung by the leading lady, the chorus is often repeated by the gathered or simply by a cry *hu-hu-hu*. Singing lullaby is connected with the belief that death is a type of sleep usually referred to as *khobi hasrat* (grief-sleep).²³

Funerary dances are known in the northern and eastern regions of Tajikistan, Zerafshan and Badakhshan regions respectively. At the moment, this form of funerary cultural expression is almost extinct, however the recent studies showed that the knowledge about some of the funerary dances are still

²³ Expression 'khobi hasrat barad' (may you fall in grief-sleep) is used in Tajik as curse as well.

preserved, such as *poialam* (grief feet) dance known in Badakhshan (Monogarova 1959, 81–84; 1983, 155–164; Karomatov, Nurdzhanov and Kabilova 2010, 253–261).

The funeral dances are performed by both men and women and they take place both on the funeral day and after the funeral. In the north, the funeral dance by men is performed by circling around the *tobut* (coffin) while women dance in the courtyard of the deceased (Khamidzhanova 1985, 54–58). These funeral dances are group dances performed by more than 5 participants who hold each other by the shoulder and make a circle by raising their hands and putting it down to their chest or shoulder, while weeping in a loud voice naming the deceased. (Lashkariev 2007 2) mentions that currently *poialam* is performed only in Bartang region and in other parts of the Badakhshan has died out.

The singing and dancing at funerals are preceded by the *gradangirakon* (holding necks), where the guests or relatives greet members of the deceased person's family by holding their necks and weeping out loud. This type of 'funeral greeting' is the most widespread and a common across the country. This event is repeated until the first-year anniversary of the death and is the most common ritual and a way of comforting a grieving person on the funeral day. In *gardangirakon* women usually sob and cry, but men usually give hugs and say condolences such as *bandagi da; miyontona mahkam banded* (it is human destiny; be strong).

Asogiri (holding a staff)

The custom of *asogiri* is common ceremony in the northern regions, particularly in Ayni, Mastchos, Istaravshan and Yaghnob. Among the Yaghnobi it is only male kin of the deceased who take a staff wearing *joma* (a traditional overcoats) with their waists tied. In Mastchoh and Ayni female family members also participate in the ceremony; and these staffs are then taken to the cemetery and placed on the grave indicating how many heirs the deceased has. *Asogiri* also helps the funeral guests to identify the immediate family members of the deceased. *Asogiri* takes place on the day of the funeral. In the Yaghnob culture those participating will go around in a circle in the yard of the deceased. In Ayni the belongings of the deceased are put on display and the children will march in a circle around it and greet the people who come, with a loud cry.

The practice of *asogiri* on funeral days is symbolic parallelism of Sufi tradition of dervishes and qalandars. Both these two categories in cultural interpretation of Tajik Muslims are those who are *khudojui* (God seekers) and the holding of staff means they tread long and dangerous at a time paths with humility. Family members on the day of their grief take a rod to signify their humility and powerlessness before God and by circling the yard on the funeral

day they symbolically present their journey in searching God in midst of life and death.

Preparation of coffin (tobut kardan)

Traditionally Tajiks used a ladder-like carrier for taking the body to the cemetery; where the wood for the carrier came from the poplar tree growing in the garden of the deceased or his next of kin. When constructing the *tobut* nails are not used. This is for both practical reasons i.e. ease of dismantling the *tobut* at the grave site and also a belief that if one uses nail it causes suffering to the deceased in journeying to the afterlife.²⁴ After delivery of the body, *tobut* is dismantled and some parts of it are used for blocking the grave before sealing it with earth and the two long branches used for handles are then erected in two ends of the grave as grave markers. *Tobut* is furnished with a new carpet and mattress and these after the funeral are donated to the mosque. The body after being dressed in shroud is wrapped in a special ‘envelope’ covering, which is opened and left inside the grave as a bedsheet. Additionally, there will be at least two or three additional fabric coverings used, including items of personal belongings, such as overcoats, robes, hats, headscarves and handkerchiefs. The body is laid on coffin by close male relatives and it is tightly tied to the *tobut*.

In burial for infants a pillow is used for carrying, but it must absolutely be a new pillow, which has never been used; or when this is not available they make one for the occasion. Rozenfeld (1974, 251–259) has recorded a funerary custom specific to coffin structure in the funeral of an unmarried or young girls in Vanj and Darvoz districts. This tradition of coffin construction was known as *gahvorai noz* (cradle of beauty). This is a lost tradition now, but from Rozenfeld’s description we know that it was a usual ladder-like *tobut*, but on top of it there were thin branches used to structure an arch-shape covering. The handles of the carrier than were decorated with fresh herbs and flowers.

When placing the body in the grave the pieces of fabric used for tying up the chin and toes of the deceased are removed. These thin pieces of fabric are than tied on the *khodachub* (the grave sticks) indicating the position of the head and foot. In addition, head-scarfs and handkerchiefs are also used to mark the gender and age. For example, red, burgundy, pink colour and headscarves signify female and waistline kerchiefs male.

²⁴ However, this tradition has changed significantly and now there are ready-made *tobuts*, which every communal mosque commissions and lends it to those who need. This shift in tradition is caused primarily by urbanization and difficulty of finding young poplar trees in the cities.

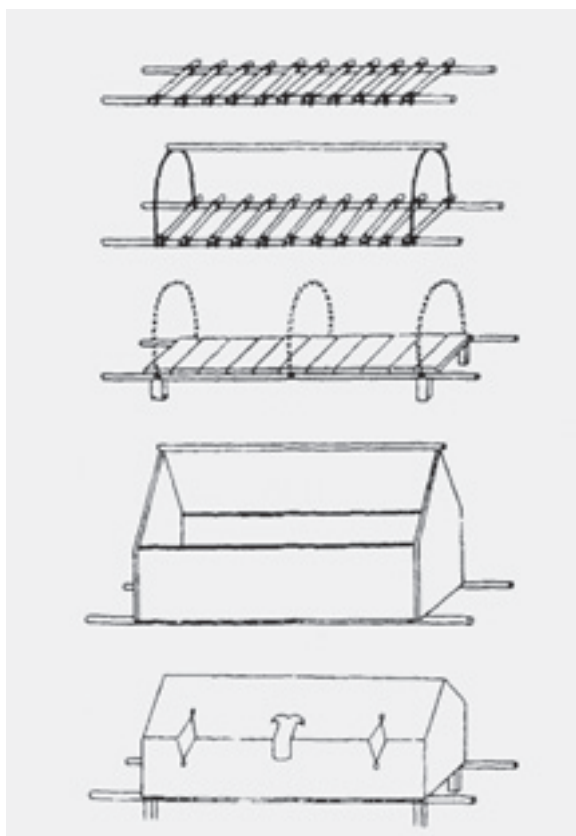


Figure 1 Types of tobut (coffins). Reproduced after Babaeva 1993

Davra kardan (Purchasing the sins rite)

The *davra* ceremony (literary meaning ‘making a cycle’) is performed before the deceased is bathed and his burial garments are made (Babaeva 1985, 58–63). It is performed by a *mulloi davragar* (an expert mullah in performing the *davra* ceremony) and there will be 7 to 12 male participants. However, the main players in the ceremony are the mullah and *sohibi murda* (father or brother of the deceased). The other participants, usually representatives of both *qavm* (neighbourhood, community) and *kheshu tabor* (next of kin) act as witnesses.

The *davra* ritual is made up of 3 acts:

1. Determining the ‘age’ of the deceased by deducting the ‘innocent years’ from ‘sinful years’. That is from the factual age of deceased, for women 9 years and for men 12 years will be taken off.
2. Determining *khairot* (charity). Death is considered to terminate all economic benefits that one enjoys while alive. Whatever wealth has been accumulated during one’s lifetime and available at the time of his death has to be passed on either

as *meros* (inheritance) to the family members (wife and children). Whatever is announced *khairot* must be given to the poor and needy. In determining *khairot* they during the *davra* ritual the gathered have to determine if the deceased has any debts or not. Because whatever is determined to be either *meros* or *khairot* must be done so after the deduction of the debts. In addition, those conducting the *davra* will consider the number of people in the family and their individual socio-economic statuses. Both *meros* and *khairot* are decided on grounds of *wassiyat-noma* (written will, testament). Babaeva (1993, 55–56) discusses that material assets declared *khairot* must be owned and belonged to deceased i.e. acquired by the deceased without shared ownership. Material assets determined as *khairot* are then converted into a monetary value. The fabric used for the burial garment and things set aside as a wage for the gravediggers and those involved in bathing ritual are not considered *khairot*. After *janoza* (funeral prayer) portion of the *khairot* is distributed among those who came for funeral. In addition, there is a custom of giving away household soap, kerchiefs, pieces of fabric etc. called *irtish*.

3. *Gunohi maitro kharidan* (purchasing the sins of the deceased). It is believed that one's sins and negligence of spiritual obligations can be atoned by performing *khairot* (charity) or *khudoi kardan dar rohi iloh* (alms giving or giving feasts in God's name). There's also a belief that by performing good deeds another person can help the deceased to purge his sins. One of the philosophies of *davra* centres on possibility of the passing sins of deceased to another living member of his family, clan and community referred to as *gunohosha dar kalai digar kas mondan*. Usually it is the *sohibi murda* who has to take the deceased's sins on himself. Whatever is determined for *khairot* in this ritual is converted into a bowl of wheat (Babaevam 1993, 58–64).²⁵ This bowl of wheat than goes in *davra* (circle) between the mullah and *sohibi murda* in accordance with the deceased's age. Each time the *sohibi murda* takes the plate by saying *qabul kardam* (I accept) and when it goes to the mullah he says *bakhshidam* (I forgive).

Kafan dukhtan (preparation of burial garment)

The *kafan* (burial garment) is made from a pure cotton white fabric called *soni safed* or *sufi safed*. The measurements are taken in the evening or early morning; depending on when the death occurs and is done in private and much earlier than the lamentation ceremony starts. Most of the households in Tajikistan traditionally keep a set of items needed for the funeral day. These are: a bucket, an ewer, a large cup and approximately 30–40 meters of the fabric to be used for the burial garment. The fabric for the garment is cut by hand without using scissors and the thread for the stitching also comes from the same fabric. The number and type of burial garments differ dependent on the age and gender of the deceased. *Kafan* is comprised of the complete set of 'replica' clothing imitating the usual attire and includes underwear, shirt and cloak. Only in female *kafan* there are two special pieces added; a head covering and a breast-covering.

²⁵ The use of wheat or oat grains is the most widespread, but historically Tajiks used also animals, such as cow, horse or camel, which after the ceremony were slaughtered and the meat was given away as charity towards the 'purchase of sins'.

The deceased is put into *kafan* by those who take part in the *ghuski mait* (bathing ritual). When they put the garment on the deceased, they will exclaim *saru poi nav muborak* (congratulations on your new clothing). Afterwards the deceased is wrapped in a bedsheet size separate piece, which will be tied from head and feet side. Then the body is wrapped in a ceremonially clean (new) blanket, which will be used for lowering the body into the grave and carrying the body out of the room to be laid on *tobut*.

Ghusli mait (bathing ritual)

There are usually 3 to 4 people who participate in the bathing ritual. They are chosen on the day and must be related to the deceased. The closest person i.e. blood related in the group will assume to role of *murdashui* (bather) and the others will be the *takyagir* (support assistant) and *obrez* (one who pours water). The water for bathing is usually heated in the smoke and the vessels used must never have been used before. After the funeral is over, these items are donated to the mosque.

The deceased is believed to be in an extreme painful state and thus, those bathing him must take care to not to touch the body too much or to wash the same spot twice. For the bathing ritual, a piece of wood; wide enough to hold a person, is used, which is referred to as *takhtai murdashui* or sometimes just *takhta* (a board for washing the dead). The water, after being used for washing the deceased is collected in a washbasin and poured onto a tree root. The board used in washing is usually burnt after celebrating the 1st year anniversary of the death.²⁶

Khamidzhanova (1980, 287–293) has recorded and discussed the regional variety of the bathing ritual for deceased that some of them at the moment had died out. For example, in the villages of Yaghnob and Rasht Valleys there used to be special rocks by the river, which were used for washing the dead and called *takhta sang* (board rock). After the bathing ritual viewing the deceased is prohibited and right after the bathing ceremony is over the burial garments are put on the body and the deceased is taken out to the mosque for the funeral prayer.

Janoza (Funeral procession and prayer)

In contrast to the lamentation ceremony the funeral ceremony is a male-only event. The *tobut* is brought out from *murdakhona* by the close family members of deceased head-forward. This ritual is statutory and common among all Muslim confession in Tajikistan and according to (Hismatuln and Krukova 1997, 84) is same in Iran. The essential nature of bringing out the *tobut* head-forward is explained by the fact that humans are born head-forward to this world and that's the

²⁶ Similar to the tradition of preparing *tobut* the *takhtai murdashui* also now has been replaced by a ready-made one. In the community mosques, both of these are readily available when needed.

way they have to go out of the world too. Once *tobut* is brought out before the start of procession the closest members of the family (female members sometimes also permitted) three times will lift and put it to the ground. This is tradition common only among the Sunni, Hanafi Tajiks and has not been recorded among Ismaili in Badakhshan. It is said that, the three times lifting and lowering of the *tobut* is that the deceased person had run out of all his chances to be in his habitat in this world and that he is now has ‘checked out’ to the next world.

Majority of able men, excluding very old participants, will come to the home of the deceased and take turns in carrying the coffin to the mosque and beyond to the cemetery. While marching towards the mosque they will shout *aš-šahādah* and ‘*saloti janoza biyo*’ (come to perform prayer for the dead). When reaching the mosque, the coffin is placed in the front of the gathering and prior to officiating the prayer the mullah will ask in the presence of everyone, *maiti hozir kist* (who is this deceased?) and *qarzi mondai mait dar gardani kist?* (If the deceased has unpaid debts who is responsible?). Usually the oldest son or a brother will come forward to respond and take responsibility. The *janoza* is the only prayer where participants do not prostrate. It is believed that after the fourth *allah akbar* call, the deceased’s ears will become deaf to this world and will only hear what is spoken by the heavenly beings. Thus, most people, until that moment in their lamentations request the deceased to take greetings to their ancestors or to forgive them.

Gurondan (burial)

Inhumation takes place in the deceased’s village cemetery or where other members of his family are buried. Tajik cemeteries are located outside the village and usually in elevated places i.e. hills. Cemeteries are mostly ‘walled’ using wire-nets and maintained by the whole community. The cemeteries located in the city and urban centres are also walled and protected. The city municipality has cemetery and funeral branch that controls and oversees the city cemeteries. Only the cemeteries that attain *mazor* (shrine) status can become the site of celebration of special *khudoi / arafagi* (offering feasts). Mostly the wealthy people dedicate money to build a small *namozjo* (chapel) or erect a big gate for the cemetery. This is done to receive *savobi ahli qubur* (good merit of those living in those cemeteries).

The deceased are buried in the cemetery where s/he already has a next of kin or relative buried. For people whose ancestors originate from other regions there is a dedicated corner of the cemetery *gharibkhok*; *musofirkhok* (foreigners ground; travellers ground), to bury their dead.²⁷ The grave is dug by a member of the com-

²⁷ Originally this practice meant temporary burial, when a traveller or a foreigner was buried till his relatives were found. However, this practice then was imposed for migrants who came to live in another place as a permanent resident. People who commit suicide (in any form), non-Tajiks (Uzbek, Russian etc.) also are buried in ‘foreigner ground’.

munity and usually the ‘gravediggers’ are instructed on what type of grave they have to dig. There are two types of graves; one which has an additional niche on its eastern corner called a *lahad* where the body is laid and another is a simple pit.

The body is lowered to the grave feet-forward imitating that he is entering his new home. There are usually only 2 people inside the grave helping to place the body. The body is placed with head towards the north and legs toward south with his face looking west. When the deceased is a male any men from his family can place him into the grave, but if it is the female only a man whom she could not marry in her life time can place her into the grave. These men are usually considered to be an uncle from her mother’s lineage referred to as *mahrami gur* (legitimate in the grave/ clean in the grave). There is also among Tajiks a tradition that only a person who has placed the body on the *tobut* should also place it inside the grave. The consistency in performing different rites is dictated by the fact that the family members would know who would be held responsible.

The depth of the grave depends on the gender of the deceased. For a male, the grave is dug up to the waist and for a female up to the chest. The depth of the grave, according to Tajiks is determined by the level of sinfulness, and women are by default considered to be more sinful. In some regions of Tajikistan, such

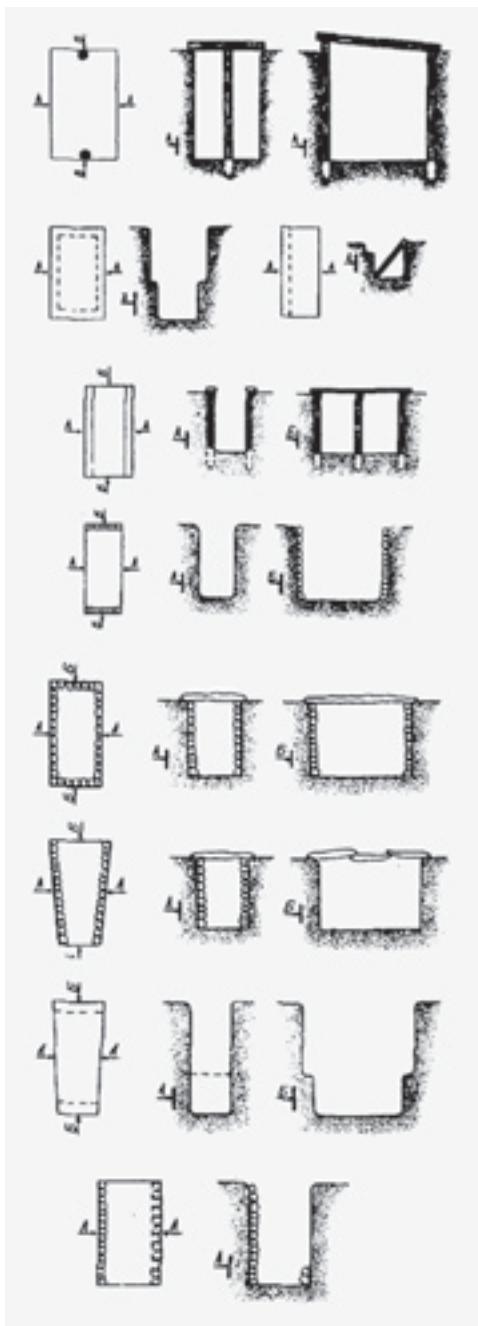


Figure 2 Forms and types of grave.
Reproduced after Babaeva 1993

as the Yaghnob valley the age of the deceased also determines the depth of the grave. For young people below 16 the grave is dug up to the knee; for those 16 and above, if male up to the hips and if female up to the chest. Once the body is laid in the grave there will be a recitation performed and after that the grave is closed and sealed, which is again followed by another recitation including the Surat Al-Muluk.

5. *Post-funeral events and ceremonies*

There are two distinct sets of post-funeral events and ceremonies: 1) events or ceremonies taking place on the same day or evening, and 2) events taking place in the course of the year.

Azodori (mourning)

The mourning period begins from the day of funeral. It is common that the *azodor* family or person will not participate in anything joyful, such as weddings and other cherrful celebrations. Tajiks mourn their dead anywhere between 6 to 12 months. Women, usually in this period will wear only plain clothing of blue, white or dark green colours and cover their heads with the white or black *chodari* (large scarf) similar to hijab. They will not wear any make-up or jewellery. No television or radio will be played in the house where they are mourning. In certain regions, such as Hisor and Varzob the mourning person also cannot engage in agriculture e.g. sowing and planting. People believe that the hand of the mourner is *vaznin* (has heaviness) and *toriki* (darkness) and that will transfer through their deeds. To protect the ecology from spreading heaviness and darkness those mourning limit their activities. And if the mourning is in the spring usually someone from outside the family circle who comes to help to sow or plant in the season for them.

Funeral days in the villages and in the cities, are a communal mourning day; the entire apartment blocks and the neighbourhood in the villages refrain from anything festive. If there were a wedding planned it will take place but with reduced festivity and music is not played through the loudspeakers. This is to demonstrate sharing the loss and grief. Close neighbours usually participate in the funeral at the same level as the family members. Neighbourhood women will also take part in *nolakuni* and they will open their homes to accommodate the funeral guests. For three days, the mourning family has to abstain from cooking and baking. Any meal cooked before the elapse of the third day is considered ritually unclean. Thus, the neighbours have the task of feeding the grieving household and their guests for at least 3 days.

Taraka / tksimi merso (Division of inheritance)

Taraka is performed in private where only immediate family members of the deceased are gathered, and involves 3 to 7 witnesses from both *qavm* (community) and *kheshu tabor* (relatives). It begins with a recitation from the Quran, and everyone present is asked to pronounce *aš-šahādah* (confession of Islamic faith) and the names of those present are written in a notebook. The ceremony is performed by a mullah from the community. In this ritual, whatever was not deemed as *khairot* in the *davra* ceremony is counted and reported. The entire belongings are then converted into a fiscal figure and divided among the family members; male siblings take full share and female siblings half. If the deceased has left a written or oral will that will be also considered. On occasion if a wife or husband of the deceased is alive, the children are urged to write in the *taraka* notebook that they surrender their inheritance to their mother or father accordingly. If *taraka* is not performed early enough *khairot va khudoi halol nest* (charity and commemoration offerings meals) are not acceptable. In this ceremony, if deceased was the 'head of the family' a new head is appointed, who usually is the new role of the oldest son in the household.

Khudoi (meal feasts)

The concept of *khudoi* in Tajiki includes any charitable deed, such as giving feasts, distributing various items, sponsoring some kind of communal projects. The word *khudoi* derives from the word *Khudo* (God) and thus performing charity is directed to God with sole purpose of earning merit for the deceased and those performing it. The *khudoi maraka* (gatherings for commemoration feasts) are the most common post-funeral rituals in Tajikistan. These ceremonies, all related with food and feasting, are organized by the immediate family members and close relatives of the deceased. The primary purposes of these feasts are requesting and bestowing *savob* (good merit) and pleading for *rahmat* (forgiveness) for the deceased. Accordingly, every person visiting these feasts must recite a portion of the Quran and dedicate it to the *sohibi khair* (person who is given the feast) and *arvohi guzashati makon* (the spirits of deceased in that place). The commemoration feasts and offerings start from the 3rd day after the funeral and continue for one year. After this time has passed it is only celebrated on the annual anniversaries and major Islamic festivals. The post-funeral feasts observed in Tajikistan include the following:

Sebegaina (third evening) literary meaning 'three evenings' is celebrated on the third evening after the burial or early morning of the fourth day. Before the ceremonial meal is cooked an elderly lady in the house will take a pot and spoon and bang them together for few minutes. Next, she will fry some flour in the linseed oil so that the smell reaches at least seven neighbours. Afterwards, there is recitation from the Quran and the main meal for the ceremony *tarhavlo* (a fried-

flour pudding) and *chalpak* (deep fried pancakes) are prepared. The food is given both to the neighbours and consumed by the family. This ceremony is also called *degu kosa halol kardan* or *khona halol kardan* (ceremonially cleansing of the dishes or the house). It is believed that the entire house where someone dies become ceremonially unclean as well as the funeral participants. Thus, after the burial people will wash their faces and sprinkle water on themselves before leaving the *murdakhona* (the house where someone died). After the celebration of the *sebegaina* the family can cook their own meals and will not depend on the neighbours' generosity.

The celebration of the 3rd day (end of the third and beginning of the 4th day) and its ritual significance is very much reflective of the Zoroastrian ritual as given in Young Avestan tradition, such as in Videvdad 19.27–32 and Hadokht Nask 2.1–15. According to this tradition it is on the third night, when the dawn appears and brightens up and the Vohu-Mano comes to assist the soul of the deceased to transit to the abode of Ahura Mazda and of all the other holy beings (Skjærvø 2013, 311–349). Accordingly, as the preparation of food will involve using the holy elements, such as fire and because until the morning of the fourth day the soul is still in this side of the heaven the mourners must refrain from using the fire. As until the transition of the deceased's soul is complete the evil spirits still can affect it.

The ceremonially cleanliness and uncleanness that is followed during the three-initial day from the occurrence of the death reflect the old Zoroastrian mortuary rituals that Tajiks followed prior becoming Muslim. It is believed that what comes in contact with the *nafasi murda* (breath of the dead) will be *haram* (ritually unclean). Therefore, whatever edible items that were in the room where some died is thrown in the water or given to dogs. For here days whatever left-over food is in the house is not consumed next day.

Dushanbegi (Monday offering feast) will take place every Monday until the celebration of the 40th day.

Jumagi (Friday offering feast) will take place every Thursday eve after celebration of the 40th day and will last till the 1st year commemoration.

Haft (7 days offering feast) celebrated on the 7th day and this feast is announced on the funeral day.

Bistshikan (20 days offering feast) celebrated on the eve of the 19th day; participated by the immediate family members and whoever is present that evening in the local mosque.

Chil (40 days offering feast) celebrated after the 40 days from the funeral and is the largest gathering for which people are invited. A day or two after this feast there is the *bargi sabz zadan* (green leaf distribution) ceremony. It is meant mainly for the immediate family members. Men, usually as a sign of mourning will not shave for 40 days; and when this ceremony is conducted, they can

shave and free themselves from mourning period. Women, when mourning wear distinctive clothing and on this day, they are given a choice either to continue or to remove their mourning attire. The ceremony is performed by an elderly lady (grandmother or grand-aunt) of the family. When she prays, she will distribute green leaves to be placed on the head and shoulders of the family members.

Sol (1 year offering feast) is celebrated either in 6 months (this is when a day and night are calculated as 2 days) or in full calendar year after the funeral. After this celebration the weekly offering feast (*dushanbegi, jumagi*) is terminated. At this feast, there is also a ceremony of *azoburorn* (to remove mourning), which is similar to the *bargi sabz zadan*, but it mainly concerns the women.

Ziyorati qabr (visiting the graves) is one of the consistent practices related to the 'death and realm of afterlife'. After the inhumation, the grave is visited every evening for three days, and sometimes in the mornings as well. These first grave visits are meant to ensure that the deceased was accepted in the other world. In some areas, these initial post-funeral visits are called *salomi khok* (to greet the earth). As indicated in the Zoroastrian ritual texts the soul goes to the adobe of supreme god only after three days. Thus, till the fourth day people visit the graves with belief that the deceased is still present and had not completely transited into the *dunyo'i ruh* (the spirit's world).

Amongst Tajiks there is a strong belief that the earth can reject the unworthy. People tell stories of certain people being 'spit out' by the grave. In order to make the earth accept such extremely sinful people there will be a sacrifice made, where the sacrificial animal, usually a dog or a horse, is buried with the dead in the same grave.

When visiting the grave, immediately after the inhumation, visitors will also bring some dry straw and burn it on the grave site to distract the evil spirits. This is done because the evil spirits can tempt the deceased when still in the process of giving account to the *pursandaho* Munkir and Nakir. Afterwards the grave is visited in major religious festivals and also on commemoration offering feasts. On the 1st year anniversary a tree is planted on the grave site or a stone is erected to mark the grave.

Concluding remarks

The burial rites and ceremonies of Tajiks are external manifestation of their fundamental beliefs and perception of the afterlife. Accordingly, in understanding the reasons behind rituals and ceremonies is part of understanding the governing dogmatic hopes and aspiration attached to them. The funeral cycle of Tajik Muslims consists of different rituals and ceremonies, which continue for one year, are closely connected with two fundamentals or 'governing views'. These are made of both *urfiyat* that are local traditions which are recognized

to be inherited into Islamic practices, but have no Islamic roots as well *farziyat* those ceremonies that are based either on Quranic or other authoritative orally transmitted Islamic theologies. Though, actually, the divide between the *urfiyat* and *farziyat* in the funeral rites and ceremonies associated with hereafter is not very explicit, i.e. where one ends and the other begins. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity of their origins, the meaning and concepts contained within the Tajik burial rites and ceremonies are a constitutive part of the Tajik Islamic culture. There are two main points, each representing *urfiyat* and *farziyat* principles to be mentioned here.

The idea of life, death, soul and afterlife

In Tajik culture, life is considered to be *amonati Khudo* (a deposit given by God) and therefore they view death and dying as *amonatro bargardondan* (paying back the deposit). It is *qarzi banda* (the debt of the created beings) and talking about death and dying is part of the daily conversations. People die from different causes in different situation, age and place; however, the fatal causes are regarded as an instrument or a means by which God demands His deposit. Therefore, however passionately they may lament the death of their kin they still hold their collars and recite *towba kardam* (I repent) to avoid God's anger.

Remembering that death in Tajik culture is considered to be a virtuous deed; in fact, there is a belief that *odami musulmon boyad dar yak ruz se bor az marg yod kunda* (a Muslim must remember that he will die three times a day). Thus, the preparation for death and the afterlife is part of the life on earth, and this 'preparatory journey' is anchored to the five main obligations also known as the Five Pillars of Islamic teaching.

Tajiks differentiate death as 'natural' and 'unnatural' and these categories are determined by the deceased's age and circumstances. Death is considered 'natural' if the deceased has reached the full potential in terms of productivity i.e. marital life, children and grandchildren and of course the main signifiers are age and physical condition.²⁸ The 'lower limit' of age for 'natural death' is considered to be 63 – the age of the prophet of Islam when he died and those dying in their 63 are thought to be special *khudo loiq donist ki dar umri paygambar murad* (God saw him/her worthy to die in the age of the Prophet). People who die in their old age are than to become the 'guardians' of their generation i.e. children, grandchildren. The name of the family members who passed in old age become part of the oath and vows in both positive and negative. For example, parents will bless their children praying *ba umri bobot rasi* (may you see the long life like grandfather) or equally can curse by saying *arvohi bobot zanad* (may your grandfather's spirit struck you).

²⁸ Thus, women are considered to have reached her full potential when her menstrual cycle terminates, which greatly varies in terms of age when the menopause occurs.

It is an inconsolable distress and grief when someone young dies; and this is called *javonmarg* (young death) or *siyahpicha marg* (death with a black hair). While for someone dying in their old age people will say *qarzi bandagiya ba jo ovard* (fulfilled his servanthood obligation) or *savdoi umr bud shid* (the market of life has closed); for those dying young they say *az dunyo hech chiz nadida raft* (has left the world without seeing anything) or *tanovi umrush kutah kanda shid* (the thread of his life cut off too short). The death in a young age is thus an ‘unnatural’ death, as it gives no chance for a person to reach their full potential (having family and children). Similar attitudes are attached to the death caused by natural or technical accidents. The central concept related to the ‘unnatural death’ is that of *shahid* (martyr). How a deceased can be credited as a martyr is governed by the following:

1. Physical condition of the deceased: There are multiple physical conditions considered to ascribe the deceased as a martyr, relating to blood and bleeding. Particularly, if someone dies in a car incident, is killed and the body bleeds when wrapped in a shroud. For women, an additional criterion is dying in birth labour *domani purkhun* (embrace full of blood).
2. The day, time and month when death occurs: Wednesday and Friday and the advent of the Muslim festivals of Eid al-Adha or Al-Fitr are considered to be ‘sacred’ and dying on these days is believed to provide fast-track transition to afterlife.

Based on these two conditions the martyrs can be further categorised as a *shahidi a'lo* (high martyr)²⁹ and *shahidi khudo* (God’s martyr)³⁰. It is often the graves of the first category martyrs i.e. *shahidi a'lo* that becomes a pilgrimage site.

The biggest fear about death among Tajiks however is about *margi gofil* (sudden death; unnoticed) or *margi mufojot* (dying in the sleep). This fear is also manifested in regularly concluding traditional prayers with the following phrase, *az tuhmati nogumon, az baloi oxiri zamon az margi mufojot Khudo nigoh dor* (God forbid me from slander, from the tribulation of the Last Day and dying in sleep). The fear of *margi gofil* and *margi mufojot* is reasoned by the facts that those who die in this manner do not have chance for *kalima guftan* (saying aš-šahādah), *tawba kardan* (repenting) or *vasiyat kardan* (making their last will). It is generally believed that those dying *margi gofil* or *margi mufojot* will face

²⁹ This concept is attached to ‘shedding blood’ and such status i.e. high martyr originally was given to those dying in spreading Islamic faith. However, this idea in Tajikistan has acquired a secondary meaning and *shahidi a'lo* status is applied to any deceased meeting the ‘bleeding’ category.

³⁰ This concept is to a ‘pious dying’ and such status i.e. God’s martyr is given to those who die both natural and unnatural death without shedding blood e.g. someone dying on the pilgrimage, while on a journey or a natural catastrophe.

a harsher trial by Munkir and Nakir. Because these two angels are believed that appear at the grave to question the deceased to determine the afterlife destiny.

Tajik's perception of death is multifaceted and death is understood to be both the termination of life and its continuity in different form. According to Tajiks, humans have *ruh* (spirit)³¹ and *jon* (soul) and these two are understood to be present in *khunu nafas* (blood and breath). This idea forms the basis for all post-funeral commemoration feasts involving the slaughter of animals. The blood of the 'offering animals' that contains life, including any form of food prepared is considered to be a *khairot* (charity) towards the atonement of the deceased's soul and earning merit both for him in the afterlife and for those alive. During the commemoration feasts participants pray and recite the Quran, pleading for God's mercy on the deceased's spirit and the provision of *joyasha Jannat kunad, shoistai rahmat kunad va qabrasha pur nur kunad* (may he/she will be granted place in paradise, forgiven and his grave be full of light). This prayer points to the fact that the deceased live in the graves referred to also as *khonai okhirat* (eschatological home).

Tajiks understand that *jon* ceases to exist at death, but *ruh*, on the contrary is eternal and the spirit of the deceaseds remain active on earth *bejasad* (without corporal manifestation). The *ruhu arvohi guzashtagon* (spirit of the ancestors) are venerated, feared and relied upon daily, and they are evoked in each *duo* (prayers) during the five time regular prayers, at the prayers of blessings, welcoming and farewells and religious holidays. It is usually thought that the spirit of the deceased is found, both; where he has passed away and places where he has been, including the grave site and anywhere he is remembered or called for help.

The afterlife consists of heaven and hell, but these ideas are extremely fluid and no one knows for certain about the real destiny of the deceased, which accordingly to the canonical tradition is determined to be on *ruzi qiyomat* (the Judgment Day). However, often the deceased, based on his earthly lifestyle is categorised either as *jannati* (of heaven) or *duzakhi* (of hell). But of course, this maybe only be wishful thinking of the immediate family and the continuous ritual cycle for the dead confirms that the passage to heaven has to be 'bought' in exchange for charity and offerings and the final verdict is given on the Resurrection Day. It is considered to be profane to say bad things about the dead and usually Tajiks do not name the dead, but refer to them as *khudo-rahmati* (forgiven by God)³². It is only in certain occasion that the real name of the deceased is spelled out, but even then by adding the above phrase to it.

³¹ *Arvoh* the plural form of *ruh* is used as a collective type agency to protect and harm the living. In their prayers of blessings and protections Tajik invoke both '*ruhu arvoh*' (spirit and spirits) because certain spiritual authority is handled by an individual spirit or sometime group of spirits.

³² Other expression used in connection naming a dead person is *shodravon/ravonshod* (merry-spirit). In addition, when speaking about dead usually Tajiks say

*Resurrection after death, reality of heaven and hell,
earning merit and fulfilling the 5 obligations*

In Tajikistan, the idea of resurrection after death has diverse interpretations. Certainly, the phrase *qiyomat qoil shud* (the Resurrection took place), which is loosely used in the contexts of war, tragedy and communal clashes show that the perception of resurrection after death is a domesticated idea. In the sense, that it is an ordinary element of the afterlife, the same as the tragedy and communal clashes being an ordinary element of life here on earth. Nevertheless, the basis of the eschatological understandings of the Tajik Muslims is based on the Quran, found in Surat Al Qiyamah.

On the other hand, the idea of Heaven and Hell are more much idealized, one being the state of extreme happiness the other being the opposite. These two are both, much sought after and greatly avoided. To reach heaven and avoid falling into the hell is believed to be possible, if one has performed enough *kori savob* (merit giving deeds). The main meaning of *savobgiri* (earning merit) is to *kam kardani gunoh* (reduce sin), because only those who are *begunoh* (without sin) can enter the heaven. The deeds, which can be counted towards *savob* can be anything done *az rui insofu a tahi dil* (from a clear conscious and the sincere heart). The *kori savob* includes a vast range of daily activities both; verbal and non-verbal deeds. Some deeds provide the 'doer' more *savob* than others. For example, leading a blind to find his way, earns *savob* according to the steps taken. Earning merit is also attached to the fulfilling of the 5 Obligations (5 pillars of Islam), which are confessing the faith (*aš-šahādah*), 5 times daily prayers, fasting (once in a year during Ramadan for 30 days), almsgiving and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). Praying in a Friday mosque gives you 26 times more *savob* than praying at home. Similarly, praying an extra prayer or prayer for an occasion, such as a prayer while traveling, prayer for someone who has died without children etc., are considered to be of merit giving deed, too. Fasting extra days, such as three days after the conclusion of Ramadan or fasting three days prior the Eid-al Adha is also included as the deeds that counts as a merit.

In a similar manner, the burial ceremonies and rites are based on the concept of how the living can earn merit for oneself and for the deceased. The food and the feast given in commemoration of the dead is *khairoti dihanda* (charity at the expense of the one who makes it), but *savobash ham ba murda ham ba zinda* (is merit counted both for the dead and living). Burial practices, rites and ceremonies in Tajikistan differ from region to region and their format and observances depends on the deceased person's age, gender, marital and social status, the last

'*khoki siyoh khabar nabarad*' (may the earth will not inform). This is points to the belief that earth is an agency communication what is happening outside the grave to those inside the grave.

will, including his family background (ethnic relations, spiritual activity of his ancestors). In addition, the burial practices, rites and ceremonies are governed by a complex belief system of both the community to which deceased belongs and his family's specific preferences and desires. The ceremonies and rites are entirely handled by the deceased's immediate and extended family and the members of the community (village, town or close neighbourhood in the city).

The ceremonies and rites are external expressions of the 'thoughts' and 'beliefs' of the Tajik Muslims about the afterlife. The ceremonies show great divergences from the standards of the 'official Islam', but these differences in the Tajik context is explained by the fact that Hanafi Madhhab allowed the inclusion of one's own traditional pattern of belief into the practices of the Islamic faith. Although, many under the influence of the Wahhabi or Salafi thought are trying to abandon certain practices, such as lamentation or mourning for more than 3 days. However, the vast majority of Tajiks still adhere to centuries old traditions. These are traditions that in the depth of history emerged from the dialogue between Islam and the local indigenous traditions. These ceremonies have one ultimate goal; which is to make sure we all rise on the day when the trumpet of judgment is blown.

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Dok svi ne ustanemo: aspekti tradicionalnih pogrebnih praksi i ceremonija u Tadžikistanu

Fokus ovog istraživanja je predstavljanje etnografskog pogleda na pogrebne prakse i srodna verovanja o životu posle smrti u Tadžikistanu. Rad daje pregled literature na temu koja predstavlja centralno mesto u istorijskim i etnografskim studijama, kao i pregled različitih praksi iz kojih se sastoji pogrebni običaj. Ovaj doprinos ograničava se na prostor Tadžikistana, kao i odgovarajuće i paralelne ceremonije posmatrane među Tadžicima iz drugih država, koje se nakratko spominju. Doprinos ovog članka je kako u pregledu literature u vezi s ovom temom, tako i u diskusiji o važnosti pogrebnih rituala i tome kako se zajednice osećaju tim povodom, te šta za njih znače razlozi za obavljanje ovih ceremonija. Završni deo rada raspravlja o najnovijim društveno-političkim događajima u Tadžikistanu, gde je vlada sprovela propise o kontroli pogrebnih praksi, uključujući tugovanje, žalost, pomen odlazećem pokojniku i veličinu groba. Građa za ovaj prilog prikupljena je putem grupnih i pojedinačnih intervju sa ljudima iz različitih krajeva Tadžikistana (april-septembar 2014), ličnih opservacija, kao i prethodnih studija u vezi s ovom temom.

Ključne reči: Tadžikistan, pogrebni običaji, smrt, etnografija, tradicije, islam

Tant que nous ne nous lèverons pas tous: aspects des pratiques et cérémonies funéraires traditionnelles au Tadjikistan

Le principal axe que suit cette recherche est de présenter le point de vue ethnographique sur les pratiques funéraires et les croyances concernant la vie après la mort au Tadjikistan. Le travail donne un aperçu de la bibliographie sur le sujet

qui occupe une place centrale dans des études historiques et ethnographiques. Les différentes pratiques dont est composé le rituel funéraire sont également évoquées. Cette contribution se limite à l'espace du Tadjikistan, ainsi qu'à des cérémonies correspondantes et parallèles observées chez des Tadjiks vivant dans d'autres états, brièvement évoquées. L'apport de cet article consiste aussi bien dans le fait d'offrir une bibliographie succincte concernant le thème que de discuter l'importance des rituels funéraires et les sentiments des communautés à propos de la pratique de ces cérémonies et de leurs raisons. La partie finale de l'article examine les événements socio-politiques les plus récents au Tadjikistan, où le gouvernement a mis en place des règles sur le contrôle des pratiques funéraires, y compris le deuil, l'affliction, la commémoration du décès et la taille du tombeau. Les documents pour cette contribution ont été rassemblés à l'aide des interviews de groupe et individuelles avec des gens des différentes régions du Tadjikistan (avril-septembre 2014), puis des observations personnelles, ainsi que des études antérieures sur le sujet.

Mots clés: Tadjikistan, rituels funéraires, mort, ethnographie, traditions, islam

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