REVIEW ARTICLE

Safe and Dignified Burials During Infectious Disease Out breaks (Epidemics) in Low-Income and Muslim Minority Countries: An Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Infectious disease out breaks pose serious global threats, resulting in high morbidity and mortality rates, overwhelming the health systems, and creating community fears. Safe and dignified burials (SDB) are a critical intervention for interrupting transmission of infectious pathogens during contagious outbreaks while respecting religious and cultural norms. Religious and cultural practices, specifically the Muslim burial rituals, require that the body be washed before burial, among other practices. In cases of contagious diseases like Ebola, Marburg, and others, these cultural and religious practices put communities at risk of spreading such diseases. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) provided guidance on what to do during pandemics and outbreaks through both practical measures and spiritual principles, as documented in authentic hadiths. This review paper therefore presents an Islamic public health perspective on the conduct of safe and dignified burials (SDB) during outbreaks, reviews challenges, and proposes recommendations for integrating Islamic principles with public health protocols. This review is based on World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, Islamic jurisprudential sources, and case-study experiences from Uganda's responses to outbreaks. We Outline the steps of safe and dignified burials; we share how the Islamic legal principles allow flexibility in epidemic conditions (for example allowing tayamum instead of ghusul). A training guide framework for Muslim religious leaders in Muslim Minority Countries that are prone to deadly epidemics has also been suggested. Intergrating and harmonizing public health protocols with religious values fosters community trust and improves adherence to safety measures. Future national preparedness and response strategies should prioritize formal partnerships with religious leaders and establish faith and culturally sensitive burial guidelines.

Keywords: Safe burial, dignified burial, infectious disease, Islamic jurisprudence, outbreak control, public health

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INTRODUCTION

Infectious disease outbreaks remain a recurrent challenge to global health security. Between 1996 and 2023, over 3,000 outbreak events were documented worldwide, including multiple episodes of Ebola, Marburg, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes, influenza, and other emerging and reemerging diseases.[1,2] Many of these diseases are transmitted via contact with infected body fluids, thereby raising the risk of secondary transmission during the handling of deceased bodies. Safe and dignified burials (SDB) are designed to simultaneously reduce the risk of infection and maintain respect for the dead and their families.[3] Yet in practice, implementing

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such burials in culturally diverse and religiously sensitive settings presents significant obstacles. Such resistance in some cultural and religious settings has in some instances led to a wider spread of these infections in some communities. This therefore poses a need to harmonize and integrate public health recommendations with religious practices.

Outbreaks in Uganda: Uganda has experienced several epidemics, including multiple outbreaks of Ebola (Sudan Strain), Ebola (Bundibujjo Strain) Marburg virus, cholera, Mpox, and Rift Valley Fever. Notably, Ebola Sudan outbreaks occurred in 2000 in Gulu, 2011 in Luwero, 2012 in Kibaale and Luwero, and more recently in 2025 across several districts including Kampala, Wakiso and Mbale district among others.[4-6] Cholera remains endemic and causes annual spikes in morbidity and mortality. These events highlight the need for contextually adapted protocols that align infection control with cultural and religious values. Through this experience, Uganda has had several success stories in emergency outbreaks preparedness as well as challenges. These challenges have made it difficult to integrate the World Health Organization (WHO) public health recommendations with Islamic religious practices of burial rituals. For example, in 2025 Ebola (Sudan Variant) Out breaks, local newspapers in Uganda were released with titles like "Mbale City Authorities stop relatives from exhuming Ebola victims" and another newspaper had the heading like "Minister warns on exhuming Ebola victim bodies"[7,8] This followed attempts by the Ebola victim relatives to exhume the body in order to perform the Islamic burial rituals. Figure 1 shows snapshots of the local newspapers in Uganda during the Ebola Outbreak in 2025.

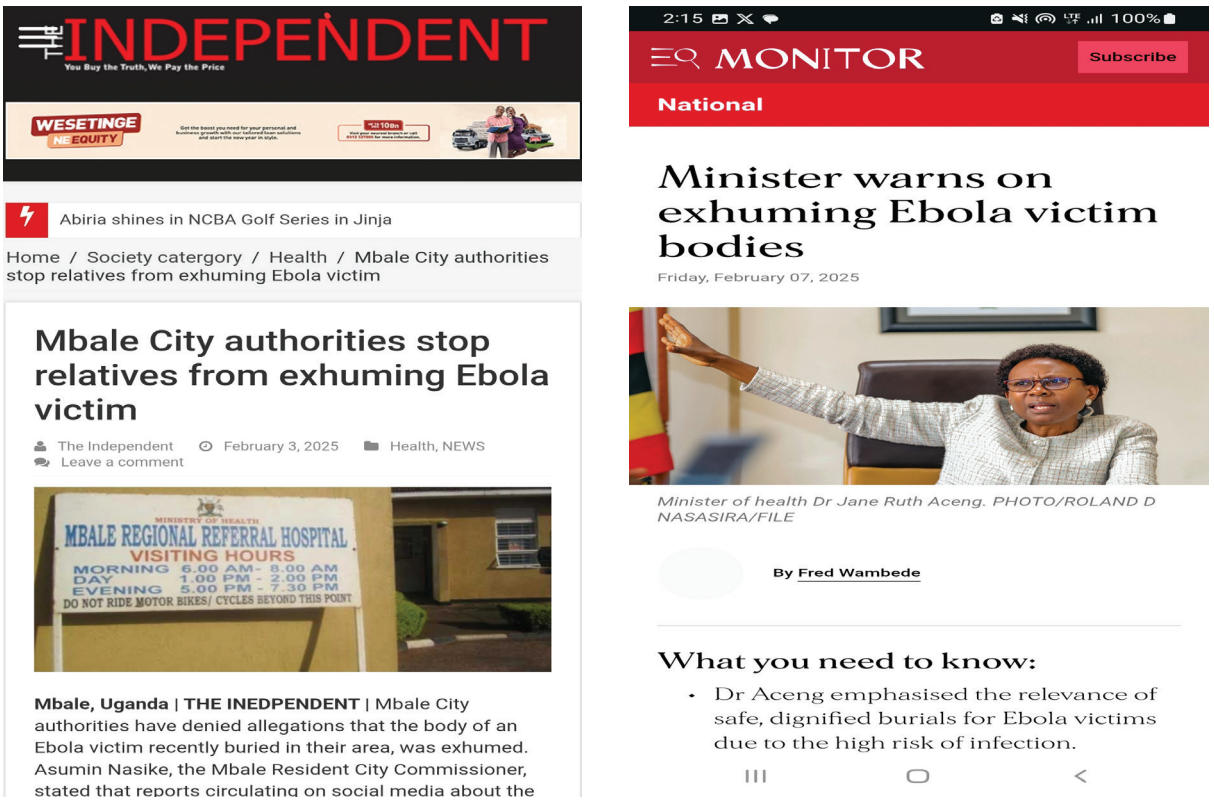


Figure 1: News headlines of Ebola Outbreak in 2025 in Uganda.[7,8]

Challenges to safe and dignified burials:

1) There is seem to be conflicts between International safe burial guidelines with traditional funeral rites and religious norms.
2) Theres is also a possibility of communities not trusting burial teams, hiding deaths, or conducting clandestine burial possibly due to stigma and fear.
3) Religious constraints: Muslims traditionally perform *ghusl* (washing), *kafan* (shrouding), and congregational prayers some of which must be modified under epidemic constraints.

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So in some Muslim communities this is seen as a challenge and it may prompt defying public health guidelines.

4) Lack of trained teams and resources: Many regions lack burial teams trained in infection prevention, adequate PPE, or logistical support.
5) Communication and trust gaps: Without good community engagement and transparency, safe burial protocols may be resisted.

It is on this background, that this paper presents the Islamic perspective and recommendations on dignified safe burials during epidemics.

OBJECTIVES

Taking all those issues in considerations, our paper looked at the following specific objectives:

1) To describe the steps involved in conducting safe and dignified burials during epidemics.
2) To review relevant Islamic jurisprudential positions on handling the deceased in outbreak settings.
3) To propose recommendations for integrating Islamic values into public health burial protocols.
4) To propose a framework for the training of Imams and local Muslim community leaders in safe and dignified burials.

METHODS

We conducted a literature review on the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and recommendations for safe and dignified Burials (SDB), the handling and response of Uganda towards to recent outbreaks. Review of the Islamic teachings, principles, and guidance from the Qur'an, Hadiths and Sunnahs of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was also done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Process of Safe and Dignified Burial (SDB):

A recommended sequence (adapted from WHO and field experience)[9] is given below:

1. Preparation: Mobilize a burial team, secure consent, gather PPE and disinfectants.
2. Arrival & assessment: Evaluate site safety and consult with family.
3. Family engagement: Communicate procedures, negotiate modifications to preserve dignity.
4. PPE donning: Team members don full protective gear according to guidelines.
5. Body placement: Place the deceased into a puncture-resistant body bag.
6. Coffin use (if applicable): Where culturally acceptable, place the sealed body bag into a coffin.
7. Disinfection: Disinfect surfaces and surrounding areas.
8. Waste & PPE removal: Safely remove PPE and manage waste per infection control.
9. Transportation: Move the body to designated burial site safely.
10. Burial: Prepare grave, lower body, cover, and mark.
11. Community rites: Allow viewing or prayers at a safe distance or under protocols.
12. Decontamination & exit: clean equipment, disinfect, and exit safely.

Islamic perspective on burials during epidemics: From the Islamic perspective, there is a multitude of lenses through which the topic in question could be tackled. First, there is a *tauheedic* perspective and the *Maqasid* lens. Both approaches complement each other rather than being independent. Tauheed involves affirmation of the oneness of Allah in belief and obedience of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in acts of worship and other worldly affairs.[10] On the other hand, *Maqasid* means the higher intents of Islam or Islamic law, and they involve preservation of religion, life, property, progeny, intellect, and human dignity.[11] From the tauheedic perspective, conducting a dignified burial is viewed as an act of worship because it is commanded by Allah through His Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Conducting a dignified burial in Islam involves specific rites and rituals, such as washing the deceased, shrouding, applying perfumes, praying, and burial.[12,13] Since all these are acts of worship, performing them affirms the divinity and unity of Allah. Every act of worship is rewarded by Allah. However, deliberately neglecting a mandatory act of worship is punishable by Allah. The dignified burial of a community member is a communal obligation, and if it is neglected, the entire community commits a serious sin.

Abu Huraira narrated that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

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عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ حَقُّ الْمُسْلِمِ عَلَى الْمُسْلِمِ خَمْسٌ: رَدُّ السَّلَامِ، وَعِيَادَةُ الْمَرِيضِ، وَاتِّبَاعُ الْجَنَائِزِ، وَإِجَابَةُ الدَّعْوَةِ، وَتَشْمِيتُ الْعَاطِسِ".

(صحيح البخاري 1240، صحيح مسلم 2162)

"The rights of a Muslim upon another Muslim are five: Returning the greeting (of Salām), Visiting the sick, Following the funeral processions, accepting invitations (to meals), Responding to the one who sneezes (by saying 'Yarḥamuk-Allāh')."[14,15]

اتِّبَاعُ الْجَنَائِزِ (following funerals):

Attending the funeral prayer (Ṣalāt al-Janāzah) and accompanying the deceased's body to the burial site. This shows respect for the deceased and support for their family. Scholars note that this primarily applies to men, although women may attend if necessary (under specific conditions). This small act acknowledges Allah's blessings and strengthens communal empathy. From the *maqasid* perspective, two principles may apply in this case: preservation of life and preservation of human dignity. Preservation of human life occupies a central position in the objectives of Islamic law and guidance.

In numerous verses of the Qur'an, Allah has prohibited anything that leads to the destruction of life and has recommended mechanisms to facilitate the preservation of life. For instance, murder is a major sin, and anything that's done deliberately or consciously to destroy life unjustifiably. For example, Allah says:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ

"…and kill not anyone whom Allah has forbidden, except for a just cause…" 6:151 in another verse Allah says;

مَن قَتَلَ نَفْساً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعاً وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعاً

"…if anyone killed a person not in retaliation of murder, or (and) to spread mischief in the land - it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind." 5:32

Allah also says; وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ

"…and do not throw yourselves into destruction…" 2:195

From this, it can be deduced that life is sacred in Islam; therefore, it must be preserved. In addition,

The Islamic objective of a dignified burial is intended to honor the deceased through a decent send-off and to protect the lives of the living by disposing of the body to prevent possible disease spread. Immediate burial is intended to prevent the deceased from decomposing and smelling for the loved ones; therefore, burial while the body is still fresh is meant to help in the preservation of the dignity of the deceased. Principle of erasing harm. Under this principle, a dead body may contain diseases that might pose significant threats to the lives of those who are still alive. It, therefore, follows that under such circumstances where there's a possibility of causing harm to the members of the community all pre cautionary measures should be done to avoid spread of infectious diseases, the WHO guideline must be followed and adhered to.



Figure 2: A district burial team in Uganda performing Salaat Janaazah while keeping a safe social distance. And ensuring tight personal protection equipments (PPE).

Recommendations for Integration:

1. Build capacity: We need to build capacity in the community, sensitize, and create awareness through training of Muslim burial teams in infection prevention and burial safety measures.
2. Engage religious leadership: Include imams and scholars in planning outbreak response and issuing guidance. Also, include all the Muslim leadership structures in planning for epidemic responses.
3. Harmonize fatwas: National religious bodies should issue rulings reconciling public health needs with Islamic obligations, since they have the Public's trust, among others.
4. Community education: Transparently communicate burial measures to reduce fear, misinformation, and resistance, including sensitizing communities on the role and process of SDB.
5. Policy inclusion; Embed faith-based burial protocols in national epidemic preparedness

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and response frameworks.

6. Muslim health workers and religious leaders have to equip them selves on the general principles of diseases prevention and health promotion, combining and integrating public health measures, clinical practices and Islamic teachings and principles.[16-18]

Proposed framework for the training of local religious leaders on SDB: This training of local community religious leaders (like Imams) can therefore take between three to five days residential or non-residential trainings. Handouts and manuals for each of the above topics can be developed and designed accordingly. Modified safe and dignified burial guide lines can be translated in the different local languages and distributed to local community and religious leaders accordingly (Table 1).

Table 1: Suggested training curriculum for SDB

Serial No.	Suggested topic	Duration
1.	Pre-Training Knowledge Assessment	3 hours
2.	General Introduction Rationale and Justification for SD Band training.	3 hours
3.	General Principles of Disease prevention and control	6 hours
4.	Islamic teachings on disease prevention and control.	6 hours
5.	WHO recommended process of Safe and Dignified Burial During Epidemics	6 hours
6.	Recommended Modified SDB process in the Islamic Perspective.	3 hours
7.	Simulation exercise for the Modified SDB	3 hours
8.	Post Training Knowledge Assessment.	3 hours

CONCLUSION

Safe and dignified burials are an essential nexus between public health and religious duty. Their success depends on the respectful integration of epidemiological measures with religious and cultural expectations. Building trust, engaging religious leaders, training burial teams, and issuing context-sensitive guidelines are critical to enhancing compliance, safety, and social acceptance during outbreaks.

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