

Somali Funeral Traditions

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Many immigrant families prefer to have a similar style of funeral as they used to practice in their home country. To be practiced in the US, the traditional Somali funeral may require building awareness among local service providers and authorities about Somali customs. In addition, Somali families need to learn about new requirements, such as legal documentation of death, which did not happen back home.

Traditional Somali funeral practices include:

- A sheikh, or other people, mostly relatives, reading some verses of the Quraan, particularly sura YASSIN, to make it easy for the spirit to go from the body.
- Putting the body in the proper way. This includes closing the eyes and mouth, and straightening legs and arms with the body so that limbs are lined up together.
- Washing and cleaning the body with warm water. Women in the family handle and wash the body of a deceased female relative, and men handle and wash the body of a male. Investigators, medical examiners, police photographers and other local authorities are asked by the community to recognize and respect the gender sensitivities when possible. The washing is done by hand. In the US, the community is learning about hygienic precautions taken during washing to avoid spread of disease, like wearing gloves or, if necessary, using chemical disinfectant.
- Using a perfume called “Adar” on the body. Adar can be colored red or green, or only appear an oily shade. A lot of adar may be used. Make-up is not traditionally used.
- Rubbing the body with a white small piece of cloth called Karfan and tying the legs, neck and head with white cloth so the body doesn't move around.
- Performing the special prayer called Janaaso. This is a good-bye and last prayer.
- Burying the body without a casket within 24 hours after the death. Usually a large rectangular hole is dug, with a second and deeper hole dug inside the middle of the first hole, to fit the body inside. In Somalia, the body would be covered by grass or leaves, sometimes sawdust or soil, and then covered by wood. Finally the larger hole would be filled back in with soil. In the United States, different states have regulations that may require a casket be used in burial. Seattle has options. The traditional burial without the casket may be done in Seattle, and the hole that houses the body may be covered with rocks or hard bricks rather than wood.

When the person dies, Somalis believe that the life of the person is completed and there is no need to spend much more money for elaborate funeral procedures.

Children younger than 16 years of age usually do not attend funeral rites. Elders participate in performing the funeral rites. In Somalia, the elders would be of the same family or tribe. In Seattle, the larger Somali community joins with relatives. Usually the men will bury the body and the women will stay back a

distance from the grave. That tradition may be changing some. It is not unusual for women to stay at home, away from the burial. Traditionally, there is no cremation.

Based on the Islamic religion, Somalis believe that when the person passes away the spirit goes to the next world, the afterworld. Somalis believe that life and death are in the hands of Allah (God) and that Allah is the only one who knows what a person's life and death will be. For this reason, many Somalis do not worry about death and accept that it can occur at anytime without notice. Somalis in general might not believe that doctors or other medical providers can extend the cycle of the life through life-support equipment, medications or better health management.

In Somalia, the majority of deaths occur in homes. Few people die in hospitals, and hospitals are not available in many areas. Doctors and nurses never discuss with terminally ill patients any specific information about when a person may die or how long the patient will live. Always, there is hope that the person will recover from the disease. In Somalia, autopsy was not performed even if the death was related to crime or murder cases. In the United States, Somali people may be resistant to autopsy. They may not accept the programs allowing people to enroll and register to donate organs. Traditionally, there is no organ donation.

Many Somalis are surprised when they encounter hospital staff, such as family doctors, nurses and Medical Examiner staff, who ask questions about information related to the dead person's life and identity. When a death and burial occurs in Somalia, there is no need to contact or inform the authorities, and for the most part there is no documentation made. Only a few big cities in Somalia record information about the numbers of deaths in their regions or districts. In those cases, information may be recorded at the hospital or cemetery, and all the death records made indicate the reason for death is "by God's will". There is no general vital statistics or death records system that represents the whole Somali nation.