

TERRESTRIAL SPACES AND CELESTIAL SYMBOLISM IN CEMETERIES: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF SPACES OF THE DECEASED

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ABSTRACT

The open terrestrial swathes are by far the most collaborative of spaces shared by human beings as they partake of the spatial and temporal experience. Their experiential reality is shaped by the sensory experience rooted in the physical plane of existence, palpably elusive of the metaphysical. Cemeteries however hold a unique terrestrial position as not simply seeking out open spaces on earth, but also symbolize the metaphysical experience; transcending the earthly in death. This unique ambivalence of the earthly and the celestial entrenched in the cemeteries is going to be a major concern of this research article. The article seeks to deconstruct how cemeteries which command sanctity can be powerful celestial signs in contradiction to ordinary cemeteries which however are bracketed with a relatively less celebrated and overtly mundane experience of death and Thanatos. The article will dwell into the role of select cemeteries as metaphors of power emanating from the treatment meted out to the cemeteries. The centre-periphery, life-death and celestial-terrestrial binaries will be explored through the epithets conferred upon rites of death, cemeteries and phenomena of afterlife in different cultures.

Keywords: Celestial, Terrestrial, Ambivalence, Juxtaposition, Binaries, Thanatos.

INTRODUCTION

Death does not transpire in a social vacuum. The experiential reality of death is shaped by divergent social contexts (Hockey, 1990). Religious experience preserved in rituals of death and funeral mores showcase a host of societal particularisms and cultural practices institutionalized through religion and ritual. It is interesting to note how society's management of these spaces becomes evocative of power dispensation, offering anthropologists, historians and archeologists, means to deconstruct patterns of management, adaptation and transformation of these spaces, affecting the collective unconscious of humanity. Cemetery choices are preceded by distinct burial rites, practiced and cultivated according to individual and societal mores (Noys, 2005). There is a relational link to the place where death takes place and the cemetery where the burial is held (Broom and Kirby, 2013), ushering into a negotiation between different social tiers.

Cemeteries offer spaces to the dead and living alike; allowing both to partake of this space vis-à-vis their relative positioning. Quietly cloistered and emanating a peculiar detachment from the humdrum, banal world of the living, graveyards stand out as places of reflection for the living and as eternal resting places for the deceased before they are finally roused on the Day of Judgement. Surah Yaseen, verses 51 and 52 clarify this point:

○ وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَإِذَا هُم مِّنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَنسِلُونَ

And the Horn will be blown; and at once from the graves to their Lord they will hasten

○ قَالُوا يَا وَيْلَنَا مَن بَعَثَنَا مِن مَّرْقَدِنَا ۚ هَذَا مَا وَعَدَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَصَدَقَ الْمُرْسَلُونَ

They will say, "O woe to us! Who has raised us up from our sleeping place?" [The reply will be], "This is what the Most Merciful had promised, and the Messengers told the truth."

Thus, a stark reminder of lives now reconfigured in lifeless numerical of birth and death dates, dispassionate names and surnames engraved over plaques and epitaphs, the existential conundrum is best displayed in the solitude of cemeteries; removed from the mainstream even if these are territorially located in an urban centre.

The recurrent demographic shift witnessed in the mass exodus of population from rural areas to urban centres has led to an increase in the density of cities, and therefore, large swathes of spaces are designated to cemeteries. It is interesting to note that the human beings demarcate spaces as burial

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places for the dead but reinvent multidimensional ways to relate with these spaces. In principle these religiously sanctioned spaces stand out as memorials; monuments and epitaphs which recede into non-entities slower than the physical bodies of the dead ones and offer a lasting relationship between the living and the dead. Connoting multiple meanings, graves and cemeteries have religious, societal, cultural, historical and more precisely, a personal significance. The relationship is queer as the living strive to acknowledge the ephemeral nature of life, mortality and matter against the backdrop of concrete epitaphs, gravestones and monuments built on graves which outlive long spans of time.

Cemeteries offer a common median to the living and dead to connect the terrestrial and the celestial, ushering into a liminal transition from life to death, from this world to the hereafter, where the living poised on the margins of afterlife participate in post-life interface, inevitably awaiting the living. Thus, cemeteries bring a predominant empathy and identification with the bygone times and souls, thereby providing a space for catharsis as well as rumination for revisiting the journey of life on the part of the regular pilgrims who frequent these spaces (Nordh, 2018).

In the developed countries, the dense cities have opened new vistas of thought as to how to render these common typologies of green spaces in the shape of cemeteries to neutralize climate change. As potential deliverers of ecosystem strategies to regulate environment, the queer balance between urban planning and the socio-religious and politico-historical signification of cemeteries is not concurrent with how west articulates and accentuates the role of cemeteries as a potential repository of green infrastructure. With the rapid deterioration of quality of environment, the role of cemeteries has increased as a celebrated 'public garden', with an emphasis on increasing elemental imagery in the shape of flora and fauna (Maddrell, 2021).

In the Islamic context the appellation in currency for sacred cemeteries is 'Rauza' or 'Jannah' (*Jannat al Mualla and Jannat al Baqi, for instance*), both signifying garden and verdant space. Thus, the western preoccupation to utilize cemeteries as drivers of ecosystem services is philosophically embedded in the Islamic thought where visiting graves has been observed as a source of connection with the Origins or the Hereafter; sanctified as a marker of respect to the deceased. Thus, we arrive at a major difference in terms of the vantage point from where cemeteries have been planned and maintained. Cemeteries can thus be divided into following broad categories in terms of significance; the historical, the historical-sacred and the communal.

Islamic societies confer respect to cemeteries. Islam as a religion of peace and salvation, upholds hereafter as a temporal epoch, situated in eternity, where death becomes a corridor from worldly life to the hereafter, lending meaning and purpose to the worldly life. Thus, Islamically graves mark an embodiment of the afterlife, while occupying space on the terrestrial terrain. The Muslim populace confers varying degrees of respect to the graves of Infallible beings, martyrs and saints. Likewise historical personages and literary icons are also celebrated in death. Yet most importantly in Islam, the dynamics governing management and maintenance of cemeteries are drawn from Sharia and religious tenets to justify the doctrinal and legal application. Quran, however envisions death and resurrection as an intersection figuring on the locale of cemeteries.

Jannat Al Mualla one of the most revered cemeteries of Islam, predates Islam, while *Jannat Al Baqi* in Medina was founded by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him). *Jannah* connotes 'garden' as well as 'heavens' whereas *Baqi* signifies eternity. *Mualla*, likewise signifies 'lofty' and 'elevated'. In Islamic world the 'Raudhaz' (implying 'gardens') of the Infallible occupy a lofty position not only among Muslims, but also among humanity at large as these draw large number of pilgrims from different parts of the world irrespective of the caste, colour and creed. The Holy Prophet's (Peace be upon Him) grave is considered most sacred and thus, the first and the second caliphs respectively chose to be buried close to Him.

The rights of the dead and the laws governing the protection of cemeteries are intimately linked to the dispensation of power and border on controlling spaces of the deceased. This lays down the peculiarities that death and the stature of the deceased bring forth to challenge the status quo of power. It has been argued that not only state machinery, but at times, societies at large and families in a microcosm, partake of their relative share in the fate of the dead bodies (Balkan, 2016). The corpse becomes a reminder of the uneasy contestation for power, inclusion and identity, at times precipitating into posthumous repatriation and shedding light on the ongoing marginalization that the deceased might have suffered. On some occasions the burial sites are faced with blatant sacrilege, an act pivotal to localizing the identity predicament. The last rites culminating into burial unlock a contentious process

with different strands of society vying for socio-political assertion. The parallels between the territorial and the celestial unwind in the nexus between authority, territory and populace at a transnational level.

The demolition of sacred sites especially cemeteries has been likened to bulldozing layers of history for a mere ‘parking lot’ (Aslam Abdullah, 2005). According to statistical analysis, over the past half a century, approximately 300 historical sites have been razed under the pretext of discouraging ‘polytheism’, while many believe that it is only a ruse conveniently employed by real estate mafia to expand their mercenary ends. The ulterior alliance between the ruling and religious elite, mainly comprising the orthodox school of thought has precipitated into an unbridled mushrooming of corporate culture and commercialization strategies, aimed at ruining sacred sites for making ways for money-minting business. It is ironic that desecration of holy sites is not censured by the religious elite and seemingly the ruling elite does not lock horns with the religious hierarchy. On the other hand, the religious elite joins hands with the ruling elite at the helm of affairs and sanction demolition of sites of religious and historical significance; thereby entrenching a safe haven for the nexus of the ruling class and corporate giants.

Comparing the western model and the Islamic model of cemeteries, we deduce that these factors modulate subsequent planning and maintenance of cemeteries. There are multiple reasons informing visits to cemeteries. Keeping into consideration the case of Berlin Cemetery, Germany, the factors behind cemetery visits were carefully studied. A large number of sample population visited cemeteries for reasons to cherish ‘nature’, seclusion, leisure and natural ecosystem. Thus, according to T. M Straka, they displayed pronounced preferences for elements of nature such as wildlife and meadows (Straka, 2022). This was contrasted against the second largest category of sample population visiting cemeteries to express mourning for the deceased and showed a greater penchant for arcs, chapels and monuments rather than for natural elements. The third category comprised people who visited cemeteries for historical reasons. They displayed an ambivalent interest; a high preference for structural features such as arcs, domes and the like, and less pronounced preference for elemental imagery. More so, the preference of women tilted in the direction of nature while men were driven by architectural features. Another category was that of men and women who visited cemeteries for religious reasons. This group displayed a predictive ability to appreciate structural elements as compared to the natural ones (Straka, 2022).

Thus, we infer that cemeteries can be managed through orientation of funeral norms and a clear grounding in climate change, ecosystem and spiritual values since cemeteries are not simply an open, urban green infrastructure. That is why, studies demonstrate that the interplay of natural elements with the cemetery features proved to be an important stimulus behind cemetery visits. That is why most of the participants were predominantly moved by the fulfilling experience associated with natural wilderness in cemeteries as compared to spic and span green lawns.

The reasons behind visitors’ trips to cemeteries stand out in sharp contradistinction to visiting other open, green spaces such as parks. Strolls at leisure and dog walking were also less recurrent features in visits to cemeteries, partly influenced by social desirability bias where interfering with conventionally rooted manners is not seen as desirable. Hence keeping in view the preference pattern of participants visiting cemeteries, it is important that the link between rehabilitation of biodiversity and psychical and spiritual elements is maintained by regulating different sections of the cemetery to cater to different stimuli and propagate cemeteries as shared habitats for the natural and human lives. From the Islamic perspective, the religious approach is pivotal to burial rites. Despite debates extending around visiting cemeteries, it is a staple element of the grieving process. An ethnographic inquiry into the visits to cemeteries affirms reasons of veneration for the deceased together with denial of worldly affiliation and as a reminder of the hereafter.

The sacred mausoleums in Iraq and Iran for example are known as *Atabat*, or sacred abodes associated with the descendants of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon Him). Likewise, *Wadi as Salam* in Najaf also commands religious and historical significance. The collective memories being shaped by commemoration of funereal rites vis a vis these sacred cemeteries also brings out the subtle differences in terms of different schools of thought. The distinct variance in terms of symbolism attached to holy shrines to the modest places of burial showcase that Islamic cemeteries emanate a deep-seated religious streak as compared with the pronounced ecological perspective governing the maintenance practices in the west.

A multidisciplinary approach to deconstructing death and funeral rites in a Muslim society brings out an interesting array of the deceased to be classified according to their position in society-building such as *Imam*, saints, *Shuhadaa* (martyrs), heroes, tribal elders and ordinary deceased. The contemporary, ecological currents intermingle with tenets of Islamic jurisprudence and yoke together the terrestrial and the celestial on a common median, both however considered under the divine writ.

The Quran situates burial in the context of resurrection (22: 6-7). The codification of burial rites and the rites of visitation of mausoleums have been contested among theologians, scholars and jurists. While some sections display a strongly entrenched, doctrinal position rooted in orthodoxy, censoring construction of mausoleums and concrete manifestation of funerary symbolism. Grave is considered a religious particularism symbolising isthmus or *Barzakh*, the liminal space between the living and the dead. In the western model, the accent fell upon turning cemeteries into collaborative green habitats for the visitors, instrumental in conserving ecological system. Syncretic views exist on the sanctity and salvation of burial spaces affianced to the disparate notions of memory and identity in the Islamic perspective. Precisely memory as a motif entailed in graves and cemeteries are a tense phenomenon revealing historical, socio-political, funeral, memorial and religious undercurrents integrated on the plane of burial rites. This can be further studied in detail by decoding the distinct practices prevalent among expatriate Muslim communities who in a bid to re-territorialize death, are faced with multiple challenges to adhere to the religio-cultural funeral practices. The spatial and territorial management, rites and rituals adapting to multicultural contexts show that burial practices and choice of cemeteries is backed by economic motives rather than strict observance of codified laws on the part of immigrant communities. The conflict between state laws and Islamic rituals at times results in the repatriation of bodies, further facilitated by availability of burial funds allocated with regards to such untoward circumstances (Balkan, 2015). In an attempt to achieve cultural fusion, many Muslim migrants opt for on-site burial, battling challenges of economic and social integration. Issues of citizenship, national character, identity and social values pose challenges in an otherwise non-religious and secular Europe. The phenomena of dying, burial rites and cemeteries are deeply fragmented by the capitalist market trends. On a careful investigation into last rites, one comes across gaping disparities among differently 'priced' cemetery charges according to location.

The Islamic deathscapes unravel symbols and meaning spread around public display of Islamic practices especially regarding the phenomenon of Muslim migrant communities dying abroad. Deathscape is usually attributed to the positive affirmations of familial ties, home and homeland, thus, making burial choice abroad a decision that hinges on the unchartered boundaries of nationhood, politics, social mores; unlocking meaning and motives behind burial choices (Yuval, 2011). The grave itself is an intense semiotic symbol steeped in the institutionalized burial practices as well as personalized display of grief and affiliation on the part of the family and friends of the bereaved. It is interesting to note that the graves of Muslim migrants abroad signify a spatial liminality, signifying the death of the deceased but a reclaimed identity of the descendants, making meaning of their presence in a foreign land (Balkan, 2018).

Monica Black sheds light on the role of political intervention in purging cemeteries of foreign symbols and racial representations in the likeness of the stride of Aryanization. Black demonstrates how certain communities were abandoned the right to bury their dead in local cemeteries (Black, 2013). Thus, Muslims' call for greater space for cemetery in Germany is a reinforcement of diaspora identity (Gruber, 2016). The Muslim burial sites in Germany are imbued with a sense of struggle between belongingness, identity and communal memory, re-imagined in a multicultural context. Such calls are also evident in other European states, and become markers of both individual and communal identity in the face of otherwise elusive 'migrant' identity conferred upon individuals in a broader multicultural context. The cemeteries symbolize not merely Thanatos, where dying in a home country is the final attempt to fully access citizenship, thereby maintaining individual identity of faith and a perpetuation of religious values.

The epitaphs which communicate Islamic prayers such as request for '*Fatiha*' not only communicate with the Islamic referents invoking prayer for an explicit immigrant ancestry. Here death is pitted against birth, especially concretizing the symbolism of birth in another country, contrasted against death in foreign lands. There is a sharp contrast in symbols erected over the tombstones in foreign countries than those common in Muslim majority countries. There is an interesting interface among nationalist signs, spiritual motifs and personal representations on the epitaphs in Germany. Such

subjectivities are further established when inscriptions occur in their native languages, widening the gap vis a vis the receivers from communities other than Muslims. The graves with overtly Islamic symbols such as mosques, with minarets are uncommon among cemeteries in Islamic countries (Strack, 2023).

The symbols of mosque, minarets and rosary offer insight into the proliferation of Islamic deathscapes within the larger, contemporary landscape of multicultural Germany where such semiotic articulations are no more extraneous or alien, but bring out the simultaneous ambivalence around the rapidly expanding contours of contemporary Germany. Possibility exists that these signs and symbols seamlessly blend into the urban cityscape and become unremarkable like other symbols such as crosses and gothic architecture of the church towers.

Muslim cemeteries are thus sites of negotiation between home countries and immigrant identity, contesting politics of belonging even in the even of death and burial rites (Aries, 1975 and Harrison, 2004). The questions related to the place of burial in home countries is never a question of freedom of choice in a diasporic setting. The friction between self and other, where the migrant Muslim community is invariably attributed as the exotic Other, the burial rites at times are at times essentialized as opposed to being modern or even egalitarian (Laqueur, 2015). The vantage point of an enlightened self-image, personifying Europeans as emanating values of human freedom puts the ‘other’ people in a position of compromise (Said, 2003). Thus, in European countries, Christian legacy casts a lasting impact on almost all facets of cultural and legal norms, and more so on death rites. Even the overarching term ‘Muslim minority’ in these countries tends to neglect the essential heterogeneity that comes with the diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds contained in a minority. Ethno-linguistic and religious pluralism have become hallmarks of Western societies. Muslims despite their ethnic, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity share core values in terms of belief system. At times the concern to adhere to a set of core values in terms of funereal practices is pitted against the variance rooted in the disparate cultural backgrounds and brings out multiplicity of practices central to the construction of graves, preceded by burial rites.

Cemeteries demonstrate exercises in ‘sequestration’, predating the immediate experiences meted out to the dead right before death. For example, dying of the old and senile; or death of persons from amongst the marginalized segments of the society elicit disparate responses from care-givers and those responsible for making decisions regarding burial choices as Lawton points out (Lawton, 1998). The interplay between spaces and temporalities in death and financial costs involved in end-of-life decisions, burial rites and sites foregrounds the prevalence of the extraordinary in an otherwise mundane occurrence of death every minute.

The burial rites are preceded by washing and dressing of dead bodies at hospitals, hospices or homes both as a part of care of for deceased and also as a matter of infection control. For instance, in the Islamic perspective, ritual bathing of the deceased called, *ghusul* is followed by enshrouding the body called *kafan* and finally offering burial prayers in congregation followed by burial itself. The burial rites perpetuate the lineage of faith and even belongingness (Dechaux, 1997). Cemeteries thus bring the living and the dead on a common median, allowing them to reunite not only with their predecessors but also carving out a spatial permanence which is otherwise not delivered to the migrants. Consequently, the end-of-life decisions are of crucial significance overshadowed by challenges of political inclusion. The interment of bodies in cemeteries located in host countries appear to be a locale beset with anxieties. While many prefer repatriation to the place of birth, the posthumous journeys from the host countries is a choice rooted in a deep-seated desire to return to the place of origins and doctrinal approach to the conceptual underpinnings of afterlife.

Historically speaking, in the context of colonization, the earliest records of Muslims buried in European countries such as Finland dates back to their military participation. The soldiers buried in these cemeteries were either convicts of the Czarist troops deployed in Finland or those defending the territory against foreign infiltration. In Britain the early soldiers were likewise those who were sent to fight in the ranks of the colonial armies. In WWI, almost 1.2 million soldiers from Indian were deployed to fight for Britain. In November 2015, the inauguration of Muslim Burial Ground Peace Garden by the Earl of Essex commemorates the sacrifices of soldiers who died almost a century ago. It is interesting to note that the cemetery existed in the past, yet it has been rehabilitated as a step towards national cohesion and interfaith harmony.

In the remote past a handful of burials took place dating to 1857, Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Later colonization tilted the secularization of the cemeteries through migrant conflict, international protocols and indigenous legal framework. Currently a segment among the minorities however prefers setting aside the insurance money to ensure repatriation of the body when they die (Schofield, 2013). According to Schofield 70 percent of Muslims want to be repatriated when they die despite involving an exorbitant cost, in time flights, consular consents and involvement of funeral providers. The day Muslims in France prefer burial in France will be a marker of complete integration in French Society (Schofield, 2013). Apart from challenges facing the immigrant Muslim community in retaining burial rites and spatial rights in terms of designated cemetery, the death of soldiers dying in military conflicts today has posed questions of funeral rites and dignified burial.

CONCLUSION

The study of cemeteries and the multifarious symbolism that it bears in a pluralistic society warrants critical investigation into assertion of citizenry and migration reinstatement. Thus, modern nation-states carefully render the services to the living and dead, delivering the freedom to be, embedded in dying in the home country. The uneasy ownership of the deceased comes in handy as compared to the living immigrants who undergo various phases of trials to fully qualify as formal citizens and not just as parts of a large national collective. Dwelling upon the burial decisions, we come across the intersecting negotiation amongst various actors on the socio-economic, geo-political, cultural and religious plane. At times vested interests on the part of the actors structure claims regarding dying and death, belonging and citizenship in a political parlance involving embassies and consular advice at times. Moreover, the cemeteries emanate cultural peculiarities and individual subjectivities in terms of symbolism entailed in the inscription as well as signs embedded on the epitaphs, offering insights into the sense of 'belonging' and identity. For the visitors however these cemeteries function as an intermediary, liminal space bridging the terrestrial and celestial on a common median.

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