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# Muslim cemeteries and politics of belonging

## A comparative case study of France, Finland and Britain

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### **Abstract**

There are minimal core practices, specific to Muslim burial rituals, which appear problematic in different national contexts. The premise of this article is to understand Islamic cemeteries as sites of politics of belonging and the negotiation of national belonging in the face of death and burial. The specific sites to which this article refers are Helsinki (Finland), Paris (France) and London (United Kingdom). In these countries there are various Muslim minorities, but they also differ in their respective migration histories, the legal framework of burial regulation and their traditions of regulating cultural diversity. The article examines the question of Islamic burial as problematic in selected national contexts at different times. By visualising the specific burial sites in all three ethnically and religiously plural societies, it aims at concretising and unravelling the

comparative analysis of contemporary Muslim practices in selected locations.

### **Introduction**

Over 258 million people around the world do not live in the country in which they were born. Today, in Western Europe an average of 10% of the total population are migrants. Even if some migrants do ultimately return home, many settle, establish roots and stay in their new home countries. As a consequence, an increasing number of individuals do not only live but also die outside of their country of origin, in settings where their conceptualisations and practices of death and burial often differ from those of the national majority. In Western European countries, nowadays one typically dies in a hospital, is deposited to a morgue with little ritual pretence and remains there up to weeks before ultimately entering

eternity in the adjacent churchyard or a secularised cemetery. If this all seems quite natural to native-born citizens, to migrants and minorities, some of the state-regulated steps of the funeral process may appear highly problematic, as violating their very conceptions of a dignified death.

This is the case for Muslims, in particular, who have traditionally been cast as the ultimate “Other”, exotic Orientals essentialised as antimodern, anti-egalitarian, irrational and undisciplined, whereas Europeans have constructed their self-image as enlightened, democratic and freedom-loving superior people and nations (Said 2003). Despite the general trend of secularisation, which is especially strong in France, Christian heritage casts a long and permanent shadow on the legal and cultural norms of burial to which Islamic traditions form an exception. To be sure, Muslim identities are multi-faceted and multi-ethnic, and it is difficult to separate the field of religious beliefs from customs rooted in different cultural backgrounds. Grouping diverse populations under the label “Muslim” runs the risk of essentialising minority individuals and masking the internal heterogeneity of European Muslims.

However, our respective research projects point out a minimal core of practices that are specific to Muslim burial rituals and appear as problematic in the national contexts that this article pertains to: Finland, France and the UK. Mainstream Islamic tradition bans cremation and imposes three norms for the funeral ritual: body washing or *ghusul*, shrouding the body or *kafan* and quick burial and burial prayers. Muslim tradition firstly requires that the body be ritually washed before burial. This requires the availability of a

room, with running water and a drain, that in principle should not be too far from the cemetery. Secondly, according to Islamic Canonical Law, the body must be buried in a shroud, the *kafan*, rather than in a casket. Burial without a coffin, where the body is laid directly in the ground, is not a prescription of Sunnah in its strict sense. In fact, it is recommended that the body be buried in the simplest manner, as the prophet Mohammed had been. Thirdly, it is recommended that the burial occur on the day of the death or at the latest within 48 hours following the death, with the face of the deceased turned towards Mecca. The prayer ceremony takes place in the cemetery, and only men participate, the women remaining in the vicinity of the cemetery.

These pragmatic concerns relative to funeral organisation faced by the Muslim minority raise important questions over national belonging. For if we align ourselves with the scholars who see the very foundations of the human species and culture in our propensity to bury the dead and care for burial sites (Ariès 1975; Harrison 2004; Laqueur 2015), funeral rites and in particular cemeteries emerge as a fascinating entry to the study of negotiations over belonging. These questions matter to individuals, families and communities, who perpetuate their sense of togetherness and lineage through rites of burial and commemoration (Déchaux 1997). Consequentially, the ways they are regulated speak of their great importance for the continuous (re) construction of nation-states. In a diasporic context, choosing where to bury a relative is never entirely a question of free, individual choice. The options open to the families and the possibility of burying the

deceased in accordance with the previously outlined burial norms depend on the legal, cultural and political conditions of the Muslim minority's home country. They are expressed through a distinct vocabulary that echoes structural differences in each country. Indeed, the issues involved in funerary policies are intertwined with broader political discourse on cultural and religious pluralism, identity and diversity.

Set against these pragmatic and political concerns, this article is premised on the understanding of Islamic cemeteries as sites of *politics of belonging* – here understood, following Nira Yuval-Davis (2011: 10), as “specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collective/s which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries”. By examining the particular case of Islamic cemeteries, it sets out to understand *how national belonging is negotiated in the face of death and burial* in France, Great Britain and Finland, three countries that differ from each other with regard to their Muslim minorities as well as in terms of their migration history, the legal framework of burial regulation and their tradition of regulating cultural diversity.

The three countries' Muslim populations also differ from each other - by size as well as by origins. France currently hosts Europe's largest Muslim minority. Based on measurement by self-declaration, 4.1 million individuals living in France identified as Muslims according to a 2008 survey – approximately 6% of the total population (Simon 2019). 70% of France's Muslims are of North African origin, and half of them were born in France. The official estimates foresee an increase in this growing and aging population up

to 9-13.5 million individuals by 2050. According to the latest British census of 2011, 2.7 million Muslims live in England and Wales, constituting 4.8 per cent of the population. Muslims in Great Britain have diverse ethnic backgrounds, yet 68% come from the Indian subcontinent. In Britain this religious group increased by 3.5% from 2001 to 2011. Based on the current age pyramid of the British population, the Office for National Statistics estimates that by 2021, 190,000 Muslims will be aged between 65 and 84. As a colonial hinterland rather than an epicentre, an agrarian country with no history of labour migration, Finland is set apart from Britain and France by the modest number of Muslim residents or citizens, which amounted to approximately 60,000 individuals in 2006. The number represented less than 1% of the country's population (Martikainen et al. 2008). The largest groups by national origin are Somali, Turkish and Iraqi. What the three country cases have in common, however, is the nature of the Muslim minority, which is both growing and aging. In Finland, the growth of the Muslim population has been dramatic, from a mere thousand individuals in 1990 to 65,000 in 2015, and it is expected to reach 190,000 by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2015).

In the three subsequent sections, this article asks how the issue of Islamic burial has been problematised in each of these national contexts at different points in time. We start out by shedding light on the historical background and especially the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a foundational moment of including Muslims in the national community through burial customs. We then compare the national legal frameworks

of Muslim burial practices and discuss them as a neglected element of politics of belonging. The final section examines the most recent developments in Muslim funeral practices through the analytical lens of different national traditions of governing belonging in the three ethnically and religiously plural societies. Throughout the article, the central argument on cemeteries as strategic sites for negotiations over national belonging is concretised by a visual approach: the reader is invited to unravel the comparative puzzle picture by picture in Helsinki, Paris and London.

### **Military conflicts as milestones in the management of Muslim burials**

Despite the diversity of national contexts, the comparison of France, Britain and Finland reveals a common pattern of development of Muslim burial grounds that in all three cases mirrors past military engagements. More precisely, the historical comparison shows how the question over Islamic burial is closely connected to the participation of Muslim colonial subjects in the war efforts of the French, British and Russian Empires, notably in WWI in the case of France and Britain and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century military conflicts involving Imperial Russia in the case of Finland. The first Muslim burial sites in these three countries indeed express a common concern of offering a dignified burial for minority subjects among casualties of war. However, both the politics of memorialisation and the politics of belonging are anchored in political and national contexts. Based on a brief overview of the pragmatic organisation of burials of Muslim casualties and civilians during the war years, this section highlights the facts, key similarities and differences in the management of

Muslim burials in the three countries and thus starts to unravel the historical roots of the differences in national traditions of governing diversity that in contemporary scholarship have typically been captured by distinct “national models of integration”: a Republican one in France, a liberal multiculturalist one in the UK and a Nordic variant of multiculturalist in Finland.

### *Finland: The Prästö military cemetery and the imperial legacy of management of diversity*

The first Muslim burial grounds in Finland date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the era of Russian Imperial rule over the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. The earliest records of Muslim burials in Finland reflect this imperial connection: the first Muslims known to be buried in the country were soldiers or convicts of the czarist army stationed in Finland. Although there are written records of Muslim soldiers being buried in the fortress of Viaborg that lies on an island in front of the Russian-founded capital of Helsinki as well as at the grounds of the military hospital that functioned in the central neighbourhood of Lapinlahti, no material remains, human or monumental, have survived to this day.

The earliest signs of Muslim burials in Finnish soil can be found in the quaint commune of Prästö on the Åland islands lying between Finland and Sweden in the Baltic Sea. Following the annexation of Finland to the Russian Empire in 1809, military construction projects were started in order to defend the territory against the Swedes. At the time, the Bomarsund fortress in Prästö was among the largest military construction projects in the

country. Between the 1820's and 1860's, hundreds of soldiers and war prisoners were brought to work at this site, where many of them died, notably of disease.

According to the current Prästö Museum data, the first burials took place in the 1820's in the Prästö cemetery. The Prästö cemetery is divided into five confessional sections, set apart from each other by stone hedges. Approximately 50 funeral monuments crafted out of granite can still be found in the site's Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Orthodox sections. The smaller Jewish section still comprises piles of stones, most likely where Jewish individuals were buried. Although no identifiable vestiges of Islamic graves remain, one can distinguish mounds of land and scattered pieces of wood that most likely indicate the spots where Muslim individuals were buried. According to the present day Prästö Museum, circa 500 Muslim members of the penal companies brought to work at the Bomarsund fortress were buried here. These Muslims likely came from the areas of conflict within imperial Russia (Central Asia) and from the border regions with Turkey – with which the Empire was at war.

The cemetery is an interesting entry to the analysis of the historical formation of the Muslim minority's membership in Finnish society. First of all, it allows for critically examining myths of Finns as an unusually ethnically homogeneous group and of population diversity as a historical novelty (Tervonen 2014). The case indeed draws attention to the *de facto* ethnic and religious plurality of 19<sup>th</sup> century Finland and to the anomalous nature of the period between Finland's independence and internationalisation (1917–1990), characterised by historically



Figure 1: The Islamic section of the Prästö military cemetery (photo: Linda Haapajärvi)

low levels of foreigners residing in this politically unstable and economically backward European periphery (Leitzinger 2008). Secondly, the cemetery hints at an alternative origin of the Finnish “multiculturalist” tradition of managing diversity, typically attributed to the Swedish and Canadian examples (Saukkonen 2013), i.e. “multiculturalist” logics inherited from the Russian imperial administration, having opted for separating the casualties by religion and allowing for each confession to follow their specific traditions in terms of burial practices and monuments.

#### *Great Britain: Working, recognising the “Muslim soldiers”*

The presence and the death of Muslims are directly linked to Britain's colonial history. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims were buried in non-conformist public grounds in Britain. WWI triggered the first official changes to this pattern. The colonies participated in the war efforts and sent soldiers to fight and die in the ranks of the colonial armies. During WWI, nearly 1.2 million soldiers from India went to war for Britain. The War Office initiated the first dedicated Muslim

cemetery in 1915; wounded Muslim soldiers were treated for their injuries at the Indian Army Hospital set up in Brighton's Royal Pavilion (Tibawi.al 1981: 195). Contacts were established between the hospital's officers and the Imam of the Woking Mosque, which was the only and first purpose-built mosque at the time to ensure that deceased Muslim soldiers were given the appropriate religious Muslim burial. A decision was made to purchase land near the mosque for a burial ground, and the religious funerary rituals were performed at the nearby Woking Mosque (Islamic Review: 5532). It is located on the southeast corner of Horsell Common, near the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking. It was originally known as the Woking Muslim Military Cemetery. 17 soldiers from WWI were buried there and 8 from WWII. In 1969, the Commonwealth War Grave Commission made the decision to exhume the bodies and reinter them in the Brookwood Military Cemetery. Since then, the site has slowly fallen into neglect.



*Figure 2: Woking Garden of Remembrance, Peace Garden (photo: Nada Afiouni)*

In the wake of the commemoration of a century since WWI, the empty Muslim burial place in Woking benefitted from a renovation program. During the summer

of 2013, works to restore the unique Muslim military burial ground began. The Peace Garden of Remembrance features 27 Himalayan birch trees, representing the number of Muslim soldiers formerly buried at the site, and a water feature incorporating a memorial stone bearing their names. The Muslim Burial Ground Peace Garden was inaugurated by the Earl of Wessex in November 2015. The rehabilitation of this empty burial ground can be analysed as a means to highlight Muslim soldiers' participation not only as individuals but more importantly as a group. Thus, the attention paid to this group repositions them as "the Muslim Soldiers" and inscribes the group in a different narrative perspective, as part of the national "Us" within a multicultural frame that acknowledges and recognises group rights. This group of Muslim soldiers who died more than one hundred years ago has become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a symbolic element, important enough to be included into a common national history, where the rhetoric of inter-faith dialogue is deemed crucial for national cohesion. The rehabilitation of the empty cemetery gives new contours to the past, with an overarching perspective embracing the present.

#### *France: WWI and the revelation of the Muslims in France*

Until 1914, there were very few graves of Muslims in France. One can mention a handful of burials of Muslims from the high middle ages discovered by archaeologists in the south of the country, a funerary monument in memory of the 25 members of the suite of Emir Abd el Kader that died during his exile in Amboise and an ephemeral "Muslim enclosure" at the

Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris that was created in 1857. Created by the Ottoman embassy, this enclosure includes up to 44 graves and a prayer hall constructed with a very light oriental style. A project of enlargement was supported by the embassy with a “more assertive Islamic style”. The building was demolished in 1914.

As of winter 1914, a circular from the Ministry of War defined the rules to be followed for the burial of Muslim soldiers. They fully respected the precepts of Islam. This position of the French army testifies, like the existence of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim military chaplains, to a consideration of the religious beliefs of men that must go into battle and perhaps die. During the implementation of the great military necropolises in the 1920s, it was decided that the graves of Muslim soldiers would be memorialised by a stele mounted with a horseshoe arch, engraved with a crescent and a five-pointed star. An inscription in Arabic (“This is the grave of the reminder to God”) and one in French recalled the name, the regiment and the date of death of the soldier.

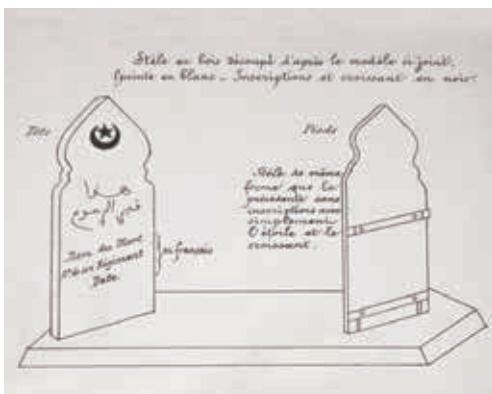


Figure 3: The original design of the official stele is supposed to have been created by Etienne Dinet, who was a famous orientalist painter. (photo: Jean-Barthélemy Debost)

When these tombs are numerous in a necropolis, they can be grouped in separate squares. Within the 10 necropolises comprising Muslim soldiers, these burials represent 8% of all funerary monuments.

This conception of secularism - freedom of belief and thinking - entering the public space of the military necropolis reflects the complexity of the secularisation process in the singular context of the sacred union under the tricolor banner that makes appeasement on the religious question a tool for patriotic mobilisation. Muslims “dying for France” benefitted from this situation.

### Burials, law and the politics of belonging

Sovereign states use legal regulation as a key technique of governing their populations. Migration fluxes are regulated by sets of international laws and treaties as well as by national laws, decrees and policies. Formal citizenship, the ultimate seal of belonging to the community of citizens, grants particular legal rights and duties and is acquired through a carefully regulated process of naturalisation. Belonging to a national collective is not, however, only weighed in the face of formal citizenship and territorial boundaries, as Yuval-Davis (2011) has seminaly argued, but it is negotiated in interactions in which particular projects of belonging are advanced. Negotiations over burial places and practices can be understood as an important site of negotiating membership in the national community. The course of these negotiations, which at the interactional level may involve the families of the deceased, public authorities, confessional representatives and commercial funerary agents, does not



however entirely depend on face-to-face exchanges. Individual partisan's margins of manoeuvring as well as the concrete possibilities for respecting the wishes of the deceased and their family depend to a great extent on the national legal framework, which itself has diverging ways of understanding the national community and regulating membership in it.

*France: Confessional exceptions in the face of the trend of secularisation*

In terms of legal regulation of burials, the French case is characterised by its strong secularising trend. In the aftermath of the Great Revolution, the decree of Prairial year XII (May-June 1803) removed responsibility over funerals and burials from the Catholic Church to the State both literally and figuratively. Cemeteries were made the legal property of communes and distanced in space from church buildings. Beyond the question of the ownership and management of the land, the "neutralisation" of burial places also involved their opening up to all citizens, not only members of the Catholic church or other confessional factions. From then on, everyone, whatever their religion, their job, the conditions of their death, their "morality", could access the cemetery (Ligou 1975). The revolution's aim was indeed to make cemeteries public property and to construct an imagery of the national community as a universal one, as one made of equal citizens unseparated from each other by religious, ethnic or class boundaries.

However, older confessional burial grounds formed a pragmatic problem. In order to respect the territories where Protestant or Jewish individuals had been buried, article 15 of the text resorts to

promoting the creation of special sections, surrounded by walls, ditches or hedges, for different religions. This article was repealed by the law of November 1881, in the time of the third republic, which was stricter in the sense that it prohibited the creation or extension of religious burial sites. The 1905 law of separation of the State and churches, which sealed the secular character of the republic, affirmed the principle of the neutrality of the public parts of the cemeteries in opposition to the private parts, such as the graves themselves (Burdy 1995).

WWI, with the strong participation of soldiers and colonial workers, in particular Muslims, and the positioning of the army in the matter of burial of Muslim soldiers (Boniface 2017) reshuffled the cards of the movement of secularization of cemeteries that the Revolution had set in motion. From then on, the pace was set by colonial, international conflict and migration situations.

With the opening in 1925 of the Great Mosque of Paris and in 1935 of the Franco Muslim hospital in the commune of Bobigny, the question over the creation of a designated Muslim cemetery in the Paris area also emerged as a part of a dual issue of the colonial discourse on Muslim presence in France. On the one hand, in inaugurating these institutions, France was showing to the rest of the world that it yielded public recognition to the almost 400,000 Muslim soldiers and workers who supported the WWI effort. On the other hand, in the context of rising anti-colonialist discourses among the migrant workers, these institutions were intended to appease the relations with the French Empire's Muslim population.

In 1934, the decision was taken by the state and the local authorities of the Bobigny municipality, located in the North of Paris, to create a Muslim cemetery. This derogation to the 1881 law is pretexted by the dependence on the Franco Muslim hospital and the practical need of burial grounds for the deceased patients. In 1936, they were 85,000 Algerians alone in metropolitan France, mostly industrial workers, many of whom sought care at this hospital and were buried in its grounds.

The cemetery remains, to this day, the only Muslim cemetery in metropolitan France. While a large migrant population, with a substantial Muslim constituency, settled in the territory by the 1970's, the 1881 law was called into question in 1975 by the Home Office Minister Pasqua. From a legal perspective, there was no obstacle to the creation of Muslim sections within French public cemeteries. Legislation concerning the *carrés confessionnels* (confessional sections) was scarce and boiled down to three *Circulaires* (bulletins) from the Home Secretary: that of 28 November, 1975, 14 February, 1991 and more recently 19 February, 2008. These



Figure 4: Entrance gate of the Muslim cemetery in Bobigny (photo: Jean-Barthélemy Debost).

*Circulaires* encouraged local councils to create such spaces, yet they were not legally binding and decisions bearing on the creation of such sections were made at the local level (Afiouni 2014: 80).

Its formal constitution inscribed it well in the colonial dynamics. Combining multiple references identified or fantasised by the Orientalists of the previous century, this style can be found in the Great Mosque, on the site of the colonial exhibition of Paris of 1931 and in the Franco Muslim hospital also founded in the 1930's. In stylistic terms, the cemetery's entrance gate exemplifies the 1930's attempts to domesticate the Muslim religion by means of funeral architecture and arts. It is a monumental Moorish style porch that welcomes families of the deceased who arrive through the gate for rituals of burial or of commemoration. As such, it can also be interpreted as a sign of making the exotic familiar – under the control of French authorities who have strictly overseen the building process.

Beyond this built-up area, the burial space itself, the burial management and the religious aspect of the place become a private affair entrusted to a local imam paid by the hospital. For nearly three generations, the imams who managed the cemetery were in charge of the norms and traditions of burying Muslim individuals, most often migrant workers. The ordering of the graves (disrupting the military order established by the colonial rulers); the separate management of social affiliation, gender and age (disrupting Islamic funerary norms); the welcoming of a diversity of branches of Islam (Shiite, Sunnite etc.); the transformation of the initial prayer hall into a mosque; and the absence of proper funeral grants have all

testified to the surprisingly great liberty the Muslim community enjoyed in running the cemetery as well as the liberal nature of interpretation of Muslim funeral norms (El Alaoui 2012).



*Figure 5: Very modest, family-made grave in the Muslim cemetery of Bobigny. (photo Jean Barthélemy Debost)*



*Figure 6: Funeral Steles from the 1980s. The magnificence of the funerary architecture and the presence of photographs of the buried are contradictory to the Muslim norm (photo: Jean Barthélemy Debost)*

At the level of the tomb, a great diversity of funeral architecture styles reigns at the Bobigny cemetery. From the austerity to

the magnificence of granite, sculpture and gilding; from a Moorish style to a style typical of stonemasons in France; from the exclusive affirmation of Islam to a syncretism with photos of the deceased, toys, flowers and memorabilia. This too shows a creative and syncretic funeral practice; developing out of sight of the majority population with the cultural and religious elements proper to the different groups constituting the Muslim minority.

*Great Britain: Muslim burials in the context of mixed management of cemeteries*

Until the early part of the 19th century, burial facilities were provided by the Church of England in parish churchyards and by other religious bodies. In the mid-19th century in England, the Anglican Church handed over the management of cemeteries to public authorities. The Burial Boards henceforth funded, managed and created new City Council cemeteries. These latter are run nowadays by the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order (1977), which sets out the general powers and responsibilities of the Statutory Burial Authorities. They coexist with the Church of England churchyard governed by the Anglican Church Burial Grounds.

The Brookwood Cemetery, property of the London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company (LNC), opened in 1854, exemplifies these legal trends. It gradually acquired a multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. The cemetery includes the oldest Muslim burial ground in England. It was the first cemetery that inscribed the Muslim community in its plurality within the British public landscape. The “Muhammadans” spot and the Hindus spot were originally purchased

in 1889 by G. W. Leitner, head of the Oriental Institute. The Oriental Institute soon closed, but the plot remained for the exclusive use of “Muhammadans” since June 1914 (Clarke 2004: 236). The landscape of death in both the Woking and Brookwood cemeteries is shaped by the discourse of the living, as both cemeteries reflect the changing patterns of the politics of diversity but also a shift of paradigm of what is important in a given society at a given time. Drawing on Katherine Verdery, “I think of such spatio-temporal landmarks as aspects of people’s meaningful worlds”, they are testimonies of the shifting memories in relation to the discourse on identity (Verdery 1999: 39).



*Figure 7: The Muslim military ground at the Brookwood Cemetery (photo: Nada Afiouni)*

The Muslim plot is organised in sections according to the various Muslim faiths: Sunni, Ithna Ashari, Ismaili and Bohra Shias and Ahmadiyya. Furthermore, there is a variety of architectural styles within the Muslim section reflecting the diversity of national and social origins of the deceased. Today, Brookwood cemetery offers an ethnically and religiously pluralistic character, and to quote Ansari, the Brookwood environment “allowed for the collectivising and anchoring their



*Figure 8: Diversity of architectural styles in the Muslim section of Brookwood cemetery (photo Nada Afiouni)*

common Muslim identities in a variety of ways; through the performance of rituals after their death; through the choice of signs, symbols and markers; and through



*Figure 9: Diversity of architectural styles in the Muslim section of Brookwood cemetery (photo Nada Afiouni)*

the choice of language for the inscription of the symbols on the gravestone which separated them from non-Muslim buried beside them” (Ansari 2007: 562).

*Finland: Lutheran monopoly over cemetery management – with early legal exceptions*

Finland forms a unique case in terms of legal regulation of burials in the sense that unlike in France and in Britain, the management of cemeteries has not been yielded to public authorities. As early as in 1686, the burial act made burial in “holy” land, e.g. the church yard, obligatory and anointed the Lutheran church with this practical monopoly. A series of laws and acts passed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reinforced the stately regulation of burials, which in practice were managed by the Lutheran Church, which still, together with the Orthodox church, enjoys the status of “state church” in Finland. From that time, all burials had to take place in “holy” land or in designated areas, apart from those in special cases such as the burial of stillborn children, suicidees, criminals, mental patients or people that died of contagious diseases such as cholera, which wreaked havoc in Helsinki in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These acts also provided for heightened hygienic concerns in so far as they make mandatory the use of caskets as well as recommend burial outside of the city centre and on “dry” grounds that eliminate the risk of contamination of ground water in contact with dead bodies.

Finland also differs from Britain and France in terms of its tradition of management of burial grounds by confessional bodies. No private for-profit cemeteries exist up to today like in the British context. One does not find entirely publicly run



*Figure 10: The entrance gate of the Helsinki Islamic Cemetery (photo: Linda Haapajärvi)*

burial grounds in France either, where the religious authorities’ grip over the funeral market was curbed early on (Trompette 2008). In addition to Lutheran churchyards, Orthodox Christian cemeteries have been commonplace in all large Finnish cities as well as in the Eastern region of the country. In Helsinki, in the central neighbourhood of Hietaniemi, one also finds the country’s historical Jewish and Islamic cemeteries. The latter were developed in the 1800’s in the area of Lapinlahti for the burial of soldiers of the Russian army and those in forced labour who died while serving in the Grand Duchy of Finland. It was first run by the army in close operation with the military hospital that was located nearby. This site was where soldiers but also a motley crew of outcasts were buried: convicts, victims of cholera,

mental patients and suicidees. In practice, its operation had been handed over to the Helsinki Muslim community consisting of Tatars, a Turkic group that had formed in Finland under Russian rule and made up mostly of merchants trading in fur, textiles, carpets and exotic goods (see Leitzinger 2006). It took until the passing of the 1923 law on freedom of religion for the Tatar community to be registered as the Finnish Islamic Community and be granted the legal responsibility of running the cemetery. The Tatar community that had taken root in Finland during the Russian imperial era then amounted to circa 1000 individuals.

Today, the Tatars are considered an “old” minority, whose cultural, religious and linguistic particularities are thought to reflect the historical pluralism of the Finnish nation-state and a certain tradition of granting particular rights to minorities – the funeral heritage being intelligible against this particular logic of governing diversity.



Figure 11: Tombstones at the Helsinki Islamic Cemetery (photo: Linda Haapajarvi)

Burial at the Helsinki Islamic cemetery is limited to members of the Finnish Islamic Community, consisting exclusively of Tatars. It is currently the only Islamic cemetery in Finland, in the sense that it is administered by the Islamic Community of Finland entirely independently from the Lutheran church. The graves are free of charge to the members of the community. Approximately 550 individuals have been buried there, with a dozen burials per year. No urns have been deposited there, because the minority group remains loyal to the prohibition against cremation. The deceased are buried in simple caskets, burying in shrouds being prohibited by Finnish law for hygiene reasons. One grave is permanently kept open in order to respect the norm of hasty burial.

### Current trends in Muslim burial and governance of diversity

21<sup>st</sup> century France, Britain and Finland negotiate the administration of cemeteries with a view to a political commitment to the integration of Muslim families. Yet, as developed earlier, the issues involved in funerary politics link to broader political discourse on cultural pluralism, identity and diversity. The demands voiced regarding specific burial places act as markers of both individual and collective identity. They can be interpreted as a desire to access full citizenship while at the same time conserving a sense of community and the perpetuation of cultural and religious traditions.

#### *Britain: Garden of Peace: the twenty first century Muslim Cemetery*

Alongside confessional and public cemeteries, contemporary British law allows for the creation of private cemeteries. Both the

Church of England cemeteries and private cemetery companies are not subject to the local authority legislation. Furthermore, mixed management (private-public) of cemeteries is allowed, which makes it possible for local authorities to resort to private cemetery services to provide for the burial needs of their constituents. Thus, the British legal framework offers a large range of options concerning burial grounds, making it possible for ethnic minorities to create their own cemeteries.

In 2002, the first dedicated Muslim cemetery was established in Redbridge, northeast of London. It was initially designed for 10,000 burial places, yet the cemetery soon ran out of space, and it was extended in 2012 to fit 34,000 new burial spots. The cemetery exclusively serves the Muslim Sunni community, regardless of national or ethnic origin. It offers specific areas for miscarriages, stillbirth, children and adults. It also includes dedicated facilities for body washing, *Ghusul*, and a prayer hall. The graves consist of mounds of earth marked with marble slabs. The cemetery offers a stunningly homogeneous landscape, as specific tombstones are provided by the cemetery and flowers are not welcomed on the graves. The impression of uniformity and sameness is all the more reinforced by the absence of family plots. Bodies are laid in the ground on a first-come, first-buried basis. The landscape of the cemetery expresses both a strong feeling of belonging of a post-colonial population to a national community (the cemetery ground is in the outskirts of London) and an equally strong affiliation to Islam. These double bonds are crystallised in the expression “We British Muslims”, which came up regularly during interviews dismissing any

reference to possible countries of origin. Furthermore, all grave inscriptions are in the English language.



*Figure 12: The 21<sup>st</sup> Muslim Private Cemetery Garden of Peace (photo Nada Afjouni)*



*Figure 13: The 21<sup>st</sup> Muslim Private Cemetery Garden of Peace (photo Nada Afjouni)*

The cemetery’s landscape is in sharp contrast with that of Muslim graves in Brookwood Cemetery. None the less, both can be considered as the by-products of multicultural management of

ethnic and religious diversity. The first one celebrating diversity and inclusion, the second participating in the creation of a new distinct post mortem Muslim British identity based on the rebranding of ancient Sunni Muslim funerary traditions while displaying the primacy and prevalence of religious identity over ethnic and national origin or family identities. The message that can be read in the demand and creation of specific funerary practices and grounds is in fact a dual one; on the one hand, religious affiliation fosters a sense of ethnic community, and on the other, it is simultaneously a statement of a new national belonging.

*Finland: The “new” Muslim minorities and the politicisation of Islamic burial practices*

The question of Islamic burial norms emerged in Finland at the turn of the 2000's, following an increase in deaths in the young non-Tatar Muslim minority. After a few burials of “fellow Muslims” in the cemetery in the early 1990's, the Tatar community stopped accepting the burial of non-Tatars in at the cemetery out of concern over the space's limited capacity to accommodate the community's deceased in the future – and perhaps in order to demark itself as an established minority compared to the more recently arriving Muslim minority.

In the broader Finnish context, only since the 2007 act over non-confessional burial has it become possible for atheists or non-Christians to claim their right to be buried elsewhere than in the church yard *stricto sensu*. In practice, however, the majority of individuals aspiring for final deposit in non-confessional cemeteries still end up buried in the

non-confessional sections of Lutheran cemeteries managed by the church and set apart from the rest of the burial grounds merely by the absence of Christian insignia in the funeral monuments. Although all Lutheran church run cemeteries are now obliged by the law to designate within the cemetery a separate non-confessional section, these areas have often remained empty, since even non-devout Finns are rarely likely to be opposed to burial in the church yard. In the wake of the 2007 law, however, local sections of the Union of Free Thinkers – the largest national association of atheists – has funded a dozen non-confessional cemeteries. These cemeteries are entirely independent from the Lutheran Church, set on land acquired and also managed by the union.

There has been movement in Finland in the direction of founding a new Islamic cemetery. Drawing upon the laws of 1923 and 2007, Muslim associations have launched petitions for the founding of an Islamic cemetery with the help of public authorities that should in the spirit of these laws as well as of equality of Finnish citizens (2015) guarantee access of all individuals, citizens or residents, to dignified burial within Finland. Various Islamic associations have actively searched for a plot of land in the capital region for the foundation of a cemetery complete with a prayer room and facilities for the ritual wash. However, as The Finnish Islamic Funeral Association for instance reports, the search has been inconclusive, from its perspective largely because of landowners' aversion to the Muslim faith and burial practices. The Muslim minorities' internal divisions, whether based on denominational differences or different national cultural traditions,



have also played a part in slowing down this process.

As it stands, Muslims in Finland are typically buried at the Islamic sections of Lutheran cemeteries, sometimes in the non-confessional sections, and even more rarely at the Free Thinkers' non-confessional cemeteries. The ritual wash, *ghusul*, is always performed at the hospital and burying in shrouds only, *kafan*, is prohibited by burial law in the entire country. The Islamic section of Lutheran cemeteries is almost always organized so that the body may face Mecca and in large cities at least one grave is permanently open in order to guarantee a quick burial – the deceased typically spending several weeks at the morgue in Finland.



*Figure 14: Standard Lutheran funeral monument at the Lamminpää Lutheran cemetery in Tampere. (photo: Linda Haapajärvi)*



*Figure 15: A recent tomb of a Muslim individual buried at the Islamic section of the Lamminpää Lutheran cemetery in Tampere. (photo: Linda Haapajärvi)*

The current solution to Muslim burial can be thought to reflect a particular logic of governing diversity that is typical of Nordic countries, namely the logic of “institutional absorption of difference” (Borevi 2012). The Finnish variant of multiculturalism differs from the British version in that it is more timid in favouring legal exceptions granted to minorities, such as burying in shrouds only, and in setting up of minority confessional cemeteries. The Finnish case also differs from the French context’s strong secular and assimilationist impetus in that within a given public institution, here the cemetery, room is made for minorities’ customs. Muslims do not suffer from



Figure 16: A recent tomb of a Muslim individual buried at the Islamic section of the Lamminpää Lutheran cemetery in Tampere. (photo: Linda Haapajärvi)

the insufficiency of burial grounds, and the Lutheran church run sections try to accommodate for particular norms such as orientation towards Mecca, quick burial and diversity of funeral monuments. In other words, it seems as if the public authorities now attempt to make room for the Muslim minority in the national community of the dead, at least in the larger cities. However, they also define in the conditions of belonging in the national community of the dead and the living that the minorities should not trespass, unless they are ready to run the risk of appearing as a threat to the cohesion of the Finnish nation-state.

*France: Late secularisation of the Bobigny cemetery*

In 1996, an investigation conducted by the State Inspectorate General of Social Affairs found out that the common rules of a proper cemetery were not followed at the Bobigny burial ground. It was decided that the management of the burial part of the cemetery be transferred to the intercommunal syndicate of the Cities of Bobigny, Aubervilliers, La Courneuve and Drancy.

Very quickly, the local authority took the site in hand. The works undertaken showed new tension within the religious question in France. Repair of the networks; maintenance of the alley between the plots; creation of a new entrance “turning its back” on the monumental entrance (“the users should be able to come into a cemetery without passing by the architectural signs of Islam”); construction of a grid, with a portal between the burial part and the Moorish built part; construction of a new container-type manager’s office and of a parking lot that required the burial recovery of a certain number of graves; systematic implementation of the funeral grant; etc. It is a matter of implementing public professional know-how without real adaptation to the religious and cultural identity of the place. This transition strongly secularises the site.

This radical transformation is to be understood in two ways. First of all, since 1996, the four cities were run by Communist city councils, nicknamed the “red belt” of Paris. The policies implemented in these four cities, by the Communist political majority, displayed hostility to any kind of religious expression in the public sphere. Secondly, that event took place in a national context of a strong



*Figure 17: In the Muslim cemetery. In the background right, the new entrance welcome building. The military plot presents the official Muslim steles. (photo: Jean Barthélemy Debost)*

desire to advance immigrants' and their descendants' integration into French society, even when that meant largely assimilationist measures, such as the 2004 law that prohibited the wearing of external signs of religions in school.

The heritage question arose with the local authorities during the restoration of the military plot containing the graves of 80 Muslim colonial soldiers that died between 1944 and 1954. In 2005, it was shown to require important work. A decision was made to undertake a more expensive but respectful restoration of the original Moorish style. This was done officially to preserve the military square and not to legitimate in any way the testimony of a Muslim heritage. In 2006, the built complex and the military plot were protected as historic monuments "as an illustration of an important period in our country".

## Conclusion

This article set out to understand how national belonging is governed and negotiated in the face of death in Finland, France and Great Britain. Although these three countries differ from each other with regard to their Muslim minorities as well as in terms of their migration history, regarding the legal framework of burial regulation and their traditions of regulating cultural diversity, significant similarities were found in all of them: the burial of Muslim subjects has always presented a pragmatic puzzle to these variably secularised nation-states imprinted by a Christian cultural heritage. More than depositories of mere matter, cemeteries are places through which citizens reunite with their ancestors, build a common present and imagine shared futures – sometimes by means of excluding from these places individuals and groups perceived as outsiders to the national community.

This has gone unnoticed in citizenship and migration studies that have concentrated on studying the living. This article, however, shows that nation-states claim their subjects beyond the grave. By governing the living and the dead, modern states seek to know their citizens and to "conduct their conduct" and, in so doing, to guarantee the unicity and permanence of their population and territory (Foucault 2004). If states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century took an interest in guaranteeing a dignified death and burial to citizens of all social classes and thus actively participated in building a national "community of the living and the dead" (Esquerre 2011), today such debates pertain instead to religious and cultural differences.

With respect to the study of contemporary politics of belonging, this article draws

three main lessons from the particular case of Muslim burial grounds and practices. It is not intended as an expansive analysis of the issue but should best be read as an invitation to migration and citizenship scholars to dig deeper into the intertwined questions of death, burial and politics of belonging.

The comparison of early Muslim burial grounds in each country firstly underlines significant similarities across the three countries. In all of them, military conflicts constitute a milestone in the history of death management, and this also applies to Muslim burials. Throughout WWI in particular, European countries were confronted with large-scale management of the dignified burial and commemoration of citizens as well as of colonial minority subjects who died for these sovereign states on the battlefields. The solutions found in the 19th century and in the aftermath of WWI provide a pragmatic, even ad-hoc, logic of managing Muslim burials, i.e. the participation in war efforts of these minority subjects was commonly regarded as worthy of public recognition or at least of burial conforming to a minimal set of Islamic norms. In a certain sense, more so than when alive, minority subjects redeemed their membership in these nation-states at the moment of their death.

The comparison of the legal framework regulating burials and thus directly influencing the possibility for respecting the three outlined norms of Muslim burial begins to highlight differences among the country cases. Individual partisan's margins of manoeuvring as well as the concrete possibilities for respecting the wishes of the deceased and their family depend to a great extent on the national legal framework, which itself has diverging

ways of understanding the national community and regulating membership in it.

Finally, the article outlines current trends in Muslim burials in the three different countries. This last section, together with the first one, underlines the dynamic nature of politics of belonging as it shows how, despite fairly similar initial responses to the practical dilemma of burying Muslims, the three countries have largely diverged in modern times. The comparison casts light on the fact that death and burial have been and always remain contentious, political issues, a battleground of negotiations over belonging.

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