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Cemeteries

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Muslim Graves in Sweden and the United Kingdom

It is estimated that the UK is home to more than one million Muslims from diverse geographical backgrounds, but of which the cultures of the Indian sub-continent are predominant.¹ Sweden, on the other hand, is home to an estimated 250,000 Muslims, the largest groups of which are Bosnian, Turkish and Iranian.² These observations take on greater importance when seen within the framework of the fundamental Islamic concept of the *umma*, the united worldwide Muslim community, which perhaps supersedes any notion of nationality or ethnic identity.³ It is clear, however, that despite the apparently overwhelming common attachment to the concept of *umma*, Islam remains fragmented along both theological and cultural lines, affecting many aspects of life – and even some aspects of death.⁴

One thing that virtually all practising Muslims in Europe fear is that they might become absorbed into a secular culture. However, when living in diaspora, religious rites often become all the more important. Rites, including death-related ones, serve a variety of functions. For example, they inform children of the collective customs from their religious and cultural background, rather than the sentiments of the host society. Durkheim posits that when an individual dies, the whole of his or her group is affected and that death upsets the social equilibrium, threatening the strength of communal identity.⁵ Hence, rites ensure the perpetuation of Islamic identity outside of the homeland. Subsequently, the need to restore equilibrium and reinforce communal identity arises. More often than not, grave markers are found at the place that marks the burial of the community's deceased and can be seen as emblematic symbols which are imbued with the collective sentiments of the community. They are reflective reminders of the reality of the community, *ergo*, encouraging the make-up and continuity of group consciousness. Furthermore, grave markers, as well as recording the history of the community, demarcate an area of sacred space – a piece of Muslim earth in an often profane and alien land.

The following aims to draw attention to some of these variations and to offer some preliminary explanations for them, although this material will eventually be located within a wider discussion on graves as statements of both individual and collective identity. To illustrate these variations some comparisons are drawn amongst three cemeteries in the UK, which predominantly come under local authority control and one in Sweden, where cemeteries are, for the most part, both public and owned and operated by the Church of Sweden.

Saffron Hill: Leicester (UK)

This cemetery is located on the south side of Leicester and contains the city's only Muslim burial site. It also boasts a purpose-built *janazgah* (funeral mosque). The city's Muslim community is predominantly Sunni, originating from the Bulsar district of Gujarat, India (approximately 16,000 people). There is also a significant Sunni Pakistani community (approx 4,000) and a Bangladeshi community (approx 2,000). The earliest burials appear to have taken place in the 1970s. The burial area is characterized by small white headstones, a close-up example of which can be found in photo 1. The inscriptions on these stones are limited to Qur'anic text, often the first surah, and the name of the deceased alongside the dates of birth and death.

Leicester's Gujarati Muslims mostly follow the Hanafi school of thought, and adhere to a Deobandi interpretation of this school of *fiqh*.⁶ The researchers were told by a member of the community that this style of grave marker was common to Muslims of the Gujarat and reflected the 'puritanical' ethos of Deobandi thinking; hence the grave and its marker are simple and unadorned, bearing only minimal information on the life of the deceased.

Stapenhill Burton Upon Trent and East Dundee (UK)

There are approximately 2,500 Muslims in Burton Upon Trent, mainly of Pakistani origin. Unlike the Gujaratis of Leicester, their understanding of Islam is rooted in the folk traditions of the Barelvi movement⁷ although they are also Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. Unlike the Deobandis, the Barelvis see the Prophet Mohammad as more than a man, a part of the divine light of Allah. This doctrine gives rise to a form of Islam that provides a space for holy men and esoteric practices and graves appear to be often more ornate than those found within Deobandi communities, at least within the context of the UK.

Dundee also has a Pakistani Barelvi community of around the same size, and as photos 2 and 3 show, the grave markers are very similar in the two cemeteries, both differing from those of the Deobandis found in Saffron Hill. Within the Muslim area of Dundee East cemetery, decoration and flowers are common, as are British style gravestones.

It has also been noted that grave markers are more likely to denote the social or socio-economic status of the deceased within the Pakistani community, and close scrutiny of photo 3 reveals a grave marker that is considerably taller than those surrounding it. The grave in this case belongs to a deceased Pakistani millionaire.

Malmö (Southern Sweden)

Sweden's Muslim community has its roots in the country's recruitment of labour during the early 1960s and 1970s, and also in the role Sweden has played in receiving refugees.⁸ This has resulted in the country's Muslim community being very diverse, consisting of people from Arab, Iranian, Turkish, Asian, and Bosnian origins. A survey of Malmö's Muslim burial sites shows patterns of grave markers that clearly reflect the ethnic identity of its deceased, most notably for the Bosnians.

Photo 4 shows graves of a very different design from those previously considered, most mirroring local Swedish designs. Many carry the emblem of Bosnia or Turkey, and some follow a European tradition of including a picture of the deceased. Another characteristic noted on Muslim graves in Sweden is the presence of a foot marker as well as one at the head of the grave. In addition, there is no evidence of Arabic or Urdu script. Thus, what is portrayed is a Muslim identity rooted in European culture. One phenomenon witnessed in Malmö and worthy of mention is that of Muslims participating in the Swedish 'All Saints Day' ritual of decorating the grave with flowers and lights (see photo 5).

It is apparent that Muslim grave designs vary considerably. Some reflect that which constitutes an appropriate grave marker in the cultures of origin. For example, the Gujarati graves in Leicester follow traditional Gujarati designs, while others such as those in Dundee and Sweden appear to reflect designs current in the host communities. It can be argued from evidence so far collected that, while in both the UK and Sweden grave markers contain statements regarding reli-

gious/cultural identity, in the UK such statements are likely to include Arabic script and verses of the Qu'ran, while in Sweden national symbols and crests are employed. Moreover, by their participation in 'All Saints Day' rituals, it may be argued that Muslims in Sweden are also seeking ways to make statements regarding their sense of being Swedish as well as being a Bosnian or Turkish Muslim, and are hence participating in what might be termed 'Civil Religion'.⁹

Furthermore, while Muslim burial areas may be seen as fulfilling the functions outlined by Durkheim (see above), it can be noted that distinct variations in the nature of grave markers do exist, as revealed when comparing Muslim grave markers even within the UK. The variety extends from those that are clearly designed out of religious motivation, to those that vary little from Western secular graves. ◆

1.
Close-up
of headstone
Saffron-Hill



PHOTO: AHMED ANDREWS

2.
Stapenhill



PHOTO: MICHELE WOLFE

3.
Malmö Cemetery



PHOTO: AHMED ANDREWS

4.
Dundee East



PHOTO: MICHELE WOLFE

5.
A Muslim Grave
on All Saints
Night (Malmö)



PHOTO: AHMED ANDREWS

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Notes

1. See, for example, Nielsen, Jorgen (1994), *Islam and Europe*, Selly Oak: CSIC Papers.
2. Estimate given to the authors by Jonas Otterbeck, University of Lund, Sweden.
3. Hewer, Christopher (1994), *Recent Developments Amongst Muslims in Britain*, Selly Oak: Birmingham, p. 9.
4. Jonker, G. (1997), 'The many faces of Islam: Death, Dying and Disposal between Orthodox Rule and Historical Convention', in: Parkes, C. (et al), *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*, London: Routledge, pp. 147-65.
5. Durkheim, Emile (1976), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2nd edition, London: George Allen and Unwin, p. 399.
6. The term Deobandi denotes adherence to the teaching of the Deoband school in India.
7. Named after Ahmad Raza Khan of Bareilly, who defended traditional Islam against the Deoband.
8. See, for example, Freyne-Lindhagen, in: R. Barot: *Religion and Ethnicity*, Kok Pharos: Kampen Netherlands
9. See for example Bellah, N. (1970), *Beyond Belief*, New York: Harper and Row.