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Multidisciplinary perspectives

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The intercessor status of the dead in Maliki Islam and in Mauritania

Corinne Fortier

Summary

In this article, the representations and practices related to death are studied through references to Islamic texts and also from their lived practice in one specific society, Moorish society in Mauritania. The majority of social and religious practices related to funerals are salutary not only to the deceased, but also for those who carry them out. It thus seems that, in spite of a certain denial by Islam with regard to intercession practices, the dead in this religion are considered as mediators between men and God. Moreover, the living continue after the funeral to seek salvation for the soul of their relative and more generally for all Muslims, which bears witness to the fact that they are able to have an influence on the destiny of the dead, which is decided upon in the final instance by God.

Keywords: Islam, Mauritania, death, body, intercession

Introduction

Representations and practices related to death (*mawt*) will be considered here using Islamic texts, and also from their lived practice in one specific society, Moorish society in Mauritania. Moorish society, as with most societies in North Africa, has for a long time been Islamized. The Maliki rite of Sunni obedience was spread in this area by the Almoravids in the 11th century. Moors regard themselves as Arabs, and speak an Arab dialect, *ḥassāniyya*. They call themselves *biḍān*, an Arabic term which means “white”. They are still Bedouins in cultural terms, even though they are now rarely nomadic. Three regions in Mauritania with minuscule cultural variations can be differentiated - Adrar in the north west, Trarza in the south west, and Hawdh in the east. Moorish society is considerably hierarchical in tribal terms; at the top, there are the maraboutic tribes and the warrior tribes, each one of which comprises former tributaries, former slaves, blacksmiths and sometimes griots (musicians).

Initially, detailed analysis of funeral rites and of the status attached to death enable us to precisely examine Islamic sources related to such matters. Subsequently, the connection of local practices with foundational Sunni Islamic texts reveals the subtle interplay that a Muslim society keeps alive with its scriptural references. In order for our approach to be coherent, we limit ourselves to the texts which are the most well-known in Moorish society,¹ and which are most likely to have influenced local funeral practices.

In the service of a pure body

Upon the death of a person, the body is no longer the subject, rather it is the object of intentions and of attentions from its social and religious community. Firstly, in washing it and in blocking all of its orifices, the Muslim ritual of funerary cleaning is aimed at protecting the body from all exterior impurity, so as to prepare its entrance into the beyond. This hypothesis enables us to understand a recommendation of Maliki

jurisprudence, according to which any person in a state of impurity must not approach the deceased (Qayrawānī 1968: 105). Moreover, it is required that the person who lifts up the body of the deceased perform minor ablutions (*wuḍūʿ*) (Khalīl 1995: 112). Thus, unlike other societies and other religions,² in Islam, the dead body (*mayyit*) represents less of a source of impurity for the living, than they do for it.

In Moorish society, the cleaning of the dead body is not reserved for a particular social category, it may be carried out by any individual who knows the required Muslim recommendations. Maliki jurisprudence (Qayrawānī 1968: 107 and Khalīl 1995: 106) has nonetheless determined the type of person who may carry this out, in accordance with criteria related to gender and to kinship with the deceased. In the first instance, it is recommended that this be the spouse; in the second, a close relation and in the third an individual of the same gender.³ The latter possibility is the one most followed in Moorish society, local codes of modesty between couples and relatives of the opposite sex prevent the persons stipulated in the first two categories being favoured juridically.⁴

Numerous actions in attending to the dead are religiously recognised as meritorious for salvation of the deceased, and also for the person who carries them out. In Moorish society, as in classic Islamic texts, the notion of *ājir* is

² On the other hand, in Judaism, the corpse, through contact, and even its very presence, represent one of the main sources of impurity (Wigoder 1996: 834), just as the whole cemetery does, and those who go there must cleanse when they leave (Wigoder 1996: 223). M. Gaborieau, who worked in a Hindu and Muslim environment, also notes that Islam restricted the impurity related to the corpse to a minimum (1993: 178). This minimum corresponds for instance to the fact that Maliki jurisprudence (Khalīl 1995: 109) recommends that the person who is taking care of the cleaning of the body carries out major ablutions (*ghuṣl*) once they have finished. Concerning Mālik's uncertainties on this matter, the corpse is not considered as a source of contamination, see Halevi (2007: 54-55).

³ Failing this the funerary cleaning may in exceptional cases be carried out by an individual of the opposite sex who by necessity must be a prohibited relation (*muḥaram*). Thus, a man may carry out the funeral cleansing of his wet nurse (Khalīl 1995: 111), considering the milk kinship between them (Fortier 2007).

⁴ On the other hand, in Maliki's age, in Medina, a wife could legitimately wash her husband's corpse and vice versa (Halevi 2007: 54).

¹ To appreciate more precisely the corpus of texts taught in Mauritania, notably concerning Maliki jurisprudence, see Fortier (1997: 89-91).

used to refer to “good points” which they believe have been accumulated during this life in preparation for life in the beyond (Fortier 2005).⁵ It is for instance meritorious for the believer who knows the rules to complete the funerary cleaning as well as presenting, amongst others, this hadith: “God shall forgive forty times over anyone who washes the dead body and conceals its state” (Nawawy 1991: 258). In Moorish society, a person who is not in any way related to the deceased, but rather has a relationship based on respect, can ask to wash him. This is the ultimate homage that an individual can pay to a person who has died, since they will be the last to see them before a shroud covers the body.

Moreover, it is not uncommon that a significant person might, out of respect for the deceased, wish to carry out their final cleaning; the family of the deceased would be eternally grateful. This practice confirms that the funeral cleaning, although it puts the person performing it in contact with a corpse in a state of putrefaction, has been related in Moorish society, and more generally in Sunni Islam, to a pious practice which honours the person undertaking it religiously and socially – which again constitutes an indication of the “sacred status” of the dead body.

Praying for the body

The body should be buried as quickly as possible, in accordance with prophetic speech: “Bury him the same night!” (Bukhârî 1977, vol. 1: 404). In ancient cities and in encampments in Mauritania, as in a lot of other Muslim countries, the dead body is taken to the cemetery (*maqbara*) on a stretcher (*janâ'iz*) which the men present at the funeral are expected to carry in turns, since this is a meritorious undertaking from the religious point of view. This practise is seen in other Muslim countries, notably in Egypt (Galal 1937: 179, note 2) and in Constantine in Algeria (Breteau and Zagnoli 1979: 305). In general, Muslims considered it a meritorious act to follow processions to the cemetery; jurists represented this deed as one of the five essential duties that Muslims owed one another, and they argued that God would reward participants by forgiving their sins (Halevi 2007: 144).

As for women, in Mauritania, they follow slightly behind the funeral procession, as Maliki jurisprudence advises (Khalîl 1995: 110). It is even recommended “that an old woman or a young girl, of whom there is no fear of temptation, go out to accompany the funeral procession of a relative, such as a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister or spouse” (Khalîl 1995: 111). Women going out for funeral processions (*khurûj al-nisâ' 'ala al-janâ'iz*) was associated by traditionalists with temptation, or with civil strife (*fitna*) (Halevi 2007: 128).

The grave, which is of a depth equivalent to the height of a man, is made up of two levels and it is the lowest level (*la'ad*) which receives the deceased. The position of the

body, in accordance with Muslim requirements, is stretched out on its right-hand side, feet pointing northward, head turned toward the south, eyes directed toward Mecca (*qibla*) (Qayrawânî 1968: 111).

The body is first of all set down at the side of the grave which has been dug for the occasion, then the funeral prayer is carried out (*ṣalat al-janâ'iz* or *ṣalat al-mayyat*), which requires that the body be situated on the bare ground (Khalîl 1995: 107). This prayer, which has the distinct feature of not comprising inclination, calls for an imam to oversee it, since it is to comply with specific rules.

During this prayer, the imam on four occasions says “God is great” (*Allah akbâr*) (Qayrawânî 1968: 111), yet from the pronunciation of the first *takbîr*, those giving prayer call to God for his protection against Satan “the stoned” (*ta'awudh*), and they recite the first sura of the Qur'an, which is known as *fâtiḥa* (Nawawy 1991: 260). The second *takbîr* “Abraham’s prayer” (Nawawy 1991: 260) then follows. The sura *yâ'sîn* (XXXVI) may also be recited in accordance with certain rites, however not that of Mâlik (Qayrawânî 1968: 105). In listening to the invocations which follow this prayer, the assistants reply: amen (*amin*).

Those who know the funeral prayers have a religious obligation to perform them, and may even, according to certain jurists, receive remuneration in compensation (Ould Bah 1981: 105). Moreover, uttering this prayer is part of “collective obligations” (*farḍ al-kifâya*) in Maliki jurisprudence (Qayrawânî 1968: 291), unlike ritual prayer which is the result of “individual obligations” (*farḍ al-'ayn*); in addition, in theory, as soon as two Muslims have carried this out, the others are excused from doing so, yet failing to do so may lead to divine punishment (Qayrawânî 1968: 109), so the majority participate voluntarily.

In the event that numerous persons participate in the funeral prayers, it is necessary for there to be at least three rows (*sufûf*),⁶ since multiplying the rows of the faithful during this prayer favours its fulfilment, as this hadith shows: “Marthad b. Abdallâh al-Yazani reports that Mâlik b. Hubayra, while conducting a funerary prayer where he considered the congregation to be too few, separated the faithful into three groups then addressed them thus: ‘God’s envoy’ says: ‘he who will have gathered three rows of faithful at his funeral services is deserved of paradise’” (Nawawy 1991: 259).

Invoking the body

The funerary prayer concludes with an appeal for divine mercy. The clemency of God is sometimes invoked on behalf of the deceased, and on behalf of all the dead and the living, with this invocation: “My Lord! Forgive us the living, our dead, those present with us, those who are

⁵ The concept of *thawâb*, is also used in the same sense in classic Islamic texts, yet less commonly used in Moorish society.

⁶ Fifteen faithful, for example, will be made up of three rows of five people.

absent, the young and the old among us, men and women...” The more the significance of the number of people who carry out this type of invocation, the greater the chance of it bearing fruit; as a hadith declares: “When a community of Muslims, one hundred in number, carry out the *ṣalat* for a Muslim, and all pray for the forgiveness of sins, this prayer is sure to be answered” (Muslim, *Janâ'iz*, Wensinck and Gardet 1998: 183).

In short, when the body is placed into the grave, the person who carries out the burial, utters a religious invocation requesting that God alleviate the suffering of the dead in the grave (Qayrawânî 1968: 107). Each person present then takes three handfuls of soil, or sand, which they throw on the deceased while reciting a section (*ḥizb*) of the Qur'an, for the salvation of its soul (*rûh*). This is a section named *tabarak*, in reference to the first word of the sura cited – although it is known in the Qur'an under the name of the sura of Monarchy (*al-Mulk*) (LXVII) (trans. Blachère 1980: 605).

Participating in the funeral is not only salutary for the dead, but for individuals too, as a hadith asserting that it is meritorious to participate in the funerary prayer suggests, it is still advantageous to be present at the burial:⁷ “Anyone who is present at the burial until the funeral prayer is finished will have one *qîrât*. A person who is present until the burying will have two *qîrât*. To anyone asking: ‘What are *qîrât*?’, the response would be ‘The equivalent of two large mountains’” (Nawawy 1991: 259).

The body “quranised”

After the burial, the men present and the Qur'anic pupils from the place, simultaneously read different sections (*aḥzâb*) of the Qur'an for the happiness of the deceased in the beyond. This sacred chorus is called *salka* in regions of the Adrar and of Hawdh, and *khatma* in the Trarza region, a term which refers to the closing of the Qur'anic reading, which is also used in the same context in other countries, notably in Egypt (Galal 1937: 190).

In Tiris, a border region of north-west Mauritania, this ceremony takes place within three days after the burial, according to the custom of their Moroccan neighbours. It is not rare for Muslim societies to carry out the reading of the Qur'an in its entirety, even on the day of the burial, as is the case in Egypt (*ibid.*: 189), or more often afterwards, for example during the first three days which follow the burial in Syrian villages (Jomier 1994: 141); or even on the fourth day in Nepal (Gaborieau 1993: 230). This custom, acknowledged in numerous Muslim societies, does not seem to have any sources in foundational Islamic texts and might even be semi-forbidden in Maliki jurisprudence (Khalîl 1995: 112).

In Moorish society, women who stand outside the dwelling, where this reading is taking place, carry out one

thousand *tarkim* at this moment, that is, they rub hundred beans of their rosary, ten times, while repeating the religious phrase: “May God forgive him and grant him mercy” (*Allah rahmu wa yaghfarlu*). When the reading of the Qur'an is over, they approach the men⁸ and invoke with them the salvation of the soul of the deceased. A hadith indeed recommends that the majority approach those who have finished the complete recital of the Qur'an because this moment, which is particularly pleasing to God, favours the fulfilment of wishes: “Being present at a session is recommended where there is a reading of the Qur'an, whether we are those who know how to read it or those who do not know” (Nawawy 1991: 131).

Laying down the body

Local custom consists of setting down branches⁹ on the grave, already noted in 1795 by the traveller Mungo Park (1996: 54), and this is also recognized in other Muslim countries, notably in Egypt (Galal 1937: 198; Abu-Zahra 1997: 58), revealing, after analysis of Islamic sources, inspiration from a hadith. The Prophet, passing close to two sepulchres whose inhabitants suffered torture, would have taken the branch of green palm tree¹⁰ and, breaking it in two, put each of the pieces on one of the tombs (Bukhârî 1977, vol. 1: 439). To those who questioned him about the finality of such a gesture, Mohammed responded: “In the hope that they will feel some relief as long as these branches are not dried out (*la'allahu an yukhaffafa 'anhumâ mâ lam yabâsâ*)” (*id.*).

The significance of this gesture is found in Mauritania; so, the phrase which makes reference to the recent death of an individual: “There remain branches which are still green” (*mazal zarbu akhẓar*), suggests that as long as the greenery placed on the grave is not dried out, the deceased is supposed to have no worries. Moreover, in Egypt, it is believed that as long as the palms, placed on the tomb, are verdant, they will bring about divine mercy (Galal 1937: 198, note 4).

During this period of time, God is not supposed to hold debts left by the deceased. This is a significant pardon, since their reimbursement, in the sayings of the Prophet, is amongst the major problems which may delay the liberation of the soul: “The soul of the believer is held prisoner as long as their debts have not been settled” (Nawawy 1991: 263). In addition, as a hadith recommends, their heirs must settle them quickly: “It is advisable to settle the debts of the deceased without delay” (Nawawy 1991: 263).

The beneficial nature of this greenery is without doubt due to its implicit association with Muslim paradise,

⁸ Women continue nonetheless to avoid men seeing them, even hiding themselves behind the canvas of a tent or behind the walls of a house in which the Qur'anic recital has taken place.

⁹ Especially acacia branches (*Accacia raddiana*), of the palm tree in ancient cities, or simple twigs which are still green.

¹⁰ In another hadith, reference is made to a piece of green wood (Bukhârî 1977, vol.1: 445).

⁷ It is the same in Judaism, both for the salvation of the dead and for the living (Gugenheim 1978: 197).

which is represented in a particularly luxuriant manner, even the term paradise in Arabic literally refers to garden (*janna*). More precisely, the shade that this vegetal protection brings in the time that it remains verdant seems to echo “the extensive shade” of the trees of paradise of which the Qur’an talks about: “The companions of the straight line will be, amongst the jujube trees which have no thorns and acacias lined up in the extensive shade” (LVI, 27-40). The image of the shade of the tree relates to the idea of blessed rest, physical or spiritual, and presents a particularly evocative suggestion of men of the desert who live under a blazing sun, which would appear to be the Moors or the Bedouins of Arabia from the beginnings of Islam.

The body celebrated

In Mauritania, after the burial, a sheep is slaughtered by the family of the deceased for those who have come, sometimes from far away, to be present at the burial. This custom, known in other societies of the Maghreb, is not completely in keeping with what a hadith stipulates, according to which it is strangers to the family, or at the very least, those who are more distant genealogically, who must serve a meal to the closest relations of the deceased. Thus, the close family of the deceased, in honour of those taking part in the funeral, offer a feast considered as an almsgiving (*sadaqa*), which is intended to favour the salvation of the soul of their relative.

Condolences (*‘azâ*) must be presented to the family within three days. Expressions of praise are then made, with the aim of God, bearing witness to the sentiment of respect that the deceased individual inspires. Moreover, divine clemency is invoked in these terms: “What God takes back and what He gives, are chosen by Him, and each item has a predetermined term in His opinion. Endure with fortitude and hope for divine reward.” The most commonly used expression of mercy at the time of condolences: “May God welcome his soul” (*Allah rahmu*), is also used in a systematic manner since it alludes, in conversation, to the deceased.

Moreover, in Maraboutic tribes, in the same way – and in reverse generational order – that poems, composed at birth, praise the ascendants of the newborn and ask that this intercedes favourably for their parents, funeral orations put into verse¹¹ in honour of the deceased, praising their qualities, have a propitiatory effect for their descendants. This kind of funeral oration, called *marthiyya*, is a poetic genre which is known in classic Arab literature. We have also shown (Fortier 1998: 207-209) that small children were considered in Islam as intercessors, and it seems that it may be the same for the dead, and for similar reasons related to their unconsciousness, their incapability to do wrong, as well as their power to communicate with the invisible world, and in particular with angels.

The body and the grave

A stone positioned in the ground at head level is used to indicate the position of the grave; a smaller one may also be placed at the feet. Furthermore, it is forbidden by Islam for a building to be constructed above or around the sepulture (Khalil 1995: 113), signifying that social and economic differences are no longer applicable in the other world.

The Moors, essentially Bedouins, do not have much trouble in conforming to this instruction, unlike their sedentary neighbours in Maghreb who are in the habit of building mausoleums (*qubba*) to the “very close to God” (*‘awliyyâ*).¹² In Moorish encampments, it is even the case that the sepultures are not made of distinctive stone, in accordance with prophetic custom.

In Mauritania, although some gravestones do not bear any inscription, in conformance with certain prophetic traditions (Halevi 2007: 32-35) and with the recommendation of Maliki jurisprudence (Khalil 1995: 113), others bear the name of the buried man, along with that of his father, combined in the epitaph: “Here lies so-and-so, son of so-and-so” (*hadha qabru fulân ibn fulân*) while in another it reads: “May God grant mercy to the son of so-and-so” (*rahîma Allahu fulân ibn fulân*).

Various formulae invoking divine clemency are also used, such as “Entrusted to the kindness of God” (*rahmatu Allah*). Mention is sometimes made, not just to the father, but also to the mother, who thus benefit from the mercy that God might possibly decide to grant to their child: “May God pardon and grant mercy to the slave of God named so-and-so, and also to his father and mother” (*Allahuma ‘aghfir wa ralam wa tajâwaz ‘an mâ ta’lam min ‘abdika fulân wa abîhi wa ummîhi*).

The stones are engraved by one of the local men who has the neatest handwriting; this man sometimes adds his name beside that of the deceased, in the aspiration that his sins will also be pardoned. In the majority of cases these steles are not dated, however, the name of the engraver, which appears on several of them, enables sepultures from the same epoch to be identified.

The custom of burying an individual in the same place where he dies is consistent with the hadith, which the Prophet, amongst others declared (Wensinck and Mensing 1943, vol.2: 138): “If I had been present at the time of your death, you would have been buried where you died” (*law haqartuka mâ dufinta illa hayzu mita*). So, in Moorish society, when an individual has died far away from their encampment, or from their city, he is buried in the place where he has died. In this case, he has two gravestones, one in the area where his death occurred, and the other in the cemetery where his ancestors are buried. The latter gravestone, which generally consists of a stele, enables his relatives to carry on his memory,

¹¹ The same kind of funeral oration is also shown in Judaism (Wigoder 1996: 310).

¹² This is why we call them *‘awliyyâ* (sg: *walî*) who are set apart from other believers by their prodigies and their religiosity.

meditating not on his body but on his name; something which bears witness, moreover, to a genuine relation between the name and the identity of a person.

Exceptionally, in Chinguetti, for reasons of social and religious prestige, a person there may also be seen to be given two gravestones; one in the courtyard of the big Mosque, the other in the cemetery where they have been buried. In Mauritania, the cemetery is generally located well away from dwelling places, to the east of them, beside sacred space.

The blessed body

When the gravestone of the deceased is located close to the place where his close family members reside, they generally go there each week. Visits to the cemetery are thought to be salutary for the dead and for the living alike. A local expression of “distinction”, which makes reference to Jews and to infidels, bears witness that this custom is fundamental for Muslims: “The poorer a cemetery is of Jews and infidels is, it is not visited and no alms are given to it” (*aḡḡar min maqbarat al-yahūd or al-kāfar, mā tanzār wa lâ yuṣaddaq ‘aliha*). The preferred day for visiting the cemetery is a Friday (*yūm al-jum‘a*),¹³ a blessed day; or even Monday, since the Prophet would arrive there on this day; the time of day is preferentially the time which comes before the sun wanes.

Visits to the cemetery are followed by intercession practices, the deceased are considered as being closer to God than the living.¹⁴ This conception is found in Islamic sources, and more particularly in the hadith where the term which refers to the dead, *ṣāliḡhīn*, which refers to the idea of piety and of “holiness”.

Visiting the gravestones (*ziyārat al-qubūr*) in Moorish society, as in Islamic society, is moreover designated by a specific term, *ziyāra*, which refers to the quest of blessing (*tabarruk*). This, though less known and less studied than that carried out more especially on the gravestones of those “very close to God”,¹⁵ proceeds nonetheless in the same way, by a gesture of contact with the ground¹⁶ of the gravestones. Moreover, when an individual looks for the “blessing of the dead” (*barkat ṣāliḡhīn*) not for himself, but for a sick person for example, he brings with him a little bit of this ground which will later be scattered on the head of the person for whom it is destined.

This type of blessing, which is found in many other Muslim societies, does not seem to be explained by the sacred value that Islam grants in particular to the ground

of the sepulture. Therefore, in some countries, such as Egypt where the grave of the dead does not amount to one simple stele, but rather is akin to a tomb, other elements may also be preserved, for instance a little piece of fabric or of wood (Galal 1937: 199). It is thus less the ground in itself which serves as a vehicle for the baraka of the dead, but rather any element related to the gravestone, or more precisely, to the body which it contains. In fact, the gravestone, in so far as it extends the presence of the body therein, is only one of the receptacles of the sacred aura of the dead body, in the same way, for example as the mount (horse or camel) which has touched the body when it was alive is a source of baraka in Moorish society.

In addition, it would seem that the notion of “relic”, known in late Antiquity to the Christians of North Africa and the Western Mediterranean (Brown 1984: 13), is not alien to the Muslim world. However, it does not concern the fragments of the body of someone who is “very close to God” but instead that which, having been in contact with his body, is endowed with sacred power and serves, as in the world of Christians, as “material support for intercession”. We use this expression to emphasise the physical and tactile nature of this form of intercession which is carried out by contact from body to body, by means of a transitional object, itself designed as a substitute for the absent body.

The proximity of bodies

In Mauritania, numerous tales of wonders concern the gravestones of those who are “very close to God”. Among these tales, those connected with the gravestone of Sidi wuld Rawth, of the Maraboutic tribe of the Laghlāl, bear witness to the importance of the spatial organisation of bodies in the cemetery; organisation which generally follows that of family ties. When the tomb of Sidi wuld Rawth was dug behind that of his father, in accordance with the custom which respects the codes of behaviour between generations, the earth filled in the grave continuously, while in front of the paternal gravestone, the ground was miraculously half open. Such a wonder, which indicated the place to bury this man, showed that he was superior to his father from a religious point of view.

The position of the dead in the cemetery is moreover decisive for his salvation; as it is said in a hadith quoted locally:¹⁷ “Bury your dead in the middle of a group of pious men since the dead is wronged by having evil neighbours, in the same way as the living” (*ādfinū mawtākum wasta qawmīn ṣāliḡhīna fa’inna al-mayyita yatā’adha kamā yatā’adha al-ḡayyū*). The notion of a

¹³ Leor Halevi (2007: 226) has shown the connection between the custom of visiting the graves on Friday and the cyclical suspension of the punishment in the grave (*adhāb al-qabr*).

¹⁴ Similarly, the conception according to which the dead, in particular those who are in purgatory, may intercede with God for the living was established in Christianity at the end of the Middle Ages (Legoff 1999: 813).

¹⁵ Jews in North Africa also go on a pilgrimage to the gravestone of a person that they consider as being “very close to God”, so this intercedes in their favour (Wigoder 1996: 224).

¹⁶ It may also consist of sand, depending on the location.

¹⁷ Leor Halevi (2007: 228) mentioned that in the beginning of Islam, families expected favourable effects by burying their relatives proximate to dead holy men, whose blessings might spread to neighbouring graves. This idea of good or bad neighbourhood appears also in Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 1176) in his history of Damascus: “Bury your dead amidst pious folk, for indeed a dead individual is wronged by a wicked neighbour just as a living person is wronged by a wicked neighbour” (Halevi 2007: 228).

good neighbourhood amongst the living and the dead, seems to be very important in Islam.

The body which is “all ears”

In accordance with certain Islamic representations, the sensory perceptions of the person do not cease upon death, in particular those related to hearing, and this in spite of the verse of the Qur'an (35:22) declaring: “You cannot make hear those who are in their graves”. Al-Ghazâlî, who was a mystic and a Sunni jurist (1058-1111, Perse), explicitly asserts in his major work on death and the beyond in Islam, entitled (*The precious pearl for uncovering consciousness of the world to come; ad-durra al-fâkîra fî kashf 'ulûm al-âkhira*), that loss of sight precedes loss of hearing (1974: 9): “The last thing which disappears in the dying, is hearing, since sight is lost the moment when the spirit is completely separated from the heart. However hearing is preserved until the soul has been removed.” Hearing is not only the last sense to remain alert beyond death, it is also the first to appear in a child (Fortier 1998: 207), which seems to confirm the hypothesis that we have advanced (Fortier 1997: 104), that hearing is one of the senses which is the most fundamental in Islam.

The conception according to which the dead hears, is without doubt inferred from the behaviour of the Prophet who, when he saw the bodies of his dead companions in the battle of Badr, talked to them thus: “Have you really found what your Lord promised you?” He asked him: ‘Are you speaking to the dead?’ He replied: ‘You do not hear any better than them, yet they cannot reply’” (Bukhârî 1993: 270, par. 689). The dead, in Islam, cannot speak directly to the living except through the medium of dreams.

On the other hand, al-Ghazâlî (1974: 27) reports that Mohammed would have declared: “The dead hear the sound of your footsteps, and if they hear the sound of footsteps, all the more reason for them to hear everything else.” In Moorish society, Muslim representation according to which the dead “hears” explains a number of deeds during visits to gravestones.

When an individual goes to meditate at a grave, he positions himself at the level of the stone where it is thought that the head of the dead lies, and recites eleven times in a low voice the first sura of the Qur'an (*fâtiha*). This prayer is addressed to the souls of the dead as a locally used expression shows: “He recites the *fâtiha* to the souls of the dead” (*aqra al-fâtiha 'ala arwah al-mawta*). It is also recommended that the believer recites sura CXII (“the worship”) three times, sura CXIV (“the people”) three times, and if possible sura XXXVI (“*yâ'sîn*”), since the Prophet would have declared, in connection with this last sura: “Everything has a heart, and the heart of the Qur'an is the sura *Yâ'sîn*. So recite this to your dead” (Sharaf 1987: 76). The traces of these invocations are often visible in the sand, where a series of points forming squares are drawn, with the aim of counting the number of recitals. Then follows, in Moorish

society, “an invocation of the dead” (*du'â' 'ala al-mayyat*) in which the person giving prayer calls to God to pardon this person for their sins, so that he receives paradise.

Those who visit the deceased usually address their invocation more widely to all those buried in the cemetery. This practice, which is found in other Muslim societies,¹⁸ proves, according to our research in foundational Islamic texts, to be of prophetic origin. Mohammed would, essentially, himself implore divine pardon on behalf of all the “inhabitants” of the cemetery:¹⁹ “God’s envoy passed in front of the graves in Medina: he made his way toward them, facing them and said: ‘Peace be with you, inhabitants of the graves, may God pardon you and also us. You are our predecessors and we are your vestiges’” (Nawawy 1991: 167). The intercession (*shafâ'a*) on behalf of the dead carried out by the Prophet is moreover confirmed by the account of his spouse, ‘Aysha, who declared that we go to the cemetery at night to ask God to forgive those who are there of their sins (Muslim, *Janâ'iz*, cited by Wensinck and Gardet 1998: 183).

In Moorish society, the community of inhabitants of the cemetery, like those inhabitants of a place, have an imam. “The imam of the cemetery” (*imâm maqbara*), as he is known, acts as a special intercessor for the living; in general he is a man who has shown great piety, if not extraordinary deeds during his life, that is a man “very close to God”. Just as the imam stands in front of the other faithful to oversee prayer, the imam of the cemetery is buried slightly in front of the other deceased in order to better fulfil his role as intercessor amongst them.²⁰

The body suffering

The sensory perceptions of the dead are not just auditory but may also consist of corporeal sensations related to comfort and to discomfort. This conception is found in Sunni texts, in particular in an-Nafis: “The soul which remains continues to perceive and discern, and at the same time experiences pleasure and grief; there are pleasures and grief in the grave [...]” (Savage Smith 1995: 107).

Al-Ghazâlî (1974: 25) moreover recounts several narratives indicating that the dead may recognise physical pain in their grave. He cites for instance the case of a deceased man, who appeared in a dream to one of his relatives, asking about his condition. As this person complained: “I am dead and I am well, except for the moment when you smoothed out the ground above me, a stone broke my rib and I am suffering from that”, the

¹⁸ This is for instance the case in the countryside of North Tunisia where one beseeches “the inhabitants of the graves” thus: “Salvation for you, oh inhabitants of the graves. You have arrived ahead of us and we will re-join you ...” (Dermenghem 1954: 125, note 1, citing Dornier).

¹⁹ In Judaism, it is the cemetery as a whole which is considered as a dwelling place (Wigoder 1996: 222).

²⁰ No reference to this practice has been found in the foundational Islamic texts consulted.

veracity of these declarations was certified. These beliefs find their origin in a hadith: “The dead suffers in his grave as do the living in their home” (*id.*).

In addition, to ensure the corporeal well-being of the dead, their family, on the day of the death, prepare “the drink of the dead” (*shrâb al-mawta*) or the “meal of the dead” (*‘asha al-mawta*). Though given to a poor person, or similar, such as an orphan or a foreign Qur’anic pupil (Fortier 1997: 96), the dead are supposed to benefit from such charity carried out for them.²¹

The expressions “drink of the dead” or “meal of the dead” refer to a collective, since an individual who gives this sort of alms intends it especially for the person who is recently deceased, but also for all the deceased from their family, and even, more generally, to all dead Muslims. This is no doubt explained by the fact that they recognise one common fate: everyone is waiting for the final Judgement. This state would concern all who died since Adam, except for the Prophet and ten of his companions who, according to a hadith, would have already been reunited in paradise.

This almsgiving, aiming to change the fate of the dead, which is still not permanently sealed, may be repeated indefinitely for several generations. It is carried out the day before the Friday, since on this sacred day its beneficial effect is increased. This practice is considered by Moors as Islamic, and makes reference to the proverbial expression already cited, aimed at differentiating the condition of dead Muslims to that of Jews, just as in this other quote of the same genre: “more thirsty than the dead of the Jews” (*a’tash min mawta al-yahûd*). It is moreover significant that, in this desert society whose main foodstuff is milk, the fundamental needs would make reference to hydration.

As a result, if divine grace is all powerful, the living nonetheless continue during the funeral and afterwards, on a long-term basis, to seek salvation for the soul of their relative and more generally for all Muslims, which bears witness to the fact that they may have an influence on the destiny of the dead, decided in the latter proceedings by God (Fortier 2003).²² Moreover, funeral conduct describes not just having a salutary effect on the deceased, but also on those who carry it out; it appears that in spite of a certain denial of Islam regarding intercession practices, that the dead in this religion are considered, in the same way as small children, as mediators between men and God (Fortier 2006).

Intercessor status is thus not only the exclusive right of “extraordinary figures” who are remarkable and remarked

upon – by believers and by researchers alike – such as those of holy men or heads of brotherhood, but turns out equally to be, in the Muslim world, the common and unnoticed destiny of everybody, at the beginning and at the end of their life.

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²¹ In Egypt, alms are also given to the poor on this occasion, bearing a name which explicitly attests to their beneficial effect with regard to the dead: “the bread of mercy” (Abu-Zahra 1997: 61).

²² It is the same in Christianity (Legoff 1999: 899), where those who have been punished by the flames of the purgatory fire, and who remain there until final Judgement day, may escape it earlier by prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and offerings to their relatives, or masses they make to declare their intention.

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