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Mourning rituals in the Miyonkol oasis

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Abstract

Mourning and burial rituals represent one of the most conservative cultural phenomena, often preserving layers of ancient beliefs within modern traditions. In the Miyonkol oasis, these practices embody a unique synthesis of animism, fetishism, totemism, and Zoroastrianism, later reshaped under Islamic influence. Despite their significance, the funeral and mourning customs of Miyonkol have received limited scholarly attention, particularly regarding their transformation under religious and cultural shifts. This study aims to investigate the continuity and change of mourning practices in Miyonkol, focusing on their ethnocultural and religious underpinnings. Field research and historical analysis reveal that many rituals such as washing the deceased, preparation of the "death bundle," laments, and the symbolic use of willow continue to survive, though modernization and Europeanization have contributed to their gradual erosion. The research documents and interprets rituals that preserve traces of pre-Islamic traditions, demonstrating how layers of belief systems coexisted and evolved, while highlighting practices that are disappearing in contemporary times. The findings underscore the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, suggesting that further ethnographic research can contribute to the preservation and revitalization of national values amidst globalization pressures.

Keywords: Animism, fetishism, totemism, Goktangri (Sky God), poplar tree, willow tree, coffin, evil spirits, belief systems, faith, post-mortem confinement, elegy.

1. Introduction

Mourning and burial rituals have long been recognized as essential components of cultural identity, reflecting the values, beliefs, and traditions of a people. Across civilizations, funeral practices preserve not only spiritual meanings but also collective memory, often serving as one of the most conservative domains of culture. In the context of Central Asia, and particularly Uzbekistan, these rituals reveal layers of continuity that connect ancient animistic, totemic, and Zoroastrian traditions with later Islamic principles. The Miyonkol oasis, with its distinctive historical and cultural background, represents a unique example where such practices have survived and adapted, offering valuable insight into the persistence of ethnocultural heritage despite modern transformations. Previous studies on Uzbek mourning ceremonies have largely focused on general patterns of funeral practices, Islamic frameworks, or the influence of Zoroastrian beliefs. While these works provide important foundations, limited attention has been paid to localized traditions and the specific cultural synthesis found in the Miyonkol oasis. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the coexistence of religious and magical elements such as the use of willow staffs, the preparation of "death bundles," and

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the role of laments that continue to inform local customs [1]. Employing a historical-analytical approach complemented by field research, the study engages both oral accounts and written sources to reconstruct the transformations of these rituals across time and to assess how modernization and Europeanization are gradually reshaping them.

The expectation of this research is to demonstrate how the rituals of Miyonkol reveal broader theoretical issues in anthropology and ethnography, particularly the resilience of cultural memory and the layering of belief systems. The findings highlight the survival of practices tied to animism, fetishism, and totemism, and their interaction with Islamic frameworks, illustrating how national values persist within changing contexts. By documenting and analyzing these customs, the study not only contributes to a better understanding of Uzbekistan's intangible cultural heritage but also underscores the urgent need to preserve and revitalize traditions that are increasingly at risk of decline. Ultimately, the results provide implications for cultural preservation, policy development, and further ethnographic inquiry.

2. Research Method

This study employs a historical-analytical approach combined with ethnographic field research to examine mourning and burial rituals in the Miyonkol oasis. The historical-analytical dimension involved a careful review of written sources, including religious texts, ethnographic records, and previous scholarly studies that documented traces of animism, fetishism, totemism, Zoroastrianism, and Islamic practices within Central Asian funeral traditions. These sources provided the foundation for understanding how ancient belief systems shaped customs that continue to the present day. Complementing this, field research was conducted in several villages within the Okdarya district, where local informants shared oral accounts and personal experiences related to funeral practices. Interviews with elders and community members offered valuable insights into rituals such as the preparation of the "death bundle," the symbolic use of willow in coffins and staffs, lamentation traditions, and prohibitions associated with death ceremonies. The integration of oral testimony with documented evidence allowed for triangulation, ensuring reliability and depth in capturing both continuity and change within these customs. Special attention was paid to the impact of modern influences, particularly processes of Europeanization and modernization, on the gradual transformation of rituals and the loss of certain practices. The methodology also included comparative analysis of observed customs with broader theoretical frameworks in anthropology and ethnology, enabling the identification of persistent cultural patterns and hybrid belief structures. Overall, this combined approach ensured that the study not only described ritual practices but also interpreted their symbolic meanings and sociocultural implications, providing a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of mourning traditions in Miyonkol.

3. Results and Discussion

The Uzbek people's beliefs about death have a history spanning several millennia. According to ancient animistic concepts, the primitive people who lived in the region understood death as "an unawakening sleep." According to the beliefs of ancient ancestors who practiced Zoroastrianism, death among humans occurs in the following situations: 1) illness; 2) exhaustion and severance; 3) poverty; 4) fear; 5) sorrow; 6) harm from sorcery; 7) the influence of wolves, dogs, or other animals [2].

According to the principles of Islam, death is predestined and inevitable. The Holy Quran states the following about death: "No soul can die except by the leave of Allah, the term being fixed," and "Wherever you may be, death will overtake you" [3].

According to folk beliefs, death occurs as a result of the soul leaving the human body. Death is undoubtedly a great misfortune, but it is also one of the main stages in a person's life, like birth and puberty [4].

In the oasis, there are beliefs that the evil eye can lead to illness and even death. The belief in the destructive power of the evil eye persists among the people today, and the expression "The evil eye may not break a stone, but it will break a head" is often used. People with such eyes are described as having a "strong gaze" or "powerful eyes." To protect against the evil eye, people use chili peppers, harmal seeds, and evil eye beads [5].

There are beliefs that a person's actions, that is, violating established prohibitions, can also lead to fatal consequences. Accordingly, it is strictly forbidden for pregnant or postpartum women to participate in mourning ceremonies, based on the belief that it can harm the woman's fetus or the newborn. If a pregnant woman is a close relative of the deceased and must attend the ceremony, she does not sit during the funeral prayer; she only stands. This is based on the magical belief that if a pregnant woman sits during the funeral prayer, her child will die [6].

Among the population, not only various actions, conditions, and perceptions, but also certain objects and changes in the household are believed to cause death. For example, spider webs are considered inauspicious and are believed to bring death to the household. There are beliefs that a person who consumes food with spider webs may commit suicide, and that placing household items such as a broom or rolling pin upright can bring misfortune or disaster to the family [7]. People believe that ash and trash should not be mixed together in order to prevent wedding and mourning ceremonies from coinciding in a household [8]. Even when a person is still healthy, they begin to prepare for death. First, they prepare a "death bundle," which contains the items necessary for their final send-off and used in the funeral ceremony. When an elderly person or someone who has been ill for a long time senses that their life is coming to an end, they summon their children, close and distant relatives, friends, and brothers, and ask for their forgiveness and blessing. While they are still alive, or "with their eyes open," as the people say, they divide their inheritance and property among their children to prevent disputes over wealth among family members after their death and to ensure harmony between them. If a woman is on the verge of death, she divides her jewelry among her daughters, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters before she dies [9].

To ease the suffering of a person who is struggling to die, they lay them down on the ground with their head lowered and their loved ones sit nearby, moistening cotton with water and dabbing it on the dying person's lips while reciting the "Shahada" (declaration of faith). This custom is performed to prevent the dying person's mouth from becoming dry from the heat and to keep the salivary glands functioning. They believe that doing so creates conditions for the soul to leave the body freely. G.P. Snesarev connects this practice to the Zoroastrian funeral rites. The scholar notes that because a dying Zoroastrian is constantly under the threat of Ahriman, the embodiment of evil forces, a Mobed (Zoroastrian priest) must stand before them and recite prayers to drive away the evil forces, and drops of the water of life - the sacred haoma drink - must be dripped into the mouth of the seriously ill person to invigorate them [10].

The wake for the deceased It was believed that a coffin made of willow would ease the sins of the deceased and help them enter paradise. In Samarkand, the staffs of the pallbearers were also made of willow, in the belief that the deceased would thus move on more easily. After the soil was drawn over the grave, the staff was broken in two: one piece was placed at the head, and the other at the foot. They believed that if the staff sprouted, the deceased had moved on easily. They also tied rags to long-lived willow trees, saying, "May the spirits of the ancestors be joyful." And they lit a wick at the base of the tree in honor of the spirit of the person who planted it [11]. Field research confirms that these traditions persisted in Miyonkol until the end of the 20th century. For example, the deceased's close male relatives would make a staff and coffin out of willow wood. Each body was carried to the cemetery in a new coffin, and after the body was buried in the grave, the staff was placed at the foot of the grave until the "fortieth day" memorial. Then, the staffs were stuck into a certain place in the

cemetery or at the entrance, the purpose of which was to provide shade to the cemetery and to make it easier for the staff to sprout with water, in the belief that it would provide shade to those lying in the grave and offer blessings. The coffins were taken to the edge of the cemetery, collected, and burned there. Today, these customs have disappeared, and one coffin is used for the entire village [12].

In folk beliefs, there is a notion that deceased persons for whom funeral and memorial ceremonies have not been fully performed are condemned to need in the afterlife. As ethnographer Arnold van Gennep noted: "During the period of mourning, a special solidarity is established between the worlds of the living and the dead" [13].

Second, The emergence of ideas about the soul greatly complicated the attitude towards the deceased. The ideas that after a person dies, their body decays but their soul continues to live, that there is a world of spirits in the water or underground, or in the sky, gave rise to various customs such as honoring the spirits, commemorating them, performing ceremonies to avoid provoking the wrath of the spirits, and making sacrifices [14]. The weeping (wailing, lamenting, weeping while reciting elegies) in mourning ceremonies is related to ancient Zoroastrian traditions. It is noteworthy that although more than twelve centuries have passed since our people began to profess Islam, the traces of Zoroastrianism and other ancient religious beliefs in death and burial ceremonies still remain, which is an example of the persistence of folk memory and the vitality of the rituals associated with it [15].

S.A. Tokarev provides an analysis of existing ideas about the "other world." According to ideas about the fate of souls after death, souls can remain somewhere near us, in the world of the living, or go to their own special world. These views are certainly related to totemism. The ancient tribes had clear ideas about the soul, which reflected their real-life experiences. Therefore, the view that the first layer of religious beliefs is totemism prevails, because in it people realized that they were in close kinship with their natural environment, which was unique to them [16].

4. Conclusion

The study of mourning and burial rituals in the Miyonkol oasis reveals that these practices are deeply rooted in layers of ancient belief systems, including animism, fetishism, totemism, and Zoroastrian traditions, which have been reshaped but not erased by the adoption of Islam. The findings highlight the persistence of symbolic customs such as the preparation of the “death bundle,” the ritual use of willow in coffins and staffs, and the performance of laments, all of which reflect the enduring power of cultural memory and the blending of religious and magical elements. At the same time, the research shows that modernization and Europeanization have contributed to the gradual decline of certain traditions, underscoring the fragility of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary society. The implications of these results extend to the fields of ethnography and cultural preservation, emphasizing the importance of documenting and safeguarding rituals that embody national values and identity. Future research should expand fieldwork across different regions, employ comparative cross-cultural analysis, and explore the role of younger generations in transmitting or transforming these practices, thereby providing deeper insights into the dynamics of continuity and change in Uzbekistan’s funeral traditions.

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