

Islam's ritual of washing the body bestows respect on the dead

by Nancy Haught, The Oregonian

Friday May 22, 2009, 6:59 AM

Living Impact - OregonLive.com

http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2009/05/islams_ritual_of_washing_the_b.html



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian

After Portland-area Muslims finish their burial rituals, they can seek out Muslim-specific gravesites. At the Garden of Islam at Sunset Hills Memorial Park, Ali Colestaneh, 84, reads Koran to his late wife, Monir, and late sister, Iran. "My wife's soul can see me," says Colestaneh.

Judy Nikukar was in her 40s and had been a Muslim for 15 years before someone invited her to help wash a body before burial.

The Salem woman considered whether she wanted to do it. She had seen only two dead bodies before. She was 6 when her great-grandmother died; 18 when her grandmother passed away. "I'd lived my life separated from death," she says now. "So many Americans do."

On the other hand, Nikukar had a medical background -- a degree in pharmacy from Oregon State University. She knew Islam's requirement that communities prepare their brothers' and sisters' bodies for burial.

She decided to try. Nikukar remembers walking down the funeral home steps, toward a room where the washing would occur, wondering if she'd be able to complete the solemn ritual.

"I didn't want to fail in this," she says. "I knew the lady who had died, and I wanted to do this for her."

Many religions attach sacred rituals to death and burial. Orthodox and traditional Jews, for example, do not allow embalming or cremation. Bodies are washed carefully, wrapped in shrouds and buried in simple wooden coffins.

In the West, Islamic traditions are mysterious to outsiders and, sometimes, to new Muslim converts.

The Muslim Educational Trust of Tigard invited The Oregonian to a spring workshop on Islamic funeral practices. Almost 80 Muslims from conservative, moderate and liberal backgrounds -- some members of mosques and others who aren't -- attended.

"Death is the return of the soul to its Creator, God," says Wajdi Said, a co-founder of the educational trust. The inevitability of death and the hereafter is never far from a Muslim's consciousness.

A Muslim community believes three things occur as they wash, shroud and bury the dead: The body returns to the earth, from which it was made; the soul faces judgment; and the living are reminded that their time on Earth is limited, their opportunity to do good may end at any moment.

While Muslims share these beliefs with other people of faith, they do not relinquish their dead bodies to professional undertakers. They bury the body within 24 hours. But first it must be washed carefully and wrapped in clean white cloth. In keeping with Muslim ideas of modesty and propriety, women wash women's bodies and men wash those of men. Husbands may wash their wives' bodies and vice versa. Either parent may wash a young child.

Most communities designate people who invite others to help wash a body, often at a funeral home where stainless steel tables, easily accessible running water and floor drains ease the process.

In a separate workshop for women, Gail Ramjan, a trustee and co-founder of the trust, stressed the dignity and compassion of the ritual -- as well as the trepidation she felt the first time she participated.

"I was nervous and scared," she said. "But it's truly a loving act, the last worldly thing you can do for a person."

She used a mannequin to show how a woman is always covered by a dark sheet. The body should be lifted carefully to protect the skin and to show respect, and gently washed with simple soap. A body should be rinsed three, five, seven or an odd number of times, until the water runs clear. The last rinse may include camphor or another scented ingredient. A woman's hair is washed, combed and, if possible, braided and arranged under her head.

A body is dried carefully, arms crossed right over left as if in prayer, and wrapped in large, white winding sheets tied with strips of fabric. The resulting shroud recalls the white garments Muslims wear on Hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca.

"Everyone ends up looking alike," says Aesha Lorenz Al-Saeed, a native Oregonian who lives in Saudi Arabia but attends the Muslim Community Center when she's in Portland.

"The richest and the poorest persons are buried the same way," Ramjan says. The process is completed quietly and solemnly.

"Often, when someone dies, we wish we could have done something," says Ramjan, who has helped prepare eight bodies. "Well, this is something you can do."

The washed, unembalmed body is buried in a shroud without a coffin, which is allowed by Oregon law. Men, women and children are laid in their graves on their right sides, facing Mecca, the holy city of Islam. Elaborate markers, domes or shrines are not allowed. Ideally, Muslims are not buried alongside non-Muslims, and some cemeteries set aside space for Muslim graves. Sunset Hills Memorial Park in Portland established the Garden of Islam about 20 years ago. The Muslim Community Center in Northeast Portland purchased space at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Gresham and is negotiating for more. In 1990, another group of Muslims purchased 10 acres of land near Corvallis and established the Islamic Cemetery of Oregon.

In the Corvallis cemetery, graves are marked with numbers so visitors can find loved ones. In other cemeteries, low markers bear names and may completely cover the grave. Generally, Muslims do not leave flowers or other offerings. Instead, they honor loved ones by paying their debts, offering charity in their names and with prayers.

Following Islamic funeral rules is also a way to honor brothers and sisters and teach the next generation to do the same, says Omar B. Shabazz. He first took part in the rituals in the 1970s, after seeing many of his fellow soldiers die in Vietnam.

"I'd experienced so much death," he remembers. "But when someone passes away naturally, you have time to feel compassion. My first time was a spiritual awakening, a healing."

As he speaks, Levada Marion Dawan nods her head. In her 28 years as a Muslim, she's seen Islamic traditions spare families both prolonged grief and the debilitating expense of elaborate funerals. Taking part is a sober but uplifting experience.

"We see the body relax. We see a spiritual glow," she says. "We see the body transformed."

The first time Judy Nikukar helped wash a body, the woman was someone she knew.

"I'd been there when she became a Muslim," Nikukar says, "and when she was married." When she died of cancer, Nikukar wanted also to be present and to be a witness.

Nikukar says she was absorbed in the process and didn't feel afraid. She was relieved when it was over. A sense of grace and peace came over her. "It's an honor to do for your sister the last thing on this Earth."