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France

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Dying a Senegalese Muslim in Migration

The occurrence of death in an immigrant situation is a little-explored albeit essential subject considering, for example, the presence in France of a substantial immigrant population, now largely settled, of people working and living – but also dying – in France. To study funerary practices in such circumstances is to consider the entirety of social behaviours that are caused by a migrant's death in migration. The question of death is approached here from a dual perspective: that of the choice of place for the grave (France or in the country of origin), and that of the funerary practices (what migrants actually do when a death occurs in France). It is situated at a crossing of two issues, that of the migration process and that of death, its representations, and related practices.

years), submitted to constraining legislation, and is not always possible in the Muslim sections. This precariousness of the grave is a major obstacle and constitutes a fundamental divergence from the practices carried out in the regions of origin.

The death of an emigrant is experienced as a dramatic rupture by the family in the country of origin because it symbolizes the

the costly operation (more than 4000 Euro) of posthumous repatriation and which functions as a repatriation insurance. But the developments are also due to a return to 'the religious' in the early 1980s, coupled with the change in inscription of migrants in French space that followed the modification of policies and migratory discourses. Finally, there was the familiarization of certain migrants with the functioning of procedures in the host country.

The migrants from the Senegal River region refer to their religious adherence and to their return to the native land to justify their preference for post-mortem repatriation. The choice in favour of this reveals reservations about French burial methods, which are considered as an infringement of the Islamic prescriptions, and thus of their Muslim identity, but also an imagining that associates death in migration with negative representations and especially with a failure of the migratory project – centred on the return to the village – and a negation of one's origins.

In fact, there exist different levels of justification and a plurality of causes that are articulated in a complex fashion and explain the divergences in position both between the groups of migrants and among these groups. Religious adherence, financial capacity, the ties with the country of origin, and the individual, familial, and migratory situation are all motives that influence the choice of burial place in migration. Thus, a growing number of Maghrebi immigrants today wish to be buried in France, close to their children, and they demand the creation of burial places in which the Islamic principles can be respected. It is rare for natives of the Senegal River region to follow this path. But it can be expected that changes will occur with respect to this position in the years to come.

Transnationalization of the rituals

The migratory context and the repatriation of corpses are both constraints that affect the ritual practices of migrants living in France. They hinder any identical reproduction of rituals carried out in the regions of origin and profoundly disturb the sequential unfolding of funerals. These rituals are played out on a particular register that confronts several models, several cultures, several 'space-times' (here and there, before and after the transfer), and several groups. They imply the defining of new practices, new symbols adapted to a new situation: life in France.

The original practices are never totally abandoned. The inspiration of funerary rites of Malekite Muslims remain and the practice of the ritual gifts (in money) continues to be a central element in the ceremonial activity. However, the funerals are in part recomposed, or reconstructed. For example, the rite is sectioned: in France, the ritual is limited to prayer and the cleansing and preparing of the body, followed by the repatriation of the corpse; the second part of the rite, the burial and commemorative ceremonies, takes place in the village or region of origin. In this context, the person accompanying the coffin becomes central. Spokesman for the immigrant community, this close family member takes the opposite journey of the one he is accompanying, carries money col-

lected during the offering of condolences, and oversees the proper carrying out of the rituals. When he returns, he recounts the ceremonies undertaken by the village community. He is the 'relay-person' between the actors here and there, serving as a bridge between the different space-times of the funeral.

The funerary devices in migration bring together an imperative of continuity and affiliation to the revisions and reconstructions that can be interpreted simultaneously as alterations of the rite (less funerary sociability due to lack of place or to the rules and norms of the host society), resistance to the professionalization of death (preparation of the corpse), the re-arrangement of roles (the most elderly are called upon, eventually outside of the family group), and even innovations (generalized practice of 'delegations', new role of women and non-customary social and friendship networks, and the splitting up of ritual sequences).

Finally, it is appropriate to re-examine the tie often established between funerary practices and integration of immigrants in France.² By analysing the practices through the prism of integration, the approach is centred on a dichotomized opposition between here and there, between identity and alterity. However, it seems necessary to envisage the issue of the migratory process in other terms. By posthumous repatriation the funerary practices in migration largely exceed this opposition. They are situated both here and there, between here and there, and invest the entire migratory field. It is not a question of alternative and rupture but rather of contact, continuity, and complementarity. Funerary practices of migrants are situated in an 'in-between', which characterizes these migrations. They witness the establishing of a system of material and symbolic exchanges between the migrants and their village and family of origin.

The funerary practices celebrate a transnational culture and integrate themselves in a culture of mobility and 'in-between-ness', which very well expresses continuity in the rupture. The issue of dying far away is thus an excellent means to analysing in a dynamic way the migratory process, its challenges, and the construction of cultural and ritual practices in migration.

Notes

1. The majority of them arrived in France between the 1950s and the early 1970s.
2. See the work of Y. Chaïb (1992, 2000) and M. Tribalat (1995).

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PHOTO: AGATHE PETIT, 2000

Muslim section of the St. Pierre cemetery, Marseille.

Currently the mortality rate among the population of immigrants in France from the Senegal River region is still low due to the relatively recent character of this migratory wave,¹ its demographic structure, and the re-emigration of certain migrants. Nonetheless, the question of death in France is present in the minds of the migrants.

The migrants feel a real fear with respect to the idea of passing away in France, far from their own people, in a place where the beliefs and practices related to death are profoundly different. Death in migration is particularly troublesome for those who maintain the idea of returning to their countries of origin. There is a sentiment of shame and guilt at the idea of dying in a situation that does not conform to the initial migratory plan or to orthodoxy.

To be buried in a far away land is to risk being forgotten, not being eternalized. Death in France is thus also synonymous with social death for the deceased, who is not assured of the perpetuation of his memory amongst the community of the living.

For Muslims, the will to pass away among one's own people, in one's land of origin, land of Islam, is coupled by the awareness of not being able to respect Islamic prescriptions in the case of being buried in France. In effect, the creation of burial places reserved for Muslims is contradictory to the principles of laicity and neutrality of cemeteries, stipulated in the code of districts. Two circulars (1975 and 1991) offer, however, to the mayors and cemetery administrators the possibility of providing for specific confessional spaces. Nonetheless, the legal burial conditions do not respect the entirety of prescriptions, such as being buried directly in the ground in a shroud. In addition, long-term burial in France is a paid act (burial plots being leased for a fixed number of

loss of often substantial revenue, threatens the familial equilibrium, and necessitates a social and economic reorganization, especially in the Senegal River region where immigration is aimed at reproducing the family unit.

Migrating to France, where the places of death, the rites, and emotional, symbolic, material, and financial management take on new forms, severely brings into question the serenity with which Muslims relate to death. For Muslim migrants, dying in France represents a transgression. These negative representations have a direct impact on determining the place of burial.

Choosing a place of burial

When a migrant dies in France, there are two principle possibilities for the place of burial: in France, according to the current legislation, or in the country of origin, after the body is repatriated. Surveys carried out have clearly revealed the preference of migrants from the Senegal River region for posthumous repatriation. Apart from exceptions, those who die in France are buried in the country of origin. However, this practice is relatively recent, the first repatriation of this sort dating to 1984. Before then, the deceased were buried in France. In some twenty years, the practices and representations have thus considerably evolved.

These developments are the result of the conjunction of several factors: on the one hand, the awareness of the burial methods, of the precariousness of burial in France, and of the procedure of rotation of tombs in the Muslim spaces, which is expressed through a 'conspiracy myth' that was rapidly propagated throughout the group; and on the other hand, the establishment of a 'fund for the dead', an association of people from the Senegal River region who finance