



Ritual Climate



Moad Musbahi



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Editors' note:

This piece is written as a response to the universes of thought brought about by Samaneh Moafi's work *Parable of Sugar: by the waters of Babylon* developed in collaboration with Mhamad Safa. The work was developed in response to the questions of investigating exhaustion and excavation of lands, histories, and bodies put forward by the show Fictioning Comfort.

The work was shown as part of Fictioning Comfort, exhibited at Showroom MAMA, Rotterdam (summer 2020) and also online. The work is on view at www.fictioningcomfort.space

I. Necrobiome

II. Proximity

III. The Thirsty Owl

I. Necrobiome

One prays facing Mecca. One dies with their face to Mecca. In both Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, the burial position is that of a person praying, lying down on their side. The body is placed leaning on the right shoulder and propped up to keep the alignment as the stages of death set in. A perpetual sacred orientation as the decomposition begins. When the body is placed in the soil or sand, the corpse releases fluids high in ammonia that initially kill the surrounding vegetation, the last destructive act by the buried remains. The spread of these cadaveric fluids defines the limit of what is referred to in forensic anthropology as the 'cadaveric decomposition island' (CDI). An initial spatial demarcation of the extent of the dead person's (ecological) influence.

During this initial period, the body heats up, *algor mortis*, and then their muscles stiffen, *rigor mortis*, and then the blood pools and settles, *liver mortis*. What follows is harder to define, the pattern of decomposition has proven to be elusive as the field of decomposition studies is still in its infancy. Previously bodies were studied either from instances in which death was not known, or animals were used as surrogates. The first facility for the scientific study of human decomposition, in which bodies were donated for research was The Anthropological Research Facility (ARF), set up in 1981 by Dr William Bass at the University of Tennessee. It was the only such space until 2007 when the Forensic Osteology Research Station (FOREST) was inaugurated at the Western Carolina University. Presently there are only ten equivalent centres, also known as 'body farms' eight of which are in the USA, one in Australia and one in Holland.

As decomposition progresses, the extent from which organisms visit the body increases. The second stage of physical decay instances this arrival, as the immune system becomes no longer active, the bacteria from within the gut multiplies, feeding on the available nutrients. This microbial consumption from the inside-out causes the release of heat, to an order of up to 10°C and gas, producing the bloated corpse. Through this inflation, the crevices and openings of the body are pressured, until finding their escape, they provide new openings and exits for the built-up fluids. Through these points of entry, bacteria, fungi and insects from the outside begin their visitation.

Decomposition of a carrion is a continuous process primarily carried out through chemical degradation and reduction of the carcass by several different organisms that consume the carrion and transform the organic materials. This shifting and evolving environment is defined by the guests and the host's available nutrients, from which Jessica Metcalf, a microbial ecologist at Colorado State University defined as a 'microbial clock'. Since the carrion is an ephemeral resource, numerous species have evolved strategies such as altered life history traits and behaviours to exploit the resource before it is consumed by other organisms. Since much of the mass of the carcass is removed by necrophagous species, knowledge about how necrophagous species are attracted to carrion, their pattern of succession, and how the environment affects their growth, development, and biodiversity is becoming a predictable science in which the cycle of availability of different nutrients determines the different microbes that feed on them, indexing different profiles at different time periods from the moment of death. A cycle of bodily hospitality in death which provides for the living.

This community of species which derives its sustenance from the (decaying) corpse, defines its way of life and place of temporary accommodation is called 'necrobiome'. A collective of beings in a continuous pilgrimage across a rich geography.

II. Proximity

One's ritual duty was determined in Islam by the amount of travel they had partaken in. If someone was considered to be 'on the road' they were obligated to reduce the number of ritual acts of prayer they performed each day. The prayer at midday, late afternoon and evening become two prostrations instead of four. One movement was dependant on another. The threshold over how much travel determined such a status was a debate in early Islamic doctrine. During this time the unit of measure was that of the '*barid*'. It was a calculation of distance as time. A single *barid* was the distance travelled by a messenger before they had to stop and feed their horse. Here the act of environmental affordance or human hospitality punctuated travel, if an oasis or village could provide such nourishment for the weary companions. One *barid* was equivalent to four of the ancient Persian *farasikhs*

or *parasang*. A unit derived from historic Babylon; it was also geographically situated. Different regions contained differently sized farasikhs. On the plains of Khorasan, the farakh was proverbially long, 'as long as the intestines of 'Umar' they would say. A fleshy extent. The body as length and the body as destination.

Ibn Taymiyya recounts a story of the conquest of Tustar, where the perfectly preserved body of the Prophet Danial was discovered. The Caliph 'Umar was told of the remains and ordered thirteen graves to be dug during the day. In the night, he ordered the prophet to be reburied in one of them and the grave mounds to be made level with the ground, to mask the act. This was given by the chronicler as a proof that the first Caliph was wary of tomb worship. It was said the body of the prophet Daniel provided blessings to those that are near to him. This was the case also for many other holy persons and the sites in which their miracles were witnessed. Mythical stories are imbued in the stone that marks their location, the trace of the divine's miracles. The placement of tombs and relics are the material registers of a sacred geography.

One becomes a saint through the witnessing of their miracle, an act of careful distinction whose stories are relayed with individual and meticulous detail. Awareness of these stories created a traffic, as they travelled orally along the breath of spoken words and in written pieces of paper, the *barid* as unit of measure becomes the modern Arabic word for the postal service, or post more broadly, the epistolary travel from one interior space to

another. Through this difference, both from others and from the realm of the profane, the saintly body becomes consecrated. In this formulation, the remains gain the power to bestow blessings, the cure of ailments or more favourable environmental conditions. And it was only in the physical proximity with the material remains that one is able to gain access to the blessing or *baraka* of the saint. This necessitates travel to these places. In an alternative doctrine to that of Ibn Taymiyya, one was obligated to visit the pious dead, a visitation is known as a '*Ziyara*'. Many *Ziyarat* define the itinerant pilgrim's pedagogical circuit.

The visit is made possible by the hospitality provided by the dead saint. The remains are not directly seen or touched, but faith of their presence is what ties the community of believers. A community defined by its relation to the dead, the dead who host the living in their resting place.

III. The Thirsty Owl

Before burial, the body is cleansed and beautified, Ahmad ibn Hanbal remarks that the hair of the daughter of the Prophet Muhammed was carefully combed and braided into three tresses by Umm 'Atiyya (mother of 'Atiyya), the professional washer of corpses in Medina, before it was placed into the earth. Incense and perfumed cotton was soaked in camphor and applied to the mouth nostrils and any deep wounds. It is said that some even circumcised the dead, and a soft stick was used to pick at the filth beneath the fingernails and inside the ears. The body was treated with ritual purity.

My two friends awake! How long you've slept;

Truly does your slumbering not end!

Don't you know that in all of Rawand and Khuzaq

I have no friends other than you?

I will stay at your graves, not leaving

The long night lest your owls answer.

I will pour wine upon your graves,

And if you not do not taste it, I will moisten your
earth.

I will mourn for you until death,

But what response is there for one who wails as he
mourns you^[1]

In the 'Age of Ignorance', it is said that when a person is killed and revenge is not taken from them, an owl comes to their grave screening 'quench me!' 'quench me!' (isqini, isqini), continuing so until their killer is killed.

^[2] This thirst is attributed to the dead and their resting place, upon the dry parched earth. A collapse between the body and its surroundings. The disintegration of the remains across the soil. A common condition of the deathly extent, one whose temporality pleads eternally, waiting for its solace, for the visit to moisten it with the desire of the beloved, with the blessing of the divine, dispersed across the territory.

O my Lord, if I am destroyed and you do not quench my
owl

With Laila, I will die – no grave thirstier than mine^[3]

Quench me as 'isqini' can also be translated to the act of pouring water over a thing, such the act of watering a dried-out plant for it to flourish. Here, water is an important consideration in life as in death. This vital provision at many times defined the placement of tombs, as many in the desert were markers of the only available wells. A necessary requirement for any act of hospitality, and facility for travel. Yet at times bodies were also buried under the water. In a competing history, the Prophet Daniel was said to have been buried under the Choaspes River. In the book 'Futuh al-Buldan' of Al-Baladhury, this placement was said to mediate between two villages on either side of the bank who had disagreed on his placement due to the baraka his body bestowed. A river as the division between territories, a demarcation line that ebbs and rises based on the varying climatic conditions. Dams are industrial formations that are designed to alleviate and control such acts, a water line that is supposedly set, fixed.

Where the saintly body had been buried it becomes decomposed by the community of species who had visited it, who have partaken in its sustenance and blessing. At times when the rains are too strong, and the banks and dams flood, this sustenance and blessing is distributed across the territory, creating a potential ritual climate, quenching the soil and soul in the

oncoming flood, yet one with a destructive effect. Dams in many instances fail and submerge that which was not intended to be submerged. Such as the case of the Dez River Dam built in 1963. An industrial irrevocable denial to the acts of visitation and ziyara, one with lasting effects in this life and the next.

^[1] Al-Hamasah, no. 289, lines 1-5, vol. 2. pp. 875

^[2] Al-Mufaddal al-Dabbi Ibn Salmah, Al-Mufaddaliyat, (784)

^[3] ash-Shahrestani, al-Milal, vol. 2 p312

[Moad Musbahi](#) is an artist and curator living between Tripoli and London. He is a recipient of the Sharjah Art Foundation's Production Programme, developing a project on burial claims and land rights in Southern Algeria and Libya. His work investigates migration as a method for cultural production and political expression, focusing on the social practices and forms of knowledge that it engenders. He co-organised 'Instituting Destruction', a project that brought together a group of architects, photographers and archivists, forming an association to document the destruction of tombs in north-west Libya. He worked as a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art and recently curated 'In Pursuit of Images' at the Architectural Association and was part of the curatorial team for the inaugural Sharjah Architecture Triennial.

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