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Nusayris' Funeral Rituals

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Summary

Arab Alawites (Nusayris) are an ethno-religious community with a secrecy-based belief system, living especially in Adana, Hatay, and Mersin. In these communities, funeral rituals are not seen as a biological end, but as part of the soul's journey within the framework of the belief in transmigration (reincarnation). Traditional funeral practices are a complex process that reinforces social solidarity as much as they are religious. It may assert that there are four rituals consist of four stages: Announcement of death: It is announced by the ğızzem (crier); the body is washed at home. Burial: On the first day, only men go to the grave, prayers are recited. On the second day, women also participate. Mourning practices: Women wear white headscarves, men do not shave; the house is visited for 7 days. The 7th-day ceremony (7'si): This is the most important stage; hırısı soup or rice with meat is distributed, a crowded prayer is performed. In the last 30 years, urbanization, individualization, and economic difficulties have led to the transformation of these rituals. Traditional practices (e.g., women not going to the grave) have been relaxed, and the role of religious authorities has diminished. While the 7th-day ceremony still maintains its importance, rituals now function more as expressions of identity-based belonging; they have largely lost their function of strengthening collective ties. This change is a typical example of how modernization erodes religious codes.

Social and Theological Background

In Arab Alawism, death is not seen as a biological end but as the transition of the soul from one body to another. The belief in reincarnation (tanāsukh) shapes their funeral practices, emphasizing respect for the soul's journey. At the same time, funerals serve as social events where an individual's standing, family honor, and religious devotion are publicly affirmed. Thus, Arab Alawi funeral rituals carry both religious and socio-cultural significance.

Traditional Funeral Rituals

Arab Alawi funeral rites consist of several key stages:

1. Announcement of Death and Preparation

When someone dies, a town crier (ğizzem) walks through the neighborhood announcing the death. Religious leaders (şıhlar), relatives, and neighbors gather at the deceased's home. The body is washed at home, usually by family members and close relatives.

2. Burial, Second-Day Prayer, and Himlen Meal

After washing, funeral prayers are recited, and the body is taken to the cemetery. Women (including the deceased's wife, mother, or daughters) do not attend the burial on the first day. At the gravesite, male mourners recite prayers led by an Alawi hoca, then throw a handful of soil into the grave. On the second day morning, women join the men at the gravesite for additional prayers. After returning home, preparations begin for the Himlen—a ceremonial meal and prayer gathering.

3. Mourning Practices and Condolence Period

Women wear white headscarves (yağlık) as a sign of mourning. Men refrain from shaving. The household avoids entertainment (no radio or TV). The deceased's home is visited frequently, especially in the first seven days.

4. The “Seventh-Day” Ceremony (7’si)

Although the theological reasoning behind the 7th-day ceremony (7’si) is not widely known among the Arab Alawi community, it remains the most important and highly emphasized ritual in the entire funeral process, acting as the formal conclusion of mourning. From the very first day after death, the family of the deceased begins preparations for the 7’si ceremony. Those who couldn’t attend the funeral make sure to come on this day. A large prayer gathering is held, often the most well-attended. 2-3 sheep are slaughtered, and special dishes like hirsı (a ritual soup) or meat-and-chickpea rice pilaf are prepared. The house is thoroughly cleaned—pillows, quilts, and curtains are washed—before the ceremony. Certain individuals cannot participate in meal preparation: Those who are divorced, menstruating or anyone wearing pants at the time (a symbolic restriction).

Transformation of Funeral Rituals in Modern Times

Over the past 30 years, Arab Alawi funeral customs have undergone significant changes due to: Urbanization (weakening close-knit community ties) Individualization (decline in collective participation) Erosion of religious authority (fewer strict adherents to traditional rites) Economic constraints (high costs of traditional

ceremonies) Weakening of social control mechanisms (less pressure to follow customs). While funerals remain an expression of identity and emotional belonging, they have largely lost their role as rituals reinforcing collective bonds. This shift mirrors broader trends in traditional communities undergoing modernization.

Conclusion

Arab Alawi funeral rituals, once deeply rooted in theological belief and collective social practice, are undergoing a visible transformation in the context of modernization. Traditionally centered on the doctrine of reincarnation (*tanāsukh*), these rituals not only marked the passage of the soul but also functioned as public affirmations of family honor, community cohesion, and religious devotion. However, field observations from Adana show that many of these practices have weakened or become symbolic.

While core elements such as the *7'si* ceremony and mourning signs persist, their meanings have shifted. Increasing urbanization, individualization, economic pressure, and the diminishing role of religious authorities have led to a decline in strict adherence to ritual forms. Today, funeral practices among Arab Alawis serve more as expressions of cultural and emotional identity rather than mechanisms of social regulation and religious obligation. This transformation reflects broader processes of secularization and social change within traditional communities in Turkey.

Refernces & Further Readings

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References & Further Readings