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### **Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery - A Socio-anthropological Study in the City of Najaf**

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#### **Abstract**

The topic of the study revolves around the study of one of the historical, religious and cultural landmarks among the inhabitants of the Middle Euphrates and southern Iraq, because of its important religious importance in the beliefs of the Shiites of Iraq, which is the cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam in the holy city of Najaf, which is located in the northeastern part of the city of Najaf, where the shrine of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali Ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him), the cousin of the Noble Messenger Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (may God's prayers and peace be upon him and his family) and his guardian, is located, in front of the Shiites, as it is the only place where the Shiites of Iraq in particular and the Shiites of the world in general have buried their dead there hundreds of years ago until the present time, through the anthropological study of the study community carried out by the researcher, he studied the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery as a social building that consists of a group of actors inside the cemetery, namely the burial offices, and their assistants, water and creek sellers, itinerant people of different ages and genders, tuk-tuk drivers and stoats inside the cemetery, in addition to the blacksmithing and construction offices, the researcher conducted field interviews with these actors within the study community, and used the cognitive approach to get answers to the study questions, also, to arrive at a comprehensive and integrated description of the social structure of the study community and the interrelationship between the actors in the study community.

#### **Keywords**

The cemetery, Wadi Al-Salam, Najaf Al-Ashraf, Al-Dafan, the group of actors within the study community.

## **Introduction**

The Valley of Peace Cemetery in the holy city of Najaf is one of the distinguished religious cultural monuments in Iraq, and indeed in the world, as it has a distinct peculiarity as a culture for the Shiites of Iraq in particular, and the Shiites of the world in general, as the study was divided into two sides, a theoretical side and a field side, the theoretical side dealt with the historical dimensions and religious justifications for the importance of the spatial character, and the field side dealt with an ethnographic presentation of the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery, in addition to the anthropological interviews of individuals who take the study community as a place of work, and individuals who visit their dead in the study community on specific occasions and days for purely religious cultural considerations.

## **Subject of the study**

The subject deals with the study of one of the important areas for the population of the middle Euphrates , southern Iraq in particular, and the population of Iraq in general, it is the cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam in the province of Najaf. This cemetery bears an important historical and religious significance in the hearts of the Shiites of Iraq in particular and the Iraqis in general, it is located in the northeastern part of the holy city of Najaf, its proximity to the shrine of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali Ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him), therefore, it has been the custom for Muslims, especially Shiites, to bury their dead in this valley thousands of years ago, this is to ask for the intercession of the Commander of the Faithful on the Day of Resurrection, as it is one of the sacred spots on the earth, as it is one of the important religious and cultural rituals in some parts of Iraq.

## **Importance of the study**

The importance of the study lies in the nature of the topic covered by the study, as it sheds light on one of the important cultural areas for the Shiites of Iraq in particular and the Iraqis in general, it also deals with one of the religious cultural practices they have practiced for thousands of years, which is burying their dead, and how it was in the past, what changes it has undergone, how it has become at the present time, its justifications, its importance to them, and the cultural and psychological effects it leaves for them.

## **Objectives of the study**

The current study aims , through the field anthropological study, to the following:

- 1.** Getting to know the cultural and economic life in the Wadi Al-Salam area in the city of Najaf Al-Ashraf.
- 2.** Identifying the cultural and religious motives that push the inhabitants of the Euphrates, the Middle and the South in Iraq to bury their dead in the the Wadi Al-Salam in the city of Najaf.

3. Identifying the customs and traditions of the burial ceremonies and ceremonies in the Wadi Al-Salam.

### Problems of the study

The current study tries to answer the questions:

1. What is the cultural, religious and psychological importance in the city of Najaf al-Ashraf among the Iraqis in central and southern Iraq?
2. Why the Wadi Al-Salam in particular? And what is its importance?
3. What are the reasons for paying attention to the graves of the dead, and visiting them among the residents of central and southern Iraq?

### Study terms and definitions

**1. Cemetery:** It is the place designated for preserving and burying the dead (Al-Darir, 1996), or it is the sacred religious and spiritual site or site for preserving dead bodies from environmental phenomena (Al-Hanafi, 1993). The cemetery was also defined: it is the grave or the house of the last religion for burying the dead and keeping bodies from disasters and natural phenomena (Hajim, 2013). The cemetery or the tomb of the ancient Egyptians is like the home or the eternal site in which their dead are kept (ibid). The cemetery was also defined: it is the place that a person passes through after the end of his life in this world up to the stage of the final hour in order to preserve it in the designated side in it with the aim of achieving his remains and stability (Abdul-Jabbar, 1984).

**2. Wadi Al-Salam:** It is one of the well-known names of Najaf, and this name is given today to the famous Najaf cemetery, which includes among its folds bodies from the Islamic ends of Najaf to be near to the Commander of the Faithful Ali bin Abi Talib (peace be upon him) (Mahalli, 2000). Wadi Al-Salam cemetery was known as a religious and sentimental place located in the center of the holy city of Najaf, Muslims lead it on religious occasions from most regions of Iraq, indeed, many countries of the Islamic world, or it is a blessed holy cemetery, which is one of the largest and oldest cemeteries in the Islamic world (Abu Hamad & Samaka, 2009). It also knew: It is a blessed holy site that includes two shrines of the Prophets Hud and Salih (peace be upon them), it also includes a large number of the righteous friends of God, the scholars and the righteous, kings and others, on the sides of their graves there are poetic verses, blessed and holy Quranic verses (Al-Marjani, 1986). It also knew: it is the holy place, which is located in the city of Najaf Al-Ashraf and where the dead of the people of Iraq, and from all the world, are buried, in view of this, it has become one of the largest cemeteries in the world (Muhammad, 2012).

**3. Al-Najaf:** An Arabic name and its meaning is Al-Manjuf, like a number, meaning the numbered one. Ibn Faris said: Al-Nun, Al-Jim, and Al-Fa': They are two authentic roots, one of which indicates simplicity in something, whether or not, the other indicates the extraction of something. The first is a rectangular,

submissive place that is not topped by water, and the combination is clean, it is said that the bellies of the earth are at their bottoms, easy to drain in the earth, and they have valleys that pour into the softness of the earth, it is said to the site of the Dune is the Najaf of the earth, and the Najaf by moving it and it is in the back of Kufa like a toothbrush that prevents a stream from rising above Kufa and its tombs, near this place is the shrine of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali Ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) (Al-Khalili, 1987). In some narrations transmitted from the imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them) that Najaf is the mountain about which Ibn Noah said: "I will be equal to a mountain that will protect me from water." In the area there was a sea called (Nyyi) sea, so when it dried up, it was said about it (Nyjaf, so it was called Najaf), then it came to be called (Najaf) because of its ease on their tongues (Al-Saduq, 1963). Al-Najaf was used in the past to refer to the western part overlooking Basra, which is salty from that tongue, that is, the area known as the back of Al-Hira - the back of Kufa (Sunion, 1979) the land of Najaf, before Islam, contained the bodies of some of the righteous prophets, others descended on its land and were not buried there, and accordingly it became a sacred land with its historical precedence before it was honored with the body of the master of the guardians, the Commander of the Faithful, Ali Ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) (Al-Hakim, 1999). Najaf is one of the Arab Islamic holy cities with an ancient history, rich in its civilization, its roots go back to the pre-Islamic periods, it was mentioned that the Babylonian king (Nebuchath Nasr) built Hira on Najaf and fortified it due to the importance of Najaf from the military point of view, as it is located on the edge of the western plateau that connects Iraq with the Arabian Peninsula, it is the point of contact between the sedimentary plain and the desert plateau. In the past, the Syriacs lived on the outskirts of Najaf, the evidence for this is the large number of monasteries built in the region, which were mentioned in history books and countries, in addition to being part of the Kingdom of Lakhmi, its history is the history of the Manathira state, which had an advanced civilization and a distinguished geographical location, it had a leading role in repelling the movements of the enemies (Al-Daraji, 2014).

### **A brief history of the Wadi Al-Salam in the city of Najaf**

The custom of burial in the city of Najaf dates back to the Rashidi era (11-40 AH), before the land of Al-Ghari was honored with the body of the Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him), the Kufics used to be buried in the area of Al-Thawiya, just as the Hirayans used to be buried in Bangia, the land of Najaf embraced the bodies of the prophets, the righteous, the Companions and the followers, the area of the back of Kufa was a burial place for these people, and then the burial was confined to the vicinity of Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him), the land turned into a vast cemetery called Wadi Al-Salam, people began to secretly visit his honorable grave and bury their dead around it, then, the cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam was taken to prominence,

and the cemetery of Al-Thawiya, or the cemetery, was taken to disappear, after the fall of the Umayyad dynasty in 132 AH, the architecture took over his honorable tomb, at that time, Najaf became a place of residence and shelter, a burial house and a neighborhood, people loved this neighborhood, both dead and alive, and funerals began to be transported to the holy land of Najaf from all parts of the world, until the transportation of the dead became a common tradition (Al-Hakim, 1999). In the news of historical and archaeological accounts, it is mentioned that the cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam, it is the name of a place in Najaf in the back of Kufa, and that Wadi Al-Salam means (Valley of Peace), that is, it is a valley safe from all the dangers, pests and insects of the earth, the cemetery is a spot in the Garden of Eden and the House of Peace, and there is no doubt that the House of Peace and Paradise is the place of the gathering of good souls, in fact, the burial in the cemetery was not on one side, rather, in separate directions, completely close to the vicinity of the city of Najaf, and close to it in a circular shape (Al-Muzaffar, 1964).

As for its location, the Wadi Al-Salam is located at the ends of Al-Mishraq and Al-Amarah, it takes a line parallel to the Najaf-Kufa road, and the Najaf-Karbala road, this valley, with its vastness, is part of the cemetery that was adjacent to the Holy Shrine (peace be upon him), because people used to bury their dead in the nearest area to the holy shrine, Wadi Al-Salam encircled Najaf from the northern side, especially from the two sides of Al-Mishraq and Al-Amarah. Along these two roads, the cemetery began to expand until the new layout of the cemetery, which is distinguished by its isolation from residential areas and new neighborhoods (Al-Hakim, 1999).

As a result of this impact, the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery took different forms, namely (Al-Hakim, 1999).

**1. The familiar shape:** This shape indicates the position of the deceased during burial and the direction of his head, at the head of the prominent tomb, a piece of rock or alabaster is placed on which the name of the deceased and the date of his death are engraved, and the graves take a single shape towards the west, its position indicates that the heads of the dead are in this direction, and their faces bisect the Qiblaa to the south towards the Sacred House of God.

**2. Rectangular shape:** This type of tomb is a rectangular parallelepiped that is not raised above the ground, one rectangle may contain one or more graves.

**3. Dome shape:** Islamic-style domes are built on some tombs, characterized by arches and Islamic decoration, sometimes they are built alongside domes of different heights, domes and minarets take different styles of architecture and construction, and most of them are covered with blue qashi or flowering woods.

**4. The catacombs:** The catacombs are mass graves in the ground, these are Lahouds, independent of one another, and some basements contain several floors of Lahoud, a plaque is placed in front of each grave indicating the name and date of death of the tomb owner, these catacombs are usually for certain families and accommodate a large number of the dead.

**5. Cemeteries in the homes:** Wadi Al-Salam includes large cemeteries, and a wing of them is devoted to rooms and places for prayer and ablution, they have a shelter on occasions and visits, and the facades of these tombs are decorated with ornaments, holy verses and the names of the imams (peace be upon them), the verses of poetry and in many of the Najaf houses located within the last wall are tombs belonging to the owners of these houses.

### **Functional constructivist theory**

The structural-functional theory is one of the oldest scientific theories in social and anthropological studies, and it is characterized by a detailed study of social construction and clarification of the interrelationship and mutual influence between social systems (Atef, 1971). The concept of (social construction) is one of the basic concepts in social studies in general and anthropological studies in particular (Abu Zaid, 1970). Mustafa (1975) said about the functional structural method that writing information collected from the field in the scientific anthropological style requires going beyond mere description of social life. As Professor Evans Pritchard says, the integrative analytical description that highlights the important features of social life, which in turn facilitates the understanding of the construction of that life. The function means the role that the part plays within the framework of the whole, that is, the cohesion between the parts performs the function of the whole and is represented in society and culture (Timachev, 1972).

With regard to employing the theory in the subject of the research, the researcher sees that the Wadi al-Salam cemetery performs an important social function for a large part of Iraqi society, especially in the middle and south. This religious function is an important part of Islamic religious culture in general, and Shiites in particular. As this culture performs a social and psychological function for the children of society. As the study community provides the prevailing cultural custom that dictates the necessity of burial in the Valley of Peace due to its proximity to the shrine of Ameer Almua'meen, to seek intercession, safety, reassurance, and psychological comfort for the dead and their families alike. It is an important part of the religious culture prevailing in the Shiite community in Iraq, so it is an important part within the social structure of the community, and at the same time it is a reciprocal process between the social systems that exist in the study community. , the individuals present within the study community are the launderer, the burial, the porter, the tutor, the itinerant saleswoman, the poor, the Qur'an reciter, and the simple means of transportation present there.

All of them perform a job that contributes to helping the families of the dead, each according to his job within the study community, and in return they receive different wages according to the nature of the work.

### **Study areas**

- 1- The human field: This field includes some members of the study community, such as the burial, the launderer, the beggars, the street vendor, the prompter, the Qur'an reader, and the drivers of the means of transportation available there, in addition to the individuals present there with the dead who visit their dead during various occasions.
- 2- The spatial domain: the spatial domain includes the study community confined to the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery in the city of Najaf.
- 3- Temporal domain: It is the time period that the field study took, which started from 6-12-2021 to 9-2-2021.

**Study Methodology: During the field study, the researcher dealt with the following methods:**

#### **1- Ethnographic method**

It is usually the study of individuals and groups in the field through direct cohabitation over a specified period of time using observation or personal interview with the aim of identifying patterns of cultural and social behavior. It also aims to discover the meanings behind the social act through the direct involvement of the researcher with the interactions that make up the social reality of the studied group (Al-Shanwani, 1989). Through this approach, the researcher entered the study community, the Wadi Al-Salam community in the city of Najaf, and described this community in a separate and accurate manner, according to his observations and interviews with various groups who are present in the Valley of Peace.

#### **2- The cognitive approach**

The approach to self-understanding in anthropological thought is known as the cognitive approach, and this approach aims to understand the individual's perceptions of the world and how these perceptions are formed and organized? How can you use these perceptions? The cognitive approach assumes that all individuals who live within one culture have a single cognitive system, which is formed for the action of this culture, and works to organize the material and moral things of the phenomenon, events, behavior and feelings (Ghamry, 1986).

The cognitive approach or the self-understanding approach, as it is called, works to find appropriate methods of analysis to reach models without inserting any strange perceptions or sayings about them, and then the criterion of honesty with regard to the results reached by the researcher is derived from the cultural reality itself, and expresses the point of view of the members. This is what is known as EMIC (Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*: p. 681). As the researcher took the information that aims to reach the desired facts and objectives of the field study, from all the individuals present in the study community and during the period of the field study.

### **The field study:**

The researcher studied the research community, the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery in the Iraqi city of Najaf, which is an Iraqi cemetery, and it is one of the largest cemeteries in the world. It is estimated to contain nearly six million graves that were included in the World Heritage List. The Shiites of Iraq bury their dead there for purely religious reasons and it is located close to the shrine of the Ameer Almua, mneen, in front of the Shiite Muslims. It is considered intercession for them on the Day of Resurrection, and safety and peace from the fire and the torment of the grave. The study adopted a purely anthropological field methods, the purpose of which was to obtain information, the most important of which were:

- 1- The reasons for burial in Wadi Al-Salam specifically were given by the Shiites of Iraq in particular and the world in general.
- 2- The reasons for continuing to visit the dead on various and varied occasions.
- 3- The rituals that the families of the dead perform while visiting their dead.

And during the field study that the carried out on the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, and during his wanderings in the cemetery at various and various times and at different times over a period of 3 months, the entrance to the cemetery consists of a main paved and wide street after crossing the burial offices and blacksmith shops.

To the right of the street is a large wall separating the cemetery from the main road to the city of Najaf and its exits, and to the left of the main street are sub-streets called (Al-Fatah). The cemetery starts from the first hole up to the ninth hole, approximately 7-8 kilometers along the main street, and the number of openings is related to the expansion of the graves, and the graves vary, as the basement represents the oldest of them, which is an underground room with a depth of more than a meter that accommodates a number of graves and is designated For one family, and because of the increase in the number of dead and to save space, vertical graves were used. Through the use of anthropological research methods, including the self-understanding method, the researcher conducted interviews with a group of burials (responsible for the process of burying the dead in the city of Najaf). They have their own offices located in the same study community, where they receive the dead in the presence of his family and bury him in a special way recognized by Muslims and Shiites of Iraq and teach him special religious terms. And often the burial has assistants who help him by inserting the dead into his pit and scattering dirt on him, and this service is provided by the burial in exchange for agreed amounts of money, often ranging between (250-500 thousand Iraqi dinars) and according to the position of the dead person or his economic status. , An interview with those in charge of washing the dead (Al-Mughassil) in Al-Mughasil, which are special places for washing the dead in Wadi Al-Salam, the research community, and it is also a special method and rituals for washing the dead.

The researcher conducted interviews with a group of beggars in the research community and took information about the daily life that they practice in the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery, in addition to interviews with sellers of scented water (Mi Ward) Incense that visitors to the dead buy and sprinkle water on the graves of their dead, as it is believed that it has a great reward for the dead, and lighting incense that gives relief to souls and perfumes the atmosphere.

The research also conducted interviews during its wanderings in the research community with itinerant Qur'an readers who read the Qur'an while some of the families of the dead were in the cemetery in order to obtain money, in addition to interviews with the drivers of small means of transportation located inside the cemetery to transport people to and from inside the cemetery, which are the means represented in (Al-Tuktuk and Al-Satuta), and the researcher conducted interviews with some families of the dead to learn about the occasions, times and reasons for visiting their dead in the Wadi al-Salam cemetery.

**Research results:** Through the anthropological field study, the research found the following:

- 1- Wadi Al-Salam cemetery in the city of Najaf is the main and only cemetery for the dead of Iraq's Shiites, because it is close to the shrine of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, peace and blessings be upon him. It is an obligation for every Shiite in Iraq.
- 2- The families of the dead throughout the year on various occasions visit their dead and visit the shrine of the Commander of the Faithful in the holy city of Najaf, according to the Shiite religious heritage. It takes place all year round.

Wadi Al-salam Cemetery community is a social construction based on a group of actors and a group of beneficiaries. A process of mutual benefit takes place between the actors and the beneficiaries, as the actors provide cultural services within what is customary within the study community, starting with the process of washing the dead, burying them, indoctrination, building their graves, and providing services. The various services are provided by Qur'an readers, street vendors and beggars, and means of transportation inside the cemetery. All beneficiaries who are represented by visitors to the Wadi al-Salam cemetery from all Shiite Iraqi provinces receive these services, in return for providing financial amounts to the actors in the various economic activities that they provide.

- 4- One of the duties of a Muslim, especially according to the Shiite sect, is to visit the graves and the dead, as it is a bite and a lesson that the world is fleeting, just as the dead feels his family when they visit him playing in his grave, and he rejoices in their joy, and grieves for their sadness. The Prophet and his family (may blessings and peace be upon them).

**Recommendations:** The researcher recommends the following:

- 1- Intensifying anthropological field studies of topics with a historical and cultural dimension, because of its connection with the reality of the current culture of society.

2- With regard to the study community, paying attention to the Wadi al-Salam cemetery by periodically maintaining and restoring the roads leading to the Wadi al-Salam cemetery in order to preserve the historical heritage that continues with the present, especially after its inclusion in the World Heritage List, and because of its religious and cultural importance to the Shiites of Iraq in particular.

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