

## Change in Death Rituals: The Case of the Ritualistic Wailing in the Amazigh Culture

*Fatima Gaddar*

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, University Mohammed V, Rabat-Morocco

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**Abstract:** Recently, Morocco has witnessed a number of mutations at the social, economic and political levels. The state of culture stands witness to these changes and the rituals of death are a case in point. In this regard, the present paper seeks to investigate the wailing ritual and provide an account for its current state. Particular focus will be put on the major role which education has played in shaping the target community's perceptions of the custom. The study was carried out among Ayt Merghad, an Amazigh tribe in the south of Morocco. The Ayt Merghad culture provides an ideal source of data for the analysis of the changes witnessed by the rituals of death with respect to the process of socio-economic development in Morocco. It has been found that self-punishment behaviors have been eradicated in death ceremonies; whereas the wailing practice is still in evidence. The custom is deeply rooted in the old women's psyche that they find it difficult to abandon. However, with the raised awareness of the irreligious aspect of wailing, the young generation rarely goes beyond crying.

**Key words:** Death rituals • Wailing • The Amazigh culture • Morocco • Education

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### INTRODUCTION

Development and urbanization in Morocco have had a great impact on the Moroccan society in general and the Amazigh community in particular. This effect has been noticed in different aspects of the Moroccan culture. Currently, the state of lifecycle rituals, especially those related to death, among Ayt Merghad stands witness to the transformations that the Amazigh culture among this tribal group has undergone. From an ethnographic perspective [1-6], the researcher tries to provide an account about the ritualistic wailing in ceremonies of death in the Ayt Merghad community. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to shed light on the current state of this ritual and put a particular emphasis on the role of education in transforming the new generations' attitudes towards such a practice. An understanding of the issue investigated is assumed to be achieved through an ethnographic type of data which emerge from interviews and participant observation.

Death ceremonies mark the end of the life cycle. In the Ayt Merghad community, once a person is pronounced dead, he or she is prepared for burial as is the custom in a Muslim society. As a rule, a series of acts are

performed in honor of the dead for the eternal rest of his or her soul. The process of mourning and wailing, accompanied by the self-punishment behaviours used to be prevalent manifestations of sorrow in death ceremonies among Ayt Merghad. Today, with the increasing awareness of the aspect of such practices, the self-punishment behaviours have been abandoned; whereas, the wailing custom is still in evidence.

This paper is divided into three major sections. In the first one, the researcher presents background information about the target community, namely Ayt Merghad. The second section provides a brief account about the rituals of death in Islam. The last section takes up the issue of wailing among Ayt Merghad.

**The Ayt Merghad Community:** The target community of the present study is known as Ayt Merghad, a tribe of Imazighen. The latter are known as the Berbers. They are the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa since time immemorial; currently distributed across a number of countries including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso. Imazighen represent at least 45% of the Moroccan population [7]. They are subdivided into three

sub-ethnic groups. Linguistically, Tamazight, the Berber language, belongs to the Afro-Asiatic group and has many dialects. The three main dialects used in Morocco are *Tachelhit* in south-west Morocco, *Tamazight* in the Middle Atlas and *Tarifit* in the Rif area of northern Morocco.

A close look at the history of Ayt Merghad, native speakers of Tamazight, shows that the community inhabited one of the most important cities in Morocco, namely Sijilmasa. Since the Middle Ages, the region has been called Tafilalet. The latter refers to the Southeast Morocco until the country's independence in 1956. After that, the region became known as Ksar Es-Souk Province which would later become Errachidia Province [8]. Sijilmasa was founded in A.D. 757 by the Zennata Imazighen and flourished for 650 years. During the last two years of its existence, it was inhabited by approximately 30.000 people [9].

The territory of Ayt Merghad extends on a relatively vast area, located on the southern slope of the Eastern High-Atlas, which is situated in the south-east of Morocco. The majority of Ayt Merghad are located along the valleys of Ghéris and Ferkla in Errachidia, which had been known as *ksar ssouk* until 1956. The latter is bordered by the province of Figuig to the east, Beni Mellal and Azilal and Khenifra to the west, Boulmane to the north and Algeria to the south.

The Ayt Merghad tribe is characterized by its segmentary lineage system. The various lineages, referred to as *ighsan* in Tamazight (singular *ighs*), can be genealogically traced. According to Evans-Pritchard [10]:

*The defining characteristic of a lineage is that the relationship of any member of it to other members can be exactly stated in genealogical terms. His relationship to members of other lineages of the same clan is, therefore, also known, since lineages are genealogically related.*

Another aspect of Ayt Merghad's segmentary lineage system is that a lineage segment comprises any person descending mainly through males; whereas female ancestors were rare.

**Rituals of Death in Islam:** Regarding death rites and in accordance with Islamic teachings, there exist different rules and regulations to follow. Islam has clarified how to take care of the dying and the dead person. A complete

set of instructions has also been provided for those who are present at the time of death, as well as the relatives of the deceased.

When a Muslim is near death, those around him or her are called upon to give comfort and remind him/her of God's mercy and forgiveness. They may recite verses from the Quran and encourage the dying person to say the *shahada*: '*la ilaha illa llah*', which means that there is no God but Allah. This action is referred to as *talqin* which is necessary only when the dying person is unable to utter the *shahada*. (The phonetic transcription adopted in the present paper conforms to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Geminate sounds are indicated by means of doubling the consonant. Emphatic sounds are indicated by means of a letter with a dot underneath).

It is also recommended to say good words aloud in the presence of the dying person. After a person's soul leaves his body, one of the individuals who are present then should close the eyes of the dead person if they are open at the moment of death and the entire body of the deceased should be covered.

Muslim scholars agree that weeping for the dead is permissible. However, crying out aloud and wailing are forbidden. It is allowed for people to mourn for a period of three days over the death of a near relative. The Islamic term for mourning is *hidad*. It is not permitted for the latter to last more than three days except in the case of the husband's death. A widow must undergo the *idda* 'the waiting period', which lasts four months and ten days, before she may remarry.

Once death is evident, the body should be prepared and taken out of the house for prayer and burial as soon as possible. In this way, contact with the corpse is minimized, which keeps the grief and hurt of seeing the dead down to a minimum. Washing the dead body prior to shrouding and burial is obligatory. As a general rule, males should take the responsibility of washing males and females should wash females. The only exception to this rule is in the case of husband and wife, or small children. Those who take on the responsibility of washing the dead should be the most knowledgeable of the procedures, preferably from amongst the immediate family members and relatives. If relatives are unavailable, it is recommended that those who wash the body be among the pious. The next procedure after washing is the obligatory act of shrouding the entire body. It is permitted for the deceased to be wrapped with one or two sheets and the preferable colour of the shroud is white.

Before the burial process, the performance of *salat al janaza* 'the funeral prayer' over a Muslim is *far? kifaya* 'a communal obligation'. If someone is buried without it being performed, the whole community is held responsible, but as long as some gather and perform it, the obligation is removed from the community as a whole. It is recommendable to pray the funeral prayer outside the mosque, in a place designated for that, known as the *musalla*. It is permissible to pray *janaza* in a graveyard.

Offering condolences to the relatives and friends of the deceased is an important act of kindness. When consoling a Muslim, it is beneficent to make him hopeful of Allah's mercy toward the deceased. Offering condolences is not limited to three days and could be extended for as long as there is a need for it.

#### **Wailing in Ceremonies of Death among Ayt Merghad:**

The process of mourning and wailing in group, accompanied by the self-punishment behaviours used to be prevalent expressions of extreme grief in funerals among Ayt Merghad. In fact, importance was given to feelings of grief and its manifestations. Women used to throw themselves on the ground, rub dirt on themselves, pull their hair, beat their chests and scratch and slap their faces. They also used to recite poetic statements about their feeling of loss. A 66-year-old man criticises the situation: "*when someone died, women used to behave in a hysterical manner. Their behavior was similar to that of al-jahiliya (pre-Islamic time).*"

Currently, the situation has slightly changed; apart from the wailing custom which is still in evidence, the self-punishment behaviours have disappeared. With the increasing awareness of the irreligious aspect of such practices, educated women, who rarely go beyond crying, try to recite *hadits* 'the prophet's sayings' that prohibit such behaviours. However; many old women among Ayt Merghad are still hesitant about abandoning the action. A 32-year-old woman complains about the wailing rituals saying: "*when people come to condole, you have to stop the task you are engaged in and go and cry with them, old women start even to wail.*" It is noteworthy that the deceased's family members are supposed to keep showing their sadness through crying and wailing whenever a new guest arrives. Commenting on this state, one of the respondents says that: "*if you don't cry, people might understand that you don't care. All the visitors should see you crying.*"

Moreover, in some families, a professional wailer referred to as *tanadt* is called upon to attend the funeral

in order to contribute to the crying and wailing process. Such practice is also noticed in other communities. In Southern Albania, for example, a professional mourner is hired to lead the mourning process [11]. The assumption underlying such a practice is that the more expressions of grief are manifested, the more honour and value are attributed to the deceased.

Actually, women in the Ayt Merghad community play a more significant role in displaying grief than is common amongst men. Women believe that wailing is an ideal way to show support to the deceased family. Therefore, they are the ones who organize the wailing process throughout the three-day-mourning period; conversely, men never go beyond crying. In the Northern Albania, the wailing ritual is totally the opposite since only males might perform any self-punishment behaviour or form a structured wailing chorus [11].

Wailing in the Ayt Merghad community seems to convey two functions. On the one hand, the wailing ritual is considered an overt expression of feelings of grief. Wailers tend to produce statements that strongly reflect their inner feelings. On the other hand, wailing seems to be an instance of a covert desire to foster social ties with the other members of the community. Interestingly, as the funeral events proceed, crying and wailing are no longer meant to convey an emotional function, but become a means to reinforce the sense of belonging to the community.

In some cases, crying and wailing in funerals do not necessarily reflect any affection for the deceased. Ironically, it may be noted that, sometimes, women who hardly even know the deceased attend the funeral gathering and wail for some time then leave. One of the respondents states that: "*It doesn't necessarily mean that one weeps because of sadness. Some women engage in wailing even if they don't like the person who died.*" Another respondent argues that: "*while wailing, some women bring to mind their own experiences to make themselves cry.*" Embedded in these statements is the fact that wailing is not always performed because of feelings of grief but because of the ritual requirement. Therefore, the crying and wailing is sometimes just a 'show' instead of true feelings. Accordingly, wailing can be understood as both an overt means of expressing feelings of grief and a covert desire of being part of the whole community.

Another interesting point to note is that wailing is performed only by old women. This can be explained by referring to the fact that young Ayt Merghad women are more aware of religion through their education and thus,

act according to the religious prescriptions. A 29-year-old woman states that: *“there is no harm in crying, but wailing is forbidden in Islam.”* A similar view is expressed by a 24-year-old woman. She strongly argues that: *“women should not wail in funerals, this is not allowed in Islam. Women in al-jahilija used to do that. Today, they do it because they are ignorant.”* Holding such religious views has led the young women to reconsider the appropriateness of the wailing practice.

The researcher has also noticed that wailing is not performed in an arbitrary manner. On the contrary, well chosen statements and expressive rhythms are employed. The following statements are an instance of wailing over a lost mother.

1. *a mmanu a mmanu a tahnint inu a mmanu*
2. *ata majd ittddun zari a mmanu*
3. *ata mami tawada majdi ja?n a mmanu*
4. *ata majdi ttanhun a mmanu*
5. *ata majdi ttussun a mmanu*
6. *ata iqqa be??u a mmanu*

1. Oh my mother! Oh my mother! My affectionate, oh my mother!
2. Who will visit me, oh my mother!
3. To whom shall I complain, oh my mother!
4. Who will guide me, oh my mother!
5. Who will advise me, oh my mother!
6. Separation is hard, oh my mother!

These statements are produced by a 56-year-old woman wailing over her mother. At the level of the content, these verses are characterized by their strong emotional aspect. They are improvised and they express the difficulty of getting separated from the deceased. The verses also address the deceased and state her qualities. The degree of closeness is also reflected through this wailing. At the level of the form, we can notice that most of the statements have the same structure and end up with the same word. This feature makes the statements sound poetic, especially that they are produced in an expressive rhythm.

### CONCLUSION

Wailing is a custom which still exists in the Ayt Merghad community; it is deeply rooted in the old women's mind that they find it difficult to abandon or cease to do it. However, most of the young women,

especially the educated ones, reject the idea of adhering to such a traditional custom. Indeed, education has had a profound impact on the young generations' attitudes towards this practice. Young educated women tend to question and test the validity of wailing against new educational background. With the increasing awareness of the irreligious aspect of the rite, they rarely practice it.

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