ShahidiHub International Journal of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences- ISSN (Online): 2958-8154– Vol. 4, No. 1 (2026), 1–15

Religio-Cultural Practices, Gender, and the Afterlife Among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi

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Abstract

This study explores the religio-cultural practices surrounding death and the afterlife among the Somali Muslim community in Eastleigh, Nairobi County, with particular attention to the concept of *adhaab al-kabr* (punishment of the grave) and the gendered dimensions of death rituals. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions with 48 participants, including community members, religious leaders, and cultural elders. The study utilized the theory of assimilation to examine how Islamic teachings on death and the afterlife have been integrated with Somali cultural practices, and the social interpretive theory to understand how community members attach meaning to their practices. Findings reveal that death rituals in the Somali Muslim community represent a complete assimilation of Islamic eschatology into indigenous cultural forms. Burial practices emphasize immediacy, ritual washing, shrouding, and prayer, reflecting Islamic prescriptions. The mourning process is structured, lasting forty days with specific rituals on the third, seventh, and fortieth days, blending Islamic supplication with Somali cultural expressions of grief. Women are systematically marginalized in death rituals, prohibited from approaching the grave, participating in burial, or engaging in formal religious roles during funerals. This exclusion is justified through cultural narratives about women's emotionality, yet it stands in tension with Islamic teachings that grant women greater participation. The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* shapes these practices, with the community's understanding of the grave as the first station of the afterlife informing how the deceased are prepared, mourned, and remembered. The study contributes to the anthropology of religion, gender studies, and Islamic studies by providing rich ethnographic data on the topic, as understood and lived, and on the intersection of eschatological belief, cultural practice, and gender dynamics in a diasporic Somali community.

Keywords: *Adhaab al-kabr*, Somali Muslims, Death Rituals, Gender, Culture, and Islam

Introduction

Death is a universal human experience, and how communities understand, ritualize, and respond to death vary profoundly across cultures and religious traditions. For Somali Muslims, death is understood not as an end but as a transition, a passage from the temporal world to the eternal afterlife, marked by the grave as the first station of the soul's journey. Central to this understanding is the concept of *adhaab al-kabr* (punishment of the grave), which teaches that immediately after burial, the deceased is questioned by angels and experiences either torment or blessing based on their earthly deeds (al-Awayishah 1998, 9; Khan 2018, 60). This belief shapes not only individual spirituality but also communal practices surrounding death, burial, and mourning.

Among the Somali Muslim community in Eastleigh, Nairobi County, the intersection of Islamic teachings and Somali cultural traditions has produced a distinctive set of death rituals and mourning practices. Eastleigh, a densely populated commercial district in Nairobi, has become a significant hub for Somali migrants and refugees since the early 1990s, following political instability and civil conflict in Somalia (Lindley 2007, 2; Whittaker 2020, 764). Today, the area hosts an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Somali Muslims, comprising both Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees who maintain strong cultural and religious ties to their heritage while navigating the realities of urban life (Varming 2020, 8).

Within this community, death rituals serve multiple functions: they honor the deceased, provide comfort to the bereaved, reinforce social bonds, and express theological convictions about the afterlife. The manner in which a body is washed, shrouded, and buried; the prayers recited; the duration and expression of mourning; and the roles assigned to different community members all reflect a complex synthesis of Islamic doctrine and Somali cultural tradition. Central to these practices is the belief in *adhaab al-kabr*, which infuses each ritual act with eschatological significance: the washing of the body prepares it for questioning; the prompt burial ensures the soul's immediate transition; the prayers of the living intercede for the deceased's fate in the grave. However, these practices also reveal significant gender dynamics that warrant critical examination. In the Somali Muslim community of Eastleigh, women are systematically excluded from key aspects of death rituals. They are prohibited from approaching the grave, participating in the burial, or serving in formal religious roles during funerals. This marginalization is justified through cultural narratives that frame women as excessively emotional, prone to wailing that could disturb the deceased's transition. Yet these practices stand in tension with Islamic teachings that grant

women the right to participate in funeral rites and visit graves (Roble 2008, 1). This tension between religious principle and cultural practice reflects broader dynamics of gender, authority, and power within the community.

This study, therefore, examines the religio-cultural practices surrounding death and the afterlife among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, with particular attention to how beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr* shape these practices and how gender dynamics are enacted within them. The study explores the process of assimilation between Islamic teachings and Somali cultural traditions, the structure and meaning of burial and mourning rituals, and the marginalization of women in death-related practices. By examining these dimensions, the study contributes to scholarly discussions on lived religion, the anthropology of death, and gender in Muslim communities.

Literature Review

Islamic Teachings on Death and Burial

Islamic teachings on death and burial are derived from the Qur'an and the Hadith, which provide detailed guidance on how the deceased should be treated and how the living should mourn. The Qur'an affirms the certainty of death: "Every soul will taste death" (Surah 3:185) and emphasizes that death is a transition to another form of existence. The Hadith elaborates on funeral practices, specifying that the deceased should be washed (*ghusl*), shrouded in simple white cloth (*kafan*), and buried as quickly as possible after death, ideally within twenty-four hours (Ǧibālī and Albānī 2003, 17–18). The funeral prayer (*salat al-janazah*) is a communal obligation, and the community is encouraged to accompany the body to the grave and offer supplications for the deceased.

Islamic teachings also address the mourning period, whereby widows are required to observe a waiting period (*iddah*) of four months and ten days, during which they are prohibited from remarrying or beautifying themselves (Qur'an 2:234). Mourning for other relatives is traditionally limited to three days, with expressions of grief expected to be moderate. Wailing, excessive crying, and self-harm are discouraged, as they are seen as questioning divine will and potentially disturbing the deceased (Azhar 2020, 9).

Regarding women's participation in funeral rites, Islamic sources indicate that women are permitted to attend funerals and visit graves. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have allowed women to accompany funeral processions, and early Muslim women were known to visit graves for supplication (Roble 2008, 1). However, cultural interpretations in various Muslim communities have restricted women's participation, often citing concerns about emotional expression or the

mixing of genders. These restrictions reflect cultural adaptations rather than explicit Qur'anic prohibitions.

Somali Cultural Traditions and Death

Somali cultural traditions surrounding death predate the arrival of Islam in the Horn of Africa, yet have been substantially transformed by Islamic influence over centuries. Traditional Somali beliefs included reverence for ancestors, rituals to honor the dead, and practices to ensure a peaceful transition for the deceased. With the adoption of Islam, many of these practices were reinterpreted or replaced by Islamic rituals, yet certain cultural elements persisted, particularly in mourning, community support, and gender roles (Lewis 2019, 5; Cassanelli 2016, 16).

In Somali culture, death is understood as a loss that demands a collective response. The community gathers to comfort the bereaved, provide material support, and participate in mourning rituals. The concept of *aqal* (kinship) structures these responses, with relatives expected to take responsibility for funeral arrangements, financial support, and ongoing care for widows and orphans. These cultural expectations have been integrated with Islamic teachings, producing a distinctive synthesis that reflects both religious obligations and social solidarity (Edle, Albrecht, and Kanyinga 2026).

Gender roles in Somali death rituals are highly differentiated. Men are responsible for washing the body, digging the grave, and conducting the burial. Women are typically restricted to the domestic sphere, participating in mourning rituals but excluded from the burial site. This division is often justified by reference to women's emotional nature and the belief that wailing may disturb the deceased's transition (Roble 2008, 1). While Islamic teachings do not mandate this exclusion, cultural tradition has reinforced it, and it remains a contested aspect of Somali Muslim practice.

Assimilation Theory and Religious Practice

Assimilation theory, originally developed by Park and Burgess (1921) to explain the integration of immigrant groups into host societies, provides a useful framework for understanding how Islamic teachings have been integrated with Somali cultural traditions. Assimilation refers to the process by which groups adopt the cultural patterns of another group while potentially retaining distinctive elements of their own tradition. In the Somali Muslim context, this process has involved incorporating Islamic rituals and beliefs into existing cultural frameworks, producing a synthesis that is both Islamic and Somali.

The theory of assimilation has been applied to religious contexts by scholars examining how world religions interact with local cultures. Gordon (1964) distinguished between cultural assimilation (adoption of cultural patterns) and structural assimilation (integration into social institutions), both of which are evident in the Somali Muslim community's adoption of Islamic practices. Gans (1979) further developed the concept of symbolic ethnicity, suggesting that groups may retain cultural symbols and practices even as they assimilate into broader social structures. In the case of Somali Muslims, Islamic practices have become "symbolic" of Somali identity, with death rituals serving as key sites where this identity is expressed and reinforced.

As discussed, Islamic teachings and Somali cultural traditions shape death and burial practices among Somali Muslims. Islamic teachings from the Qur'an and Hadith guide funeral rituals, mourning, and treatment of the deceased, emphasizing quick burial, communal prayers, and moderate expressions of grief. While Islam permits women to attend funerals and visit graves, cultural interpretations in many Muslim communities often limit their participation. The review also shows that Somali death traditions combine pre-Islamic cultural practices with Islamic beliefs. Death is treated as a communal responsibility, with kinship networks providing emotional, financial, and social support to bereaved families. Gender roles in funeral practices are clearly divided, with men handling burial activities and women mainly participating in mourning rituals. Finally, assimilation theory explains how Somali Muslims integrated Islamic teachings into existing cultural traditions, creating a unique blend of religious and cultural identity. Death rituals, therefore, reflect both Islamic obligations and Somali social values.

Social Interpretive Theory and Meaning-Making

Social interpretive theory, associated with Max Weber (1968), emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals and groups attach meaning to their actions and experiences. For Weber, social action is meaningful action, and the task of sociology is to interpret the subjective meanings that actors assign to their behavior. In the study of religion, this approach has been applied to understand how believers construct meaning through ritual, narrative, and practice (Berger 1967; McGuire 2008).

In the context of death rituals, social interpretive theory illuminates how communities make sense of mortality, loss, and the afterlife. The practices surrounding death are not merely functional responses to a biological event but are charged with meaning: they express theological convictions, reinforce social bonds, and provide frameworks for coping with grief. For Somali Muslims in

Eastleigh, the rituals of death and burial are sites of intense meaning-making, where beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr*, cultural values of community solidarity, and gendered expectations converge.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the religio-cultural practices surrounding death and the afterlife among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi County. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture the depth, nuance, and contextual embeddedness of cultural practices and religious beliefs (Creswell 2003, 35). The study was conducted over six months from January to June 2024, allowing for sustained engagement with the community and rapport-building with participants.

Study Site and Population

Eastleigh, Nairobi County, served as the study site. This area is characterized by a Somali Muslim population, estimated at 200,000 to 300,000 individuals, comprising both Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees who arrived after the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 (Varming 2020, 8; Whittaker 2020, 764). Eastleigh is home to numerous mosques, madrasas, and community organizations that facilitate religious education and practice, making it an ideal setting for examining the intersection of Islamic teachings and Somali cultural traditions.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding death rituals and *adhaab al-kabr*. The sample comprised 48 participants: 30 community members (laypeople), 12 church leaders (council members and elders), and 6 religious teachers (imams, sheiks, and *maalim*). Participants were distributed across three age groups: four elderly participants (aged 50–70 years), nine adults (aged 35–49 years), and 17 younger adults (aged 18–34 years). Women accounted for 56% of the sample, reflecting the community's active membership demographics. Snowball sampling was also employed, with initial participants referring others who might be willing to participate.

Data Collection

The data was collected using multiple qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants using an interview guide that explored their understanding

of death, their experiences with burial and mourning rituals, their perceptions of *adhaab al-kabr*, and their views on gender roles in death practices. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were conducted in Kiswahili, English, and Somali, with a research assistant providing translation when necessary.

Participant observation was employed to observe burial ceremonies, mourning gatherings, and community responses to death. The researcher attended six burial ceremonies at a Muslim cemetery in Langata, Nairobi, and documented the processes of grave preparation, body washing, shrouding, prayer, and interment. Field notes were recorded immediately following observations, capturing both the sequence of events and the researcher's interpretive reflections.

Focus group discussions were conducted with three groups of 10–15 participants each. These discussions enabled exploration of collective perspectives on death rituals, generational differences in practice, and community norms regarding gender roles. The researcher facilitated discussions and audio-recorded them for transcription.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 110). The analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was facilitated by NVivo 15, which enabled systematic coding and theme visualization. The analysis identified key themes, including the inevitability of death, the structure of burial rituals, the mourning process, the role of community support, the marginalization of women, and the moral dimensions of death practices.

Findings of the Study

The Inevitability of Death

The study examined the religio-cultural practices surrounding death and the afterlife among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, with a focus on *adhaab al-kabr* (punishment of the grave) and gendered funeral practices. It explored Islamic teachings and Somali cultural traditions related to death, burial, and mourning, investigated how beliefs about the grave influence funeral rituals and perceptions of the afterlife, analyzed the role and exclusion of women in death rituals, and examined how Islamic eschatological beliefs have been assimilated into Somali cultural practices and understood within the community.

Participants consistently affirmed death as an inevitable reality that all humans must face. One participant (RS14) stated, "We believe that death is a must because everybody's soul must taste death. *Kila nafsi itapatana na kifo"* (Swahili for: every soul will meet with death). Another participant (RS12) added, "Death is something that every person will go through, and there is life after death." These statements reflect a dual understanding: death is both a universal biological reality and a religiously significant transition to another mode of existence.

The inevitability of death was understood within the framework of Islamic predestination. A participant (RS10) explained, "*Mungu amekadiria kila kitu iwe jinsi ilivyo"* (God has planned everything to be the way it is). This acceptance of divine will shapes how participants approach death, with many describing it as a "must" that cannot be avoided or evaded. At the same time, death was acknowledged as emotionally difficult. A participant (RS22) noted, "If it is someone important to you, there is heartbreak." Still another participant (RS16) observed, "*Kifo wanaona ni kitu mbaya, ladies wanalia na watoto, ni kitu ya huzuni* (They see death as a bad thing, women and children cry, it is a sad thing)."

Participants also identified cultural signs that foreshadow death. One participant (RS1) explained, "People have signs when they are about to die, especially when they are in their sick bed; they say the leaf of a plant drying up until it falls is a sign of someone dying." These signs, while not formally part of Islamic teaching, persist in the community's cultural framework, reflecting the assimilation of Islamic and Somali beliefs about mortality.

Burial Rituals: Assimilation of Islamic Practice

The burial rituals described by participants reflect a complete assimilation of Islamic prescriptions into Somali cultural practice. The process begins immediately after death, with the body washed, shrouded, and prepared for burial. A participant (RS12) explained, "The first thing is that you are washed, and then you are covered with a white shroud, then prayed for, especially for the dead, and then buried." Another participant (RS26) elaborated, "The body has to be washed, the body is shrouded, that is the covering of the body, and then we have to perform a special prayer for the person seeking forgiveness on their behalf, and then they have to be buried."

Multiple participants emphasized the immediacy of burial. One participant (RS2) explained, "The prophet decreed that if a person dies, he should be buried immediately in his grave so that he can face the good things awaiting him in the grave, and if he was a bad person, bury him immediately so that his *mashaka* (evil deeds) may be taken away from you." Another participant

(RS23) noted, "Once a person dies, we notify the family immediately, and we must conduct the burial the same day. There is no waiting for relatives from afar; this is how it is done."

The grave itself is prepared with care, reflecting beliefs about the deceased's experience in *barzakh*. Participant observation at a Muslim cemetery in Langata revealed that graves are dug to a depth of approximately six feet, with a niche (*shaqq*) carved into the side of the grave where the body is placed. Participants explained that the body is positioned to face the *qiblah* (direction of Mecca), and wooden planks are laid over the niche to prevent soil from falling onto the body. One participant (RS20) explained, "There are three things in the grave: the body is placed facing the *qiblah*, the wood is laid over, and the soil is returned." The use of a shroud rather than a coffin was consistently emphasized. A participant (RS23) stated, "*Sisi hatuziki na sanduku* (we do not use a casket when burying people)." This practice reflects Islamic teachings on simplicity and equality in death, as well as the belief that the deceased should return to the earth in a state of humility.

The Mourning Process: Structure and Community Support

The mourning process in the Somali Muslim community is highly structured, lasting approximately forty days with specific rituals marking different intervals. A participant (RS11) explained, "Mourning after the burial is done, and it takes about forty days." The third day was identified as particularly significant. A participant (RS23) explained, "After the third day after the person is buried, the family comes to make a prayer so that God can ease the punishment of the dead person because you do not know, even if the person seems to have lived a good life, the righteous life you do not know the things they used to do when people were asleep, only God knows, so on the third day people pray for that dead body so that God can ease the punishment."

Community support was described as integral to the mourning process. A participant (RS11) noted that people come to comfort the bereaved, providing both material support and emotional support. Another participant (RS17) explained, "*Kama mtu amekufa, analipiwa deni, culture inasema achangiwe wamlipie deni na pia dini inasema hivo* (If a person dies, his debt will be paid. The culture and religion admonish the payment of someone's debt)." This practice reflects the community's understanding of moral responsibility toward the deceased, rooted in the belief that unresolved debts may affect the soul's experience in the afterlife.

The waiting period for widows (*hida*) was described as lasting four months and ten days, during which the widow refrains from remarrying, beautifying herself, or leaving her home except

for necessity. A participant (RS27) explained, "Bibi akifiwa (after a woman is bereaved), there is a period of four months, ten days, a period known as *hida* to check whether the woman is pregnant, and at this time she is not allowed to go out or even beautify herself." This practice reflects Islamic teaching (Qur'an 2:234) and serves both to honor the deceased and to provide clarity regarding any pregnancy that might result from the marriage.

Gender and Death Rituals: Marginalization of Women

A striking finding of this study was the systematic marginalization of women in death rituals. Participants consistently described women as prohibited from participating in key aspects of burial. A participant (RS12) stated, "Women do not usually go to bury the person; only the men go to bury that person. You are not allowed to go as a woman because you will cry too much and make noise for those who are dead." Another participant (RS14) explained, "Women are not allowed to dig the grave or approach it." A participant (RS5) added, "Women are emotional. Crying will not help; you thank Allah for taking him; he has removed *dhikis* of *dunia* (problems of the world)."

The prohibition extends to the grave itself. A participant (RS12) stated, "*Mtu akikufa wanasema usikaribie, wanawake hawafai kumkaribia* (When someone dies, they say do not approach; women are not supposed to come near)." This restriction was justified through cultural narratives about women's emotional nature, with the belief that wailing or excessive crying might disturb the deceased's transition and potentially increase their punishment in the grave.

Despite these cultural restrictions, participants acknowledged that Islamic teachings grant women greater participation in death rituals. A participant (RS2) noted, "Every time, religion overpowers the culture; Allah has given women dignity in religion, but culturally, women are inferior." Participants recognized this tension between religious principles and cultural practice, though few expressed active resistance to the cultural norms.

Moral Dimensions of Death Practices

Participants described death rituals as carrying significant moral weight. The sacredness of death was emphasized, with restrictions on speaking about the deceased after their passing. A participant (RS13) explained, "*Mara mtu amethibitishwa kufa, huruhusiwi kusema chochote kuwahusu* (When someone dies, you are not allowed to comment anything about them)." This prohibition reflects respect for the deceased and recognition that their fate is now in God's hands.

The payment of debts was described as a moral obligation that affects the deceased's state in the grave. A participant (RS15) explained, "*Ako na deni yako, utarudishiwa* (If he has a debt to

pay, it will be refunded on his behalf).” Another participant (RS13) added, “Charity is a way of punishment being taken from you.” These practices reflect the belief that the actions of the living can intercede on behalf of the deceased, influencing their experience of *adhaab al-kabr*.

The moral dimension also extends to how individuals live their lives. A participant (RS7) explained, “I cannot be scared of death; all of us will die. I have already done all the requirements of the Qur’an. I live the right way. If you are not reading the Qur’an nor praying then you will be punished in the grave, but if you have been a good person, then you are exempted from punishment.” This statement reflects the connection between earthly conduct and post-mortem fate that is central to beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr*.

In summary, the study examined how Somali Muslims in Eastleigh understand and practice death rituals, focusing on beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr*, burial customs, mourning practices, and gender roles. It was ascertained that death is seen as inevitable and divinely ordained, with strong emphasis on Islamic teachings shaping burial practices such as quick burial, washing, shrouding, and communal prayers. Mourning is structured and communal, lasting about forty days and involving social and financial support for bereaved families. The study also highlights the marginalization of women in funeral rituals due to cultural norms rather than Islamic requirements. Overall, it shows a close blending of Islamic eschatology with Somali cultural traditions, where beliefs about the afterlife strongly influence moral behavior and social practices surrounding death.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that death rituals among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh represent a profound assimilation of Islamic eschatology into Somali cultural practices. The burial process, including immediate interment, ritual washing, shrouding, and funeral prayer, follows Islamic prescriptions closely, reflecting the community’s commitment to religious orthodoxy. The care taken in grave preparation, including positioning the body toward the *qiblah* and using wooden planks to prevent soil from contacting the body, reflects beliefs about the soul’s continued existence in the grave and the importance of creating conditions conducive to either comfort or torment, depending on the deceased’s deeds (Ǧibālī and Albānī 2003, 17–18; Roble 2008, 1).

The structured mourning process, lasting 40 days with prayers on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th days, represents a synthesis of Islamic and Somali traditions. Islamic teachings prescribe a three-day mourning period for most relatives and a four-month, ten-day period for widows (Qur’an 2:234). Somali cultural traditions extend the mourning period and incorporate community

gatherings and prayers at specific intervals. This synthesis reflects the process of assimilation, in which Islamic prescriptions have been adopted while cultural practices of extended mourning and collective support have been retained (Oseje 2018, 127).

The marginalization of women in death rituals presents a complex intersection of religion, culture, and gender. While Islamic teachings permit women to attend funerals and visit graves (Roble 2008, 1), Somali cultural practice systematically excludes women from the burial site and from formal religious roles in death rituals. This exclusion is justified through cultural narratives about women's emotionality and the belief that wailing may disturb the deceased's transition or increase their punishment. However, these justifications stand in tension with Islamic principles that emphasize the equality of believers and the permissibility of women's participation in all aspects of religious life.

The tension between Islamic teaching and cultural practice reflects broader dynamics of gender and authority in Muslim communities. As several participants noted, "every time, religion overpowers the culture," yet in practice, cultural norms often prevail, particularly in areas where women's participation is contested. This discrepancy highlights the importance of distinguishing between religious doctrine and cultural interpretation, and the need for critical examination of how gender roles are constructed and maintained within religious communities.

The moral dimension of death practices, the payment of debts, the offering of charity, and the restriction on speaking about the deceased reflect the community's understanding of the grave as the first station of the afterlife. The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* infuses these practices with eschatological significance: the payment of a debt may ease the deceased's punishment; charity may intercede on their behalf; respectful silence honors their transition. These practices illustrate how eschatological belief shapes everyday moral behavior and how the living understand themselves as having responsibility toward the dead (Azhar 2020, 9).

From the perspective of assimilation theory (Park and Burgess 1921; Gordon 1964), the Somali Muslim community's death practices represent a case of cultural assimilation in which Islamic teachings have been adopted as the normative framework for death rituals, while Somali cultural traditions have been retained in areas not explicitly addressed by Islamic law, such as extended mourning periods and gender restrictions. This process has produced a distinctive synthesis that is simultaneously Islamic and Somali, reflecting the community's dual identity as both Muslim and Somali.

Social interpretive theory (Weber 1968; Berger 1967) illuminates the meanings that community members attach to their practices. The rituals of death and burial are not merely functional responses to a biological event but are charged with theological significance: they express beliefs about accountability, divine justice, and the continuity of the soul. The exclusion of women from burial rituals, while culturally contested, is understood by many as a way of protecting the deceased's transition and ensuring that the focus remains on prayer and supplication rather than emotional expression. These meanings, however contested, structure the community's experience of death and shape how individuals navigate grief and loss.

The study finds that Somali Muslims in Eastleigh have largely integrated Islamic teachings into their death rituals, especially in burial practices such as immediate burial, washing, shrouding, and prayer, while also retaining Somali cultural elements like extended mourning periods and communal gatherings. Mourning practices reflect a blend of Islamic prescriptions and cultural traditions, creating a hybrid system of ritual observance.

It also shows that women are often excluded from burial rituals due to cultural beliefs about emotionality, even though Islamic teachings allow their participation, highlighting tension between doctrine and cultural practice. Death rituals are strongly shaped by beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr*, which give moral and spiritual significance to actions such as prayer, charity, and debt repayment for the deceased. Overall, the findings illustrate how Islamic eschatology and Somali cultural traditions have merged to form a distinctive religious-cultural system that shapes both social behavior and understandings of the afterlife.

Conclusion

This study examined the religio-cultural practices surrounding death and the afterlife among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi County, with particular attention to the concept of *adhaab al-kabr* and the gender dynamics of death rituals. The findings reveal that death practices in this community represent a profound assimilation of Islamic eschatology into Somali cultural traditions, producing a distinctive synthesis that reflects both religious orthodoxy and cultural continuity.

Burial rituals emphasize immediacy, ritual washing, shrouding, and prayer, closely following Islamic prescriptions. The mourning process is structured and communal, lasting forty days with specific rituals on the third, seventh, and fortieth days that blend Islamic supplication with Somali expressions of grief and solidarity. The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* shapes these

practices, with the understanding of the grave as the first station of the afterlife informing how the deceased are prepared, mourned, and remembered. The study also revealed significant gender dynamics in death practices. Women are systematically marginalized in death rituals, prohibited from approaching the grave, participating in burial, or serving in formal religious roles during funerals. This exclusion, justified through cultural narratives about women's emotionality, stands in tension with Islamic teachings that grant women greater participation. This tension between religious principle and cultural practice reflects broader dynamics of gender, authority, and power within the community.

The study contributes to the anthropology of religion, gender studies, and Islamic studies by providing rich ethnographic data on the intersection of eschatological beliefs, cultural practices, and gender dynamics within a diasporic Somali community. It demonstrates the value of qualitative approaches that attend to the lived dimensions of religious practice, as well as the importance of examining how gender shapes access to religious spaces and rituals.

Future research could explore generational differences in attitudes toward women's participation in death rituals, the perspectives of Somali Muslim women on these practices, and comparative studies across different Muslim communities in Africa and the diaspora. Such research would further illuminate the complex dynamics of religion, culture, and gender in shaping how communities navigate death, mourning, and the afterlife.

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