

Grave as a Garden or a Pit: An Ethnographic Study of *Adhaab al-Kabr* Among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi

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Abstract

The concept of *adhaab al-kabr* (punishment of the grave) occupies a crucial place in Islamic eschatology. Yet, empirical research on how this belief is understood and experienced within specific Muslim communities remains limited. This study explored the theological understanding and lived experience of *adhaab al-kabr* among the Somali Muslim community in Eastleigh, Nairobi County, Kenya. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions with 48 participants, including community members, religious teachers, and leaders. The study utilized the Synthetic Triangular Approach to integrate textual analysis of Islamic sources with ethnographic fieldwork. The Push-Pull Theory of Religious Mobility provided an interpretive framework for understanding how beliefs about the afterlife influence community behavior. Findings reveal that *adhaab al-kabr* is understood through a structured process involving angelic questioning (*Munkar* and *Nakir*), three core questions about faith, and consequences ranging from grave-squeezing for the sinful to spaciousness and visions of paradise for the righteous. The belief serves as a powerful moral motivator, shaping daily practices such as prayer, hygiene, charity, and repentance. The grave is perceived not merely as a physical resting place but as the first station of the afterlife, a transitional space (*barzakh*) where the soul's fate is sealed until the Day of Judgment. The study contributes to the anthropology of Islamic eschatology by providing rich ethnographic data on how a classical theological doctrine is internalized, practiced, and transmitted within a contemporary diasporic Muslim community.

Keywords: *Adhaab al-kabr*, Punishment of the Grave, Islamic Eschatology, Somali Muslims, Lived Religion, Eastleigh



Introduction

The doctrine of the afterlife occupies a foundational place in Islamic theology, shaping believers' understanding of mortality, accountability, and divine justice. Among the various stages of the post-mortem journey, the experience in the grave, known in Arabic as *adhaab al-kabr* (punishment of the grave) or *fitnat al-kabr* (trial of the grave), holds particular significance (Smith and Haddad 2002, 41-45). Islamic tradition teaches that immediately after burial, the deceased is questioned by two angels, *Munkar* and *Nakir*, about their faith, and depending on the answers, experiences either torment or blessing while awaiting the Day of Judgment (al-Awayishah 1998, 9; Khan 2018, 60). This intermediate state, known as *barzakh*, marks the first stage of the afterlife and serves as a precursor to the final resurrection (Ellens 2013, 44). This stage lasts until *Yawn al Qiyama* (The day of resurrection).

Within Muslim communities worldwide, teachings about *adhaab al-kabr* are transmitted through the Qur'an, Hadith, and the instruction of religious teachers. These teachings function not only as eschatological knowledge but also as moral guidance, encouraging believers to live righteously, fulfill religious obligations, and seek divine mercy (Abdul-Rahman 2003, 552-553). The fear of punishment in the grave, balanced with hope for divine forgiveness, shapes daily practices, funeral rites, and communal expressions of faith (Ikhwan 2025, 47).

Despite the centrality of this belief in Islamic thought, scholarly research has largely focused on theological expositions rather than empirical investigations of how *adhaab al-kabr* is understood, experienced, and lived within specific Muslim communities. Limited studies have examined the intersection between official doctrinal teachings and believers' everyday interpretations, particularly in foreign contexts where communities navigate multiple cultural and religious influences (Wang'ombe 2019, 105). This gap is especially pronounced in African urban settings, where rapid migration, economic pressures, and diverse religious landscapes shape how Islamic teachings are received and practiced.

The Somali Muslim community in Eastleigh, Nairobi County, Kenya, offers a compelling context for examining this phenomenon. Eastleigh has become a significant hub for Somali people, migrants, and refugees since the early 1990s, following political instability and civil conflict in Somalia (Lindley 2007, 2; Whittaker 2020, 764). Today, the area hosts an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Somali Muslims, comprising both Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees (Varming 2020, 8). The community maintains strong cultural and religious ties to its heritage while navigating the



realities of urban life in a multicultural setting. Research on Somali Muslims in Eastleigh is important because religion strongly shapes daily life, identity, and beliefs. In this community, teachings in madrasas, mosque sermons, and gatherings regularly emphasize key Islamic ideas about the afterlife, including the punishment of the grave (*'adhāb al-qabr*). Studying this helps us understand how these beliefs influence people's behavior and community life (Mukuria 2021, 7).

This study, therefore, investigates how *adhaab al-kabr* is understood, interpreted, and experienced among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh. It explores the sources of this teaching, the ways religious teachers transmit it, and its influence on believers' moral consciousness, daily practices, and emotional responses to death and the afterlife. By examining the intersection between theological doctrine and lived experience, the study contributes to broader discussions on Islamic eschatology, the anthropology of religion, and the dynamics of religious identity in diaspora contexts. The study used a qualitative approach, including interviews and participant observation. This was necessary because it helped capture how religious teachings are both shared and lived in everyday life within the community.

Literature Review

The Concept of Adhaab al-Kabr in Islamic Sources

The Qur'an does not explicitly use the term *adhaab al-kabr*, but several passages allude to punishment experienced after death before the final judgment. Surah 40:46 refers to the "Fire" to which the people of Pharaoh are exposed "morning and evening," with the Day of Judgment described as the time when they are "admitted to the severest punishment." Similarly, Surah 6:93 and Surah 8:50 describe the soul's anguish during its extraction by angels, implying an immediate experience of divine justice (Gibb 1986, 187). These references, while not providing detailed descriptions, establish the theological foundation for the belief that the grave is not merely a resting place but a transitional space where the soul's fate begins to unfold.

The Hadith literature provides more elaborate accounts of the punishment and blessing in the grave. Al-Bukhari records that the Prophet Muhammad affirmed the reality of *adhaab al-kabr* and instructed believers to seek refuge from it in their prayers (Al-Bukhari 2019, 270). Other narrations describe the squeezing of the grave for the sinful, the questioning by *Munkar* and *Nakir*, and the opening of windows to Paradise or Hell for the deceased (Khan 2018, 60; Al-Munajjid 2008). The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* became formalized in Sunni creedal statements and remains a central tenet of orthodox Islamic eschatology (Temel 2015, 39-57).



Scholarly interpretations have varied across Islamic intellectual traditions. The Mu'tazilites, a rationalist school, initially rejected the concept, arguing that it contradicted the notion of divine justice and was not explicitly stated in the Qur'an (Gibb 1986, 187). Al-Ghazali, however, affirms the reality of the punishment while interpreting it within a metaphysical framework, suggesting that it occurs in the spiritual realm (*malakut*) rather than the physical world (Ghazali 2016). Despite these theological debates, the overwhelming majority of Sunni Muslims accept *adhaab al-kabr* as a matter of faith, emphasizing its role in promoting moral accountability and spiritual vigilance.

Death and the Afterlife in Islamic Thought

In Islamic theology, death is understood not as annihilation but as a transition from one mode of existence to another. The Qur'an states, "Every soul will taste death" (Surah 3:185), affirming the universality of mortality while pointing toward the reality of resurrection. The period between death and resurrection is known as *barzakh*, an intermediate state in which the soul experiences either reward or punishment based on earthly deeds (Smith and Haddad 2002, 31-32). This understanding shapes Islamic funeral practices, which emphasize the prompt burial of the deceased, ritual washing (*ghusl*), shrouding (*kafan*), and funeral prayer (*salat al-janazah*), all of which are intended to honor the deceased and prepare them for the grave's trials (Ġibālī and Albānī 2003, 17-18).

The grave itself is described in dualistic terms: for the righteous, it becomes a "garden of Paradise," spacious and illuminated, with windows opening to the delights of the hereafter; for the sinful, it becomes a "ditch of Hellfire," narrow and oppressive, with windows opening to the torments awaiting them (Abdul-Rahman 2003b, 293; Khan 2018, 60). This duality underscores the moral weight of earthly actions and the immediacy of divine accountability for every follower of Islam.

Religious Authority and Transmission of Eschatological Knowledge

Within Muslim communities, the transmission of eschatological knowledge occurs through multiple channels, including the Qur'an, Hadith, scholarly works (*tafsir*, *fiqh*), and the instruction of religious teachers (*ulema*, *imams*, *maalim*). Teachers play a crucial role not only in imparting doctrinal content but also in shaping students' moral character and spiritual formation (Tauhidi 1995; Shanti and Shohib 2026, 519-29). In many African Muslim communities, religious



education occurs in madrasas, where children and adults learn to recite the Qur'an, study Hadith, and internalize core Islamic beliefs, including those related to the afterlife (Mukuria 2021, 7).

The authority of religious teachers is reinforced by cultural norms that equate respect for teachers with respect for the knowledge they transmit. In Somali Muslim culture, elders and religious teachers are highly revered, and their teachings are often accepted without question (Hopkins 2010, 533). This dynamic shapes how eschatological doctrines are received and internalized, as believers trust their teachers' interpretations and apply them to daily life.

The Study's Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Push-Pull Theory of Religious Mobility (Lee 1966), which was further expanded by Bodi (2026) and William (2026) and offers a framework for understanding how beliefs about the afterlife influence individual and communal behavior. Originally developed to explain migration patterns, this theory conceptualizes movement as resulting from factors that push individuals away from their current situations and factors that pull them toward new ones. In the context of this study, the fear of *adhaab al-kabr* functions as a push factor motivating moral behavior, while the hope for blessedness in the grave functions as a pull factor drawing believers toward righteous living. This framework helps explain how eschatological beliefs shape daily practices and ethical decisions.

Methodology

The study was guided by the Synthetic Triangular Approach (STA) developed by Kim (2014). This guide provides a methodological framework for integrating textual analysis of religious sources with ethnographic fieldwork and interdisciplinary analysis. The STA enables researchers to examine how religious doctrines are interpreted within communities while remaining grounded in the textual foundations of those doctrines (Kim 2014, 183). This approach is particularly suited to studying *adhaab al-kabr*, which requires both an understanding of canonical Islamic sources of authority and an exploration of how those sources are lived and practiced in daily life.

This study also employed a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the understanding and experience of *adhaab al-kabr* among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi County. The qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to capture the depth and nuance of religious beliefs as they are lived and expressed within cultural contexts (Creswell 2003, 35). The



study was conducted over six months, from January to June 2024, enabling sustained engagement with the community and rapport-building with all the participants.

Study Site and Population

Eastleigh, located in Nairobi County, is a densely populated commercial and residential area that has become a significant center for Kenya's Somali diaspora. The area is estimated to host between 200,000 and 300,000 Somali Muslims, comprising both Kenyan citizens of Somali descent and Somali refugees who arrived following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 (Varming 2020, 8; Whittaker 2020, 764). Eastleigh is characterized by a vibrant Islamic infrastructure, including numerous mosques, madrasas, and community organizations that facilitate religious education and practice.

The target population for this study consisted of Somali Muslims residing in Eastleigh who had received instruction on *adhaab al-kabr* from religious teachers and were willing to share their understandings and experiences. The population included both lay community members and religious teachers (*imaams, sheikhs, maalim*), ensuring diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the study topic. This method enabled the researcher to intentionally select individuals who could provide rich, in-depth insights into their understanding of *adhaab al-kabr* and its influence on their lives (Bernard 2011, 145). Snowball sampling was also used, with initial participants referring others who might be willing to participate, facilitating access to individuals who might otherwise be difficult to reach.

The final sample comprised 48 participants, distributed across three age groups to capture generational perspectives: four elderly participants (aged 50-70 years), nine adults (aged 35-49 years), and 17 younger adults (aged 18-34 years). Additional participants included six religious teachers and 12 community leaders. The sample included both male and female participants, with women comprising 56% of respondents, reflecting the community's active membership demographics. Focus group discussions were conducted with three groups of 10-15 participants each, enabling exploration of collective perspectives and shared understandings.

Data Collection



Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants using an interview guide developed from the research questions. The interviews explored participants' understanding of *adhaab al-kabr*, their sources of knowledge, their religious practices, and their perceptions of the doctrine's influence on their lives. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Kiswahili, English, and Somali, with a research assistant providing translation as needed.

Participant observation was employed to observe religious practices, community gatherings, and burial rituals. The researcher attended mosque services, madrasa classes, and funeral ceremonies, documenting observations in field notes. This method enabled the researcher to witness how teachings about *adhaab al-kabr* were transmitted and practiced in natural settings (Spradley 1980, 51).

Focus group discussions were conducted with three groups of community members, each consisting of 10–15 participants. The focus groups allowed for interactive discussion and the exploration of shared understandings and collective memories related to *adhaab al-kabr*. The researcher facilitated discussions and audio-recorded them for transcription.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 110). The analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was facilitated by NVivo version 15, a qualitative data analysis software that enables systematic coding and visualization of themes.

The coding process began with open coding, in which the data were examined line by line to identify initial concepts and patterns. Axial coding followed, organizing codes into categories and exploring relationships among them; finally, selective coding integrated these categories into overarching themes that addressed the research questions. The analysis was iterative, with the researcher moving between data collection and analysis to refine emerging themes and ensure they were grounded in participant experiences.



Results

The study's findings, which sought to connect scriptural interpretation, cultural practice, and lived experience among Somali Muslims, revealed a rich and nuanced understanding of *adhaab al-kabr* in Eastleigh. Participants described the doctrine as an integral part of their faith, transmitted through the Qur'an, Hadith, and the teachings of religious leaders. The results are organized thematically, beginning with core beliefs about the nature of the punishment, followed by the role of angels and questioning, the conditions of the grave, and the influence of these beliefs on moral behavior.

Core Beliefs: The Reality of Punishment

All participants affirmed their belief in the reality of *adhaab al-kabr*. One participant (RS2) explained, "*Adhaab al-kabr* means the punishment one is going to get once they are put in the grave." Another participant (RS1) noted, "They teach that when a person is taken to the grave, it will depend on the kind of person they are, whether they are good or bad." These statements reflect a foundational understanding that the grave is not merely a physical resting place but a site of spiritual reckoning where one's earthly deeds determine immediate consequences.

While participants believed the punishment was real, some noted that the doctrine is not explicitly detailed in the Qur'an. One participant (RS12) observed, "The details of *adhaab al-kabr* are not highlighted in the Qur'an, nor are they mentioned at all; it is one of the teachings of the *Sunnah* of the holy prophet." This reliance on Hadith as the primary source for eschatological details was consistently emphasized, reinforcing the authority of prophetic tradition in shaping community beliefs.

The Nature of the Punishment

Participants described the punishment in the grave as immediate, painful, and deserved. One participant (RS6) stated, "Since you fail to follow what God has commanded you to follow, the punishment you deserve it. It's okay to be punished." The punishment is understood to be continuous until the Day of Judgment, with one participant (RS11) explaining, "This torture will continue until the day of judgment." Another participant (RS23) added, "Punishment in the grave is not final after all, there is a judgment day that will determine whether you are going to heaven or hell."



The physicality of the punishment was described in vivid terms. Many participants referenced the concept of “squeezing” (*finyo*), in which the walls of the grave press upon the deceased until their ribs interlock. One participant (RS26) explained, “The grave is going to squeeze them from all sides, left, right, center, it is going to squeeze their bodies until the ribs are going to crisscross.” This imagery, drawn from Hadith literature (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Musnad Ahmad, vol. 6, pp. 55, 98; al-Qurtubi, al-Tadhkirah, p. 90), describes the grave exerting constricting pressure on the deceased, sometimes metaphorically expressed as the interlocking of ribs.

Other forms of punishment described included being struck with iron hammers, bitten by serpents, and exposed to fire. A participant (RS7) described, “*Usipojibu utapata adhabu, utapigwa ba nyundo hadi uingie kwa ardhi*” (If you do not answer correctly, you will be punished with a hammer until you reach down). Another participant (RS5) noted, “A snake will bite every part of your body, and you will be terrified.” These descriptions, while graphic, were presented as matters of faith, accepted on the authority of religious teachers and Hadith.

The Recipients of Punishment

Not all participants believed that everyone experiences punishment in the grave. A consistent theme was that the righteous, those who lived according to Islamic teachings and answered the angels’ questions correctly, would be spared and instead experience blessings. One participant (RS2) explained, “It depends... not everyone who goes to the grave will be punished. It depends on how one answers three questions... The punishment of the grave will depend on how you answer the questions.”

Specific categories of people were identified as likely to face punishment. Participants mentioned those who neglect prayer (*salah*), fail to maintain proper hygiene, engage in backbiting, and those who die in a state of unbelief (*kufir*). One participant (RS2) cited a Hadith (Al-Bukhari, 2002; Muslim, 2007): “Mohammed passed by a grave and narrated there were two Muslim men who were punished at the grave because they did not clean themselves well after properly relieving themselves.” Another participant (RS1) added, “There is a *hadith* that says that you will be punished if you do not wash yourself well after urinating.”

Conversely, participants described the blessed state of the righteous in the grave. One participant (RS1) explained, “If you passed the questions, meaning you lived a good life on earth, your grave would be as wide as the eyes could see, and the window of *Jannah* would be opened.”



Another participant (RS7) stated, “*Kama mtu mzuri ukiulizwa swali utapita, utaonyeshwa Jannah*” (If you were a good person, you would pass all the questions and be shown paradise).

Questioning by Angels

Central to participants’ understanding of *adhaab al-kabr* was the belief in questioning by two angels, *Munkar* and *Nakir*. A participant (RS2) stated, “When you are put in the grave, and people depart, there will be two angels that will come to you.” The angels are described as fearsome celestial beings who test the deceased’s faith with three questions: “*Man Rabuka?*” (Who is your God?), *Man Nabiyuka?* (Who is your Prophet?), and *Man Dinuka?* (What is your religion?)

These three questions were consistently mentioned across interviews. A participant (RS2) elaborated, “The question is, *Man Rabuka*, who is your God? You answer the one who created you. The second, *Man Dinnuka*, what is your religion? You answer your *din* is Islam.” A few participants mentioned a fourth question, *Man Kitabuka?* (What is your book?), but the consensus affirmed three primary questions. The ability to answer correctly was understood to depend on one’s faith and deeds in life. The righteous would find it easy to respond, while the sinful would struggle or fail. A participant (RS5) explained, “Only the righteous answer the question.” Another participant (RS11) noted, “The answer determines the punishment; if you answer correctly, you are rescued.”

The Grave as Transitional Space

Further, participants consistently described the grave as more than a physical location; it is the first station of the afterlife, the place where the soul resides in *barzakh* until resurrection. One participant (RS14) stated, “We believe that we are on earth for a while, not forever; there is life after death.” Another participant (RS11) noted, “*Imani yako utakaa nayo ukiwa kaburini na matendo yako*” (your faith and good deeds will be your companions at the grave). The grave was described in dualistic terms, reflecting the deceased’s fate. A participant (RS2) explained, “The grave can be either a ditch of hellfire or a garden of paradise.” This duality was visually represented in participants’ narratives, with vivid descriptions of the grave as either a place of torment or a place of peace.

Participants also described the grave as a place where the deceased remains aware of the living, hearing their footsteps and prayers, though unable to communicate. A participant (RS16) observed, “*Yule mwenye ako kaburi anapitia, wanyama wanasikia, ikiwa wanadamu wangeweza kusikia hawangemkosea Mungu*” (The one in the grave, animals will hear, and if human beings



would hear, they would not offend God). This awareness reinforces the belief that the deceased's state is a direct consequence of earthly actions and that the prayers of the living can affect their condition.

Influence on Moral Behavior

The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* was consistently identified as a powerful motivator for moral behavior. A participant (RS22) stated, "The teaching of *adhaab al-kabr* instills fear among the Muslims because it is terrifying." Another participant (FG3) explained, "If you think about the punishment of the grave, it encourages you to live a holy life." This fear, balanced with hope for mercy, shapes daily practices and spiritual discipline.

Participants described how the doctrine influenced their prayer practices, charitable giving, and interpersonal relationships. A participant (RS5) noted, "To avoid those punishments, you will work on your religion as expected." Another participant (RS6) added, "I have to respect my neighbors to avoid punishment in the grave." The belief also encouraged repentance, as one participant (RS2) explained, "Allah says, 'Whatever *dhambi* (sin) you do, come back to me and repent,' Allah will forgive those who are sincere."

The fear of *adhaab al-kabr* also influenced participants' engagement with Islamic texts. Many participants reported reading the Qur'an daily, describing its effects as calming, purifying, and spiritually energizing. A participant (RS2) stated, "It brings satisfaction to your soul. The Quran is the medicine for your soul, so it eases your heart and lifts every hardship you have in life."

Burial Rites and Community Practices

Participants described burial practices that reflect their beliefs about *adhaab al-kabr*. The immediacy of burial was emphasized, with one participant (RS2) remarking, "The prophet decreed that if a person dies, he should be buried immediately in his grave so that he can face the good things awaiting him in the grave, and if he was a bad person, bury him immediately so that his *mashaka* (evil deeds) may be taken away from you."

The ritual washing of the body, shrouding in white cloth (*sanda*), and funeral prayer (*salat al-janazah*) were described as essential preparations for the grave. A participant (RS26) explained, "The body has to be washed, the body is shrouded, that is the covering of the body, and then we have to perform a special prayer for the person seeking forgiveness on their behalf, and then they have to be buried." Participants underscored that prayers for the deceased continue after burial,



particularly on the third day, seventh day, and for forty days thereafter. A participant (RS23) narrated, “After the third day after the person is buried, the family comes to make a prayer so that God can ease the punishment of the dead person because you do not know... only God knows, so on the third day people pray for that dead body so that God can ease the punishment.”

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical insight into how a classical Islamic eschatological doctrine is understood, experienced, and lived within a contemporary diasporic Muslim community. The Somali Muslims of Eastleigh demonstrate a coherent and deeply internalized understanding of *adhaab al-kabr*, shaped by authoritative Islamic sources and reinforced through religious instruction, community practices, and personal reflection.

The study’s findings align with theological literature that emphasizes the structured nature of the grave’s trial. The three questions posed by angels *Munkar* and *Nakir*, the immediate consequences of correct or incorrect answers, and the dualistic nature of the grave as either a garden or a pit all reflect canonical teachings found in Hadith literature (Al-Bukhari 2019; Khan 2018). The reliance on Hadith as the primary source for eschatological details, noted by participants, underscores the continuing authority of prophetic tradition in shaping Muslim beliefs, even as the Qur’an provides the broader framework for understanding death and resurrection (Smith and Haddad 2002, 31–32).

The vivid physical descriptions of punishment, the squeezing of the grave, the striking with iron hammers, and the serpents that bite reflect the Hadithic tradition’s emphasis on concrete imagery to convey moral and spiritual realities (Al-Munajjid 2008, 2-5). While some Islamic theologians, such as Al-Ghazali, have interpreted these descriptions metaphorically as occurring in the spiritual realm (*malakut*), participants in this study largely accepted them as real, physical experiences. This acceptance reflects the authority of Hadith in shaping lay beliefs and the trust placed in religious teachers who transmit these traditions (Shanti and Shohib 2026, 519–29).

The moral function of *adhaab al-kabr* was prominently evident in participants’ narratives. The fear of punishment serves as a powerful motivator for righteous behavior, influencing prayer, charity, hygiene, and interpersonal ethics. This finding aligns with Abdul-Rahman’s (2003, 552–553) observation that Muslims engage in acts of devotion to avert the feared torment of the grave. However, participants also emphasized the balance between fear and hope, noting that Allah’s mercy and forgiveness remain available to the sincere repentant. This dual emphasis reflects the



broader Islamic theological framework in which divine justice and mercy are held in tension (Ikhwan 2025, 47).

The study also reveals the integration of eschatological belief with daily religious practices. Participants' descriptions of reading the Qur'an as a source of peace, healing, and spiritual energy demonstrate how eschatological awareness permeates everyday spirituality. The Qur'an is not merely a text to be studied but a living resource that prepares the soul for its encounter with the afterlife. This finding resonates with broader studies on Muslim piety that highlight the Qur'an's role in shaping moral consciousness and spiritual formation (Mukuria 2021, 7).

The burial practices described by participants reflect the integration of Islamic teachings with Somali cultural traditions. The immediacy of burial, the ritual washing, the shrouding, and the funeral prayer all conform to Islamic prescriptions, while the extended mourning period, community prayers, and charitable acts on behalf of the deceased reflect local cultural expressions of grief and solidarity (Roble 2008, 1). The practice of praying for the deceased on the third, seventh, and fortieth days after death, noted by participants, represents a synthesis of Islamic eschatological concern with Somali cultural practices of mourning and remembrance (Oseje 2018, 127).

The study's findings also have implications for understanding the role of religious authority in shaping belief. The trust placed in religious teachers, *imams*, *sheikhs*, and *malalim*, as authoritative interpreters of eschatological doctrine, reflects broader patterns in Muslim communities in which teachers function not only as educators but also as moral guides and spiritual mentors (Tauhidi 1995; Hopkins 2010, 533). The acceptance of Hadith-based teachings without extensive theological critique suggests that for lay believers, the authority of transmitted tradition outweighs individual interpretive reasoning.

From a theoretical perspective, the Push-Pull Theory of Religious Mobility (Lee 1966) offers a useful framework for understanding how *adhaab al-kabr* functions in daily life. The fear of punishment functions as a push factor, motivating believers to avoid sinful behavior, while the hope of blessedness in the grave functions as a pull factor, drawing them toward righteous actions, prayer, and charitable giving. This dual movement away from punishment, toward reward structures the moral landscape within which Somali Muslims navigate their spiritual lives.

The Synthetic Triangular Approach (Kim 2014) proved valuable in integrating textual analysis of Islamic sources with ethnographic data on lived practice. The approach enabled the



study to remain grounded in canonical Islamic teachings while attending to the ways those teachings are interpreted, adapted, and lived within a specific cultural context. This integration is essential for understanding religious phenomena that are simultaneously textual and experiential.

Conclusion

This study examined the understanding and experience of *adhaab al-kabr* among Somali Muslims in Eastleigh, Nairobi County. The findings reveal that the doctrine is deeply embedded in the community's religious consciousness, shaping moral behavior, spiritual practice, and responses to death. Participants demonstrated a coherent understanding of the grave's trial as involving angelic questioning, immediate consequences based on faith and deeds, and a dualistic experience of either punishment or blessedness.

The belief in *adhaab al-kabr* serves as a powerful motivator for righteous living, shaping daily practices such as prayer, charity, hygiene, and repentance. It also shapes burial practices, mourning rituals, and communal expressions of faith. The doctrine is transmitted through authoritative sources, the Qur'an, Hadith, and religious teachers, and is internalized as a matter of faith that informs both personal spirituality and community identity.

The study contributes to the anthropology of Islamic eschatology by providing rich ethnographic data on how a classical theological doctrine is lived and practiced within a contemporary diasporic Muslim community. It also contributes to broader discussions on religious authority, moral formation, and the intersection of textual tradition with lived experience. For scholars of religion, the study demonstrates the value of ethnographic approaches that attend to the ordinary, everyday dimensions of religious belief. For practitioners and religious leaders, the study highlights the importance of teaching eschatological doctrines in ways that balance fear of punishment with hope for mercy, and that connect theological knowledge with moral formation and spiritual care.

Future research could explore generational differences in understanding *adhaab al-kabr*, the role of women in transmitting eschatological knowledge, and comparative studies across different Muslim communities in Africa and the diaspora. Such research would further illuminate the dynamic relationship between Islamic doctrine, cultural context, and lived religious experience.



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