

Burial practices and desires among Muslims in the Netherlands: A matter of belonging

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For Muslims in the Netherlands the choice of burial location is not only a matter of being well-informed on the practical, legal and religious possibilities and impossibilities. It is also a matter of how Muslims view themselves and the Dutch society of which they are part. This article discusses the Islamic burial practices among Muslims in the Netherlands in relation to both Dutch and Islamic legal norms. The focus of this article is on the motives and considerations that underlie the choice of burial location. The results are based on personal interviews held with Muslims of various Islamic denominations. The motives and considerations that were expressed seem to reveal a strong sense of belonging to countries of origin. Even younger generations of Muslims express their emotional attachment to their roots and their wish to return to the home countries for burial. The interview data also provides the insight that growing anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe appear to have negatively affected many Muslims' sense of belonging to the Netherlands and hence their desire not to be buried there. This article furthermore includes the results of a survey among all Dutch municipalities with regard to Islamic burial facilities. This survey reveals some quite interesting solutions developed by Dutch cemeteries in dealing with the diversity among Islamic communities in the Netherlands.

Key terms: Islam; Islamic burial plots; Sense of belonging; Islamic law; The Netherlands.

Introduction

Death, dying and burial are not only matters of individual experiences and emotions, but also social events.¹ They lay bare social relations and the shaping

¹ I would like to thank Professor W.A.R. Shadid, Professor P.S. van Koningsveld, Professor M.S. Berger and the anonymous referees for their remarks on an earlier version of this paper. This

of identity within a community. As Gardner states: “The meanings and practices which surround death are [...] the products of particular social, cultural and historical circumstances. Since these rituals are central to the identities and meanings which groups construct for themselves, they can be viewed as windows, which open out to the ways societies view themselves and the world around them [...]” (1998, 507).

For the purpose of this article I take up the case of Muslims in the Netherlands and the practice of legal and religious regulations with regard to death and burial.² Using the practice of death rituals and regulations as a ‘window’, we can elaborate on the fact that the choice as to where to be buried is not only a matter of being well-informed with regard to practical, legal and religious possibilities and impossibilities. It is also a matter of how Muslims view themselves and the Dutch society of which they are part. Regarding the latter, a sense of belonging and the myth of returning to the home countries were often mentioned. During the fieldwork done for this study, cemetery managers would often express to me their expectation that future generations of Muslims in the Netherlands would chiefly opt for burial in the Netherlands because of a decline in their sense of belonging to the countries of origin. However, it was exactly this sense of belonging to the countries of origin which formed a prominent motive for respondents in their choice of burial location. This seems to be the direct opposite of the general expectation among cemetery managers. In this article I will use Muslims’ experiences with legal and religious regulations around death, dying and burial as a window through which to look at how Muslims view themselves and the society around them. A connection will be made to theories on the sense of belonging and the myth of return (Gardner 1998; Gardner 2002; Anwar 1979; Bolognani 2007).

In what follows I will first consider how Islamic burials are facilitated within Dutch public policy. In this discussion I will deal with how the Dutch burial landscape is shaped through a brief overview of the legal history regarding the creation of cemeteries. Muslims’ responses to the facilities for Islamic burials in the Netherlands, which may concern both Islamic plots in public cemeteries and the creation of private Islamic cemeteries, will also be considered. Then a general description will follow on the practice of Islamic burial prescriptions among Muslims in the Netherlands, according to three different categories:

article is part of my PhD thesis on the religious, legal and social aspects of Islamic burials in the Netherlands and Belgium (Kadrouch-Outmany fc.).

² Although I focus on the Netherlands in this article, the matter is certainly not limited to this country. Over the last years several studies have been conducted on Muslim burial practices in European context. For example in Germany (Tan 1996; Jonker 1996), in France (Chaib 2000), and in the United Kingdom (Gardner 1998, 2002).

dying a good death, preparatory burial regulations and the choice of burial location. These categories were derived from the interviews and will be connected to the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and to studies of Islamic burials. In the final section I elaborate on the results of my interviews and discuss the ‘emotional aspect’ with regard to the choice of burial location. From the experiences Muslims in the Netherlands have had with death and burial among relatives, I will discuss their choices regarding where to be buried, how these choices are put into effect, and the role of rules and regulations in these choices.

In this multidisciplinary research, which is qualitative in nature, my aim is not to generalize the results. Primarily I aim to ensure as much variation as possible. This allows me to describe and explain specific opinions and practices concerning burial practices among the various Islamic denominations. These aims are in line with the definition of qualitative research as given in the literature on the methodology of social research (Shank 2002, 5). As a qualitative researcher I am interested in understanding how people make sense of their world and what kinds of experiences they have (see Meriem 2009, 13). Besides explaining and describing respondents’ views, I will also focus on whether the practices and opinions relate to some variables such as ethnic background, age, gender and religious denomination. One has to keep in mind that such relationships will be looked at by searching for trends, rather than by presenting statistical evidence. The sample size is too limited to allow such statistical correlations.

Countries of origin		Morocco	Turkey	Surinam	Other countries ³	Total
Total respondents		6	5	3	5	19
Gender	Male	4	2	1	2	19
	Female	2	3	2	3	
Denomination	Sunni	6	3	1	2	19
	Shia	0	0	0	3	
	Alevi	0	2	0	0	
	Ahmadiyya	0	0	2	0	
Year of birth	1981>	2	1	1	3	19
	1971-1980	3	3	0	1	
	<1971	1	1	2	1	

Table 1: Interviewed respondents in the Netherlands

³ The category ‘Other countries’ includes one respondent from each of the countries Sudan, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews among 19 Muslims (9 men and 10 women) of various backgrounds, aged between 20 and 77, who adhere to Sunni, Shiite, Alevi and Ahmadiyya branches of Islam (Table 1). Approximately 85% of Muslims worldwide adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2009, 38).⁴ Their number in the Netherlands can be estimated at 765,000. For the Shiites and Alevites both their numbers are estimated at approximately between 45,000 and 90,000 (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2009, 47; Neijenhuis 2008).⁵ The Ahmadiyya have roughly 10,000 adherents in the Netherlands (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2009, 39).⁶

Beside the interviews, the results of this article are also derived from a survey among Dutch municipalities. This survey included questions on Islamic burial practices in public cemeteries. Of all 439 Dutch municipalities that were invited to take part in this study, 327 actually responded, of which 297 have one (or more) public cemeteries.⁷

In the next section some of the results of the survey will be presented, which mainly concern the creation of Islamic burial plots. Some quite interesting solutions have been developed by municipalities in dealing with the diversity among Islamic communities in the Netherlands. The Sunni and Shiite branches represent the two main denominations of Islam and from their perspective the Alevi and Ahmadiyya branches are controversial. Where burial is concerned the fact of the matter is that all these groups want to be buried in either the Islamic plots or the Islamic cemetery. This introduces challenges for municipalities in coping with the various demands coming from Muslims to include or exclude

⁴ Sunni Muslims accept the legitimacy of the first four successors of Muhammad, Abu Bakr Al Siddiq, Umar ibn al Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib (Esposito 2003, 306), whereas Shiite Muslims believe that Muhammad's religious and political authority was passed on to his descendants beginning with his son-in-law and cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib and his sons Hasan and Husayn. The defining event of Shiism was the martyrdom of Husayn in Kerbela (Iraq) in 681 (Esposito 2003, 292).

⁵ Alevism is a term which is used to cover a number of heterogeneous socio-religious communities in Turkey and the Balkans, who in the twentieth century began to share a common transregional identity called Alevism. Alevism is considered by some to derive from Shiite Islam (Esposito 2003, 14).

⁶ The Ahmadiyya is a controversial messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Qadian (India) in 1889. This denomination consists of two branches: the Qadiani, who claim that Ghulam Ahmad is a non-legislating prophet with a divine mandate for the revival and renewal of Islam, and the Lahore branch, which considers the founder to be a renewer of the faith rather than a prophet. The Ahmadiyya were declared non-Muslims by a Pakistani law of 1974 because of their opposition to the mainstream belief in the finality of Muhammad's legislative prophesy (Esposito 2003, 11-12)

⁷ This research took place between December 2010 and March 2011.

certain Islamic denominations. To start this discussion we will first look at the legal possibilities for Islamic burials in the Netherlands.

Legal possibilities for Islamic burials in the Netherlands

Dutch Muslims who consider burying their deceased in the Netherlands are faced with a host of regulations at the national and local level, not all of them compliant with Islamic burial regulations. As a matter of Dutch public policy, burial is subject to certain regulations. National law sets standards for proper burial, hygiene and public order, while municipal regulations deal with urban planning, aesthetics and soil requirements. In this section we will briefly outline the historical developments that shaped the current Dutch burial landscape. Furthermore, we will discuss the creation of the first Islamic cemetery in the Netherlands and the development of Islamic plots in public cemeteries. Let us first turn to a general overview concerning the legal organization of cemeteries and religious plots.

In the Netherlands cemeteries can be either public or private. Since 1827 municipalities have been obliged to provide for a public cemetery. According to Van Breemer & Maussen (2012, 283) only one third of all cemeteries are owned, administered and paid for by municipalities. The remaining two thirds are so-called *bijzondere begraafplaatsen* ('special cemeteries'), owned by different religious groups or by private legal entities. The right to maintain religious cemeteries was established with the introduction of the first Burial Act of 1869. Besides the creation of religious cemeteries, article 19 of this Act stipulates the right to a plot for religious denominations who could not afford their own cemetery:

The general cemeteries are constructed in such a way that on the wish of the management of a religious congregation which does not possess its own cemetery, the bodies of the members of this religious congregation can be buried in a separate part intended exclusively for them. Every such part has a separate entrance, except for the single main entrance which can serve the whole cemetery. The layout of each of these parts is arranged by the municipal council, after having listened to the management of the religious congregations involved.⁸

⁸"De algemeene begraafplaatsen worden zóó aangelegd, dat, op verlangen van het bestuur eener kerkelijke gemeente die geen eigen begraafplaats bezit, de lijken van de leden dier kerkelijke gemeente in een afzonderlijk, uitsluitend voor hen bestemd gedeelte kunnen worden begraven. Ieder zoodanig gedeelte heeft een afzonderlijken ingang, behoudens dat één hoofdingang voor de geheele begraafplaats kan dienen. De inrigting van elk dezer gedeelten wordt door het gemeentebestuur geregeld, na daarop het bestuur van de betrokken kerkelijke gemeenten te hebben gehoord" (article 19, Begraafwet 1869, Stb 65).

These rights applied to Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Nowadays the same is also true for Muslims as well as adherents of other religions. The burial landscape in the Netherlands presents a wide range of options, including different religious cemeteries, religious plots in municipal public cemeteries and also municipal public parts in religious cemeteries (Van den Breemer & Maussen 2012, 283).

Currently cemeteries are primarily regulated by the national law *Wet op de Lijkbezorging 1991* ('Burial and Cremation Act 1991'). During the preparations for the revision of this act in the 1980s there were discussions on adapting the existing burial law, in order to remove all unnecessary obstacles for Muslims as well as adherents of other religions (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2008, 170). This resulted for example in the legal possibility of burial without a coffin and within 36 hours, both of which are Islamic burial prescriptions. Consequently, the number of Islamic burial plots started to increase. At the time of writing, there are approximately 70 to 80 Islamic plots in several public cemeteries and one Islamic private cemetery.

The first Islamic cemetery was established in 2007 in the municipality of Almere by Muslims mainly with a Surinamese background.⁹ They were able to buy a piece of land next to the existing public cemetery and to develop a private Islamic cemetery with a private entrance and its own rules and regulations.¹⁰ At the Islamic cemetery graves are only granted for an unlimited period of time, which is rare due to the shortage of space in the Netherlands.¹¹ Furthermore, only those deceased who "are Muslims according to the Islamic religious law" can be buried at this cemetery. Who is meant by this, is to be determined by the board of the organization. In case of doubt the board can ask their *mufti* (Islamic scholar) for advice. So far, it has been clear that members of the Ahmadiyya are strictly forbidden to be buried at this cemetery: "Ahmadiyya are considered non-Muslims and should therefore not be buried in an Islamic cemetery," as was explained to me during an interview.¹²

The creation and the organization of an Islamic cemetery differs from that of an Islamic plot. Islamic plots in public cemeteries have existed for decades in the Netherlands. The very first of these plots was established in 1932 and is located at the Kerkhoflaan cemetery in the city of The Hague (Ryad 2012,

⁹ The Islamic cemetery in Almere was inaugurated in 2007 and is owned by the Sunni organization SAMAR: *Stichting Almeerse Moslims Al Raza* ('Al Raza Foundation of Almere Muslims').

¹⁰ Private cemeteries do have to observe national regulations laid down in the *Wet op de Lijkbezorging* ('Burial and Cremation Act').

¹¹ Due to shortage of space, graves with an unlimited granting period are very rare in the Netherlands. From the survey I conducted among Dutch municipalities it turned out that less than 10% of the municipalities still offer the option for a grave with an unlimited period.

¹² Interview with Hadji Dilorosun, responsible for the Islamic cemetery, Almere, 22 March 2012.

293). My survey of Dutch municipalities shows that approximately 25 % of them provide an Islamic plot in one of their cemeteries. The Islamic plot is mainly separated from the rest of the cemetery by a hedgerow, and the graves face the direction of Mecca (Harmsen 2009). The rules that apply to the Islamic plot are the same as those for the public part of the cemetery, i.e. the *gemeentelijke verordening* ('municipal act') and the *begraafplaatsreglement* ('cemetery regulation'). As opposed to the Islamic cemetery, a public cemetery cannot deny anyone access to be buried there. However, discussions have occurred among Muslims about whether adherents of certain Islamic denominations should be granted access to the Islamic plots, which has led to quite interesting solutions.



Figure 1. Cemetery Westduin in the Hague. Photo Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany. The Islamic plots are separated from each other by hedgerows and a pathway in the front of the photo. In the back we see the public part of of the cemetery which is is also separated from the Islamic plots by hedgerows and pathways.

Illustrative in this regard is the Islamic plot in the municipal graveyard of *Westduin* in The Hague, which was established in 1994, and has been divided among seven different Islamic organizations belonging to three different Islamic denominations. The municipality argued that these Islamic organizations have

the right to their own plots, since they cannot be conceived of as one church community. The single Islamic plot consists of seven separate subplots which are internally divided from one another by paving stones or by a hedgerow, as shown in the photographs on the following pages. The different sub-plots are separate sections for Sunni, Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims, as a result of their refusal to be buried next to each other in the same plot. Only members of the specific organizations can be buried at ‘their’ plot. Muslims who do not belong to one of these seven organizations, but nonetheless want to be buried in the Islamic part of this cemetery, can be buried in the ‘public Islamic part’ of the Islamic plot, which does not belong to any Islamic organization in particular. During the interviews Ahmadiyya Muslims especially expressed their wish to be buried at a plot which was especially reserved for their denomination. This fragmentation in Islamic plots has occurred in several other municipalities and seems to be characteristic for the Netherlands, because of a historical tradition of separate plots for different church denominations (Kadrouch-Outmany *fc.*).



Figure 2. Cemetery Westduin in the Hague. Photo Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany. The Islamic plots are separated from each other by hedgerows. In the back of the photo we see two other Islamic plots belonging to different denominations.

Although the establishment of Islamic plots seems to be on the increase, this is not the case for private Islamic cemeteries. Earlier studies suggest that the reason there are not more Islamic cemeteries is that “Muslims prefer burial in a public cemetery instead of investing resources in a private (and costly) cemetery” (Van den Breemer & Maussen 2012, 287). I would argue that a sense of belonging and the wish of returning to the country of origin also play an important role. I will discuss this in more detail in the next sections.



Figure 3. Cemetery Westduin in the Hague. Photo Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany. Separate Islamic plots divided by hedgerows and a pathway.

The fact that the first (and so far only) Islamic cemetery was created by an Islamic organization which consists of Muslims mainly with a Surinamese background suggests that these Muslims have a stronger sense of belonging to the Netherlands and do not wish to return to their ‘home country’ after death. This corresponds with the results of my interviews which show that Surinamese and Indonesian respondents all bury their deceased in the Netherlands. Other respondents from various backgrounds, on the other hand, stated that the connection with their country of origin plays a much more important role in their choice of burial location than the legal possibility for Islamic burial in the

Netherlands. Before elaborating in detail on the motives in the choice of burial location, we will first look at what Muslims actually do when someone dies: the practice of Islamic burial regulations.

Death, dying and Islamic burial regulations in practice

In this section I will argue that Muslims in the Netherlands closely follow Islamic prescriptions relating to death and burial. I will also consider the question of why respondents stress the 'correct' carrying-out of these Islamic prescriptions and to what extent respondents knew about the prescriptions. This section is of importance regarding the question if, how, and why the practice of Islamic burial regulations are part of the motives and considerations that underlie the choices Muslims make regarding where to be buried.

Islamic burial regulations give detailed instructions to the bereaved on what to do during the time span from the deathbed until after burial. From the results of my interviews we can derive three categories of answers with regard to the process of dying and the practice of Islamic burial regulations in the Netherlands. The first category contains rules that are connected to the process of dying a 'good death'. The second category relates to the performance of rituals preparatory to the actual burial, whereas the last category concerns the choice of burial location. We will discuss these categories of answers chronologically relating both to the Islamic *fiqh* and to the results of the interviews.

As examples given in the first category we will highlight the positioning of the body towards the *qibla* (towards Mecca: *ihtidâr*), the pronouncing of the *shahâda* (Islamic creed: *talqîn*) and reading from the Quran. When it becomes clear that a person is dying, the body is often positioned in the direction of the *qibla* (Al Jaziri 2009, 668; Al Sistani 1999, 135). If this is not possible due to the layout of the room, the person is not turned in any specific direction. This was the case in the story of one of my respondents, who related the course of her father's death. Her father died in the hospital and they had not turned him in any specific direction, because hospital beds are arranged in a particular way:

My father died in the hospital and we didn't turn him in the direction of the *qibla* because it was too difficult. People were in the room reading from the Quran and my father read along. He even performed his daily prayers while lying in his bed and he pronounced the *shahâda* out loud several times. I think that is more important than turning the bed [in the direction of the *qibla*].

(Ilhame, personal interview, September 3, 2012)

According to this respondent the prayers, the *shahâda* and the people present were more important in the process of dying a 'good death', than being turned in the direction of the *qibla*. Islamic burial regulations stress the relevance of pronouncing the *shahâda* as a sign of a 'good death' (Ibn Rushd 1994, 259; Al Jaziri 2009, 668; Sayyid Sabiq 1991, 16; Al Sistani 1999, 135). It was generally emphasized also by respondents that pronouncing the *shahâda* was an important part of the dying process. One of the male respondents explained this by stating: "Those are the words you first hear when you are born and they have to be the last words you say or hear before you die" (Jaouad, personal interview, September 14, 2012). Besides pronouncing the *shahâda*, reciting from the Quran (especially the 36th verse Yasin) and doing *dua* (supplication accompanied by gesture of outraised hands with palms facing up) in order to ease the suffering of a dying person, were also stressed by respondents. These recommendations are also found in the *fiqh*, relating them to a good death (Al Jaziri 2009, 669). After death takes place, preparatory burial rituals are performed.

With regard to the second category of answers that were derived from the interviews, the preparatory burial regulations, I will discuss the washing of the corpse (*ghusul al mayyit*), the shrouding (*takfîn*), and the funeral prayer (*salât al janâzah*). Just as in the last section, the results of the interviews will be connected to *fiqh* regulations. Respondents attached much importance to the preparatory burial rituals and they were considered only to be valid if they were 'correctly' carried out.

Four of the respondents were actually present when the corpse of their deceased was washed. Those who did not attend the washing stated that it was either not possible because the deceased was of the opposite sex or that professional washers had been called upon instead.¹³ Respondents indicated that a professional washer or someone who had previously performed the washing had to be present during the occasion to make sure the washing is correctly performed. The remaining washers can be either relatives or others who are called upon, for the most part, from within a mosque. From the reports of the respondents it turned out that the washing takes place in a funeral parlour, in the hospital or in a special washing room in the mosque. In various *fiqh* works the washing of the corpse is described in detail, with some variation among the different Islamic denominations (Al Jaziri 2009, 680-684; Ibn Rushd 1994, 265; Al Sistani 1999, 136). The washing of the corpse was generally described by respondents as an overall wash of the body with water and soap, while the corpse is covered with a cloth. One of my respondents reported that

¹³ It is a general rule that a deceased male is washed by men, and a deceased female is washed by women. There are some exceptions to this rule with regard to spouses and children. Professional washers are either called upon by the family or are contacted through the insurance company.

he does not recall how many times the washing had taken place, only that the body had to be clean and that the washing had to take place while the *awra* of the corpse was covered (*awra* being the area from the navel to the knees in the case of a man, and the whole body of a woman with exception of the hands and face; Al Jaziri 2009, 672; Shadid & Van Koningsveld 1994, 128; Mamduh, personal interview, September 13, 2012). After the washing is completed, the body is dried with towels and covered with white shrouds, the *kafan*.

As far as the ritual of the *kafan* is concerned, respondents who had attended the washing were also present at the shrouding and indicated that it happened in the same place where the corpse was washed. They informed me that the *kafan* itself was either provided by the bereaved family, by the mosque or by an Islamic undertaker. The *kafan* consists of three cloths for men and five for women (Al Jaziri 2009, 684-688; Al Sistani 1999, 137-138). One of the male respondents reported that when he shrouded his son, the three parts of the *kafan* were laid down on top of the opened coffin:

We laid down the *kafan* over the coffin, one on top of the other. There was me and three other men from the mosque who performed the washing. When we were done we raised my son onto the *kafan* and into the coffin. While he lay in the coffin, we wrapped the shrouds around him. You always have to begin from the right side and then move on to the left side. His whole body was covered from head to feet.

(Rashid, personal interview, November 27, 2012)

This respondent furthermore emphasized that ‘not just anyone’ could wrap the cloth around the deceased, it should be performed in a professional manner.¹⁴ All the respondents who did not attend a shrouding related that they knew the *kafan* should consist of white cloths, but did not know about the number of cloths or the manner in which the shrouding took place. After the corpse is washed and shrouded the last ritual to be performed, before the actual burial takes place, is the funeral prayer.

The funeral prayer, unlike the five daily prayers of Muslims, is performed while standing and does not include prostrations. It consists of four or five *takbîrs* (the utterance of *Allâhu akbar*) and several *dua* in silence (Al Jaziri 2009, 689-691; Ibn Rushd 1994, 270-271; Al Sistani 1999, 138). The attendance of women at the funeral prayer is an ongoing discussion among Muslims, also in the Netherlands (see Dessing 2001, 156-157). As one of the female respondents

¹⁴ The use of a coffin in Islamic burial has been a matter of discussion and of growing importance in the Dutch situation, since burial without a coffin has only been possible in the Netherlands since the introduction of the Corpse Disposal Act in 1991. This topic will be dealt with exhaustively in my thesis (Kadrouch-Outmany fc.)

reported, she was not allowed to participate in the funeral prayer for her grandfather, although she was present at the mosque where the prayer was held:

The funeral prayer for my grandfather was held in the mosque where we had just said our farewells. When the men gathered to perform the prayers we women were asked to leave. I think it is not common for women to attend the funeral prayer and I never really asked about it.

(Norah, personal interview, April 27, 2012)

However, in all the interviews conducted in the course of this research, this appeared to be a minority. The majority of the women I interviewed did participate in the funeral prayer, although they did not attend the washing and shrouding. In most cases the funeral prayer was held in the mosque or outside at a square nearby the mosque. Some respondents indicated that the prayers were held at a funeral parlour or at the cemetery. Only a few of my respondents knew about the exact formulation of the prayer; the majority followed the imam. Since the prayer is held in silence, most of the respondents were not able to tell me what was being murmured. Although they were not informed as to the exact formulation, respondents did consider the prayer to be of utmost importance since it was considered to be the last time prayers and supplications could be held for the deceased in his or her presence.¹⁵

After the funeral prayer the burial takes place. At the cemetery the corpse, covered with white shrouds, is laid down on its right side in the grave without a coffin, facing the direction of Mecca. The body is then covered with wooden planks or large bricks and the grave is filled with soil (Al Jaziri 2009, 715; Al Sistani 1999, 138). With regard to the use of a coffin there appeared to be ethnic differences among the respondents, both in the Netherlands and abroad. Indonesian and Surinamese respondents indicated that their relatives were buried in a coffin. With regard to the deceased buried abroad the answers differed. The Turkish respondents all indicated that although the corpse had been repatriated to Turkey in a coffin, the body was always taken out of the coffin to be buried. The same was true for those buried in Iran and Iraq. In the case of repatriation to Morocco, however, the corpse was buried in the coffin. The use of a coffin is not forbidden by *fiqh* regulations. Some scholars however find the use of a coffin undesirable, unless there is a (legal) necessity to do so (Al Sistani 1999, 139; Al Jaziri 2009, 715-716).

¹⁵ There are nuances and differences among different schools of law and among different denominations within Islam with regard to the precise formulations during the funeral prayer. See Al Jaziri (2009, 689-709).

So far we have described the practice of the preparatory burial regulations from the results of the interviews and in connection to scholarly opinions. Respondents attached much importance to a 'correct' performance of these regulations and considered them to be a communal obligation toward the deceased.¹⁶ We will now turn to discussing the last category which concerns the choice of burial location.

As far as the choice of burial location is concerned, four different categories of motives were derived from the results of the interviews; social, financial, religious and emotional. Several examples of these motives that underlie the choice regarding where to be buried can be given. We will highlight a few of these examples, but in the scope of this article we will focus mainly on the emotional motive in the next section.

With regard to the social aspect, answers such as being buried among deceased relatives or being buried near to living relatives were given by respondents. For example in the case of a Surinamese respondent who buried her son in the Netherlands because she wants to keep him nearby:

I buried him here! He lived here, we live here and his children live here. It was never an option to have him buried in Surinam. He should be buried among his relatives.

(Djamila, personal interview, October 18, 2012)

Burial in the Netherlands was reported by all respondents that I interviewed with a Surinamese or an Indonesian background. This appears to have been the case for at least the past ten years since these findings correspond with the work of Dassing (2001, 160-161) and with the work of Shadid and Van Koningsveld (1995, 99). The latter suggest several other reasons why Muslims who are settled in Europe as a result of decolonization more frequently bury their deceased in Europe; these include naturalization, the distance to the countries of origin, and the availability of Muslim cemeteries or Islamic plots in public cemeteries. When visiting Islamic plots in the Netherlands, one indeed finds a large number of Indonesian and Surinamese Muslims buried there. We might argue that for Indonesian and Surinamese Muslims, burial in the Netherlands has become the standard:

My father always said that the whole world belonged to Allah. It doesn't matter where you are buried. He had lived in the Netherlands for such a long time, he doesn't even know his relatives in Indonesia anymore. We [his children] are here therefore he never wished to be buried outside the Netherlands.

(Ena, personal interview, November 20, 2012)

¹⁶ In Islamic *fiqh* the term used to indicate communal obligations is *fard kifaya*.

Colonial history and the presence of large numbers of relatives and acquaintances in the Netherlands, but also the distance to home countries were emphasized by Indonesian and Surinamese respondents as motives in their choice of burial location.

The existence of a funeral fund, the financial motive, was most frequently mentioned by respondents with a Turkish and Moroccan background as a reason for repatriation of the deceased. For a small annual fee that had been paid for decades, respondents indicated they were assured all burial costs would be covered by the funeral funds and therefore chose to have their deceased relatives buried abroad. In the next section however, we will see that this financial motive was not the main motive for burial abroad.

As for the religious motive, burial in an Islamic cemetery where graves were not to be emptied was one of the answers given in this regard. This motive was given by Muslims with a Moroccan, Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Sudanese background. Although during my own fieldwork in Morocco I was informed that graves are indeed cleared out after an unspecified time, most of my respondents are still under the impression that graves are granted for an unlimited period of time in Morocco. The same was true for the Turkish respondents with regard to eternal graves in Turkey, which are also cleared out especially in the larger cities. Only a few of the respondents actually confirmed that eternal graves are not certain but that the idea, so they explained, of an eternal grave is much more supported abroad than in the Netherlands:

As long as no one says the grave is granted for a determined period, you assume that it is there to stay for eternity. This is how it works in Morocco. No one in Morocco will ever tell you straightforward 'this grave will be emptied after 50 years.' This is why people are assured and want to be buried there.

(Louay, personal interview, July 15, 2012)

Estimates show that approximately 90 per cent of Muslims in Western Europe are still being repatriated to their countries of origin for burial (Jonker 2004, 6). On the question of why this is the case, the most frequent consideration mentioned by respondents was an emotional one: the sense of belonging to a specific country or village. In the following section we will connect this emotional motive to a sense of belonging and to the myth of returning to countries of origin.

The myth of return and a sense of belonging

In the previous sections we discussed experiences of Muslims in the practice of legal and religious rules and regulations on death and burial in the Netherlands. In the following discussion we will use this ‘window’ of experiences to elaborate on the ‘emotional’ motive in the choice of burial location in relation to the sense of belonging and the myth of return. We will begin with a brief description of the migration of Muslims to the Netherlands.

Until the end of the Second World War, there were only a small number of Muslims in the Netherlands who had migrated from the former Dutch colonies Surinam and Indonesia (Sunier 2010, 115; Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2008, 22). Similar to other Western European countries, the large-scale settlement of Muslims as guest workers (*gastarbeiders*) in the Netherlands emerged as a result of immigration from the 1960s onwards and family reunifications during the 1970s and 1980s. The guest workers who arrived in the Netherlands after the Second World War were mainly male laborers from Mediterranean countries such as Turkey and Morocco, who planned to work, save money and return to their countries of origin. With their continued stay in the Netherlands, this intention to return gradually turned into what now appears to be a myth of return (Gardner 1996; Gardner 2002; Bolognani 2007; Chaib 2000). This ‘myth of return’ was also a central feature in Dutch policies on the settlement of guest workers, who were considered to be members of a temporary labour force and would eventually return to their countries of origin. Dutch policy related to these labourers was based on this idea of temporariness (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2008, 10-11; Sunier 2010, 121). However, large-scale family reunifications in the 1970s and 1980s denied this presumption. As a result, the number of Muslims increased considerably.

Nowadays the number of Muslims in the Netherlands is estimated at 900,000 (Sunier 2010, 115). For the majority of these Muslims the myth of return may still be their intention, but has remained just that: a myth.¹⁷ For the first generation of Muslims in the Netherlands the idea of returning to their home countries provided an ideological justification for their residence. The return was only attainable once the capital needed to return was gathered (Bolognani 2007, 73). But this return rarely took place permanently when the person was still alive, as opposed to the return to countries of origin after death. The myth of return also seems to be very vivid among later generations of Muslims in the Netherlands.

¹⁷ As explained by Bolognani, ‘myth’ is referred to in the “Malinowskian sense of an allegorical representation that legitimizes contemporary patterns of social action” (Bolognani 2007, 73).

This explanation of an actual return to countries of origin to be buried there was often referred to by my respondents when talking about their loved ones being buried abroad. However, returning to the soil of one's roots was also mentioned by respondents as an important consideration in their own choice as to where they wanted to be buried. One of the respondents explained her reason for wanting to be buried in Morocco, by emphasizing:

It is not a matter of an Islamic country or an Islamic environment. For me the main consideration is to return to where I came from and to go back to the soil of my roots. I want to make it very clear to my children that Morocco is where we are from and not the Netherlands.

(Ilhame, personal interview, September 3, 2012)

Ultimately, even though she was born in the Netherland, this respondent explained that she felt a sense of belonging to Morocco.

The sense of belonging to a country or even to a specific village was frequently mentioned as a reason for burial abroad. One of the respondents even specified the city in Turkey in which she wanted to be buried, because it is where she felt she belonged (Hulya, personal interview, June 12, 2012). Although the greater majority of my respondents came to the Netherlands at a young age (before they were 12) or were born in the Netherlands, their position with regard to burial implied a feeling of not belonging 'here'; that is, in the Netherlands. Five of the respondents, three of Surinamese, one of Afghani, and one of Indonesian background, expressed their wish to be buried in the Netherlands. The majority opted for burial abroad.¹⁸

The sense of belonging is a sentiment that is caused not only by internal, but also by external factors. In his discussion on the development of 'the domestication of Islam' in the Netherlands, Sunier points to the fact that "[a]n increasing number of people have serious doubts about the possibility of Muslims becoming fully-fledged citizens while at the same time retain[ing] to [sic] their religious convictions. Islam has increasingly become associated with undesirable influences from abroad" (Sunier 2010, 127). This corresponds with the point made by a respondent who clearly indicated the feeling of not belonging to the Netherlands as a result of what he explained to be "current discussions on religiosity, loyalty and nationality" (Mamduh, personal interview, September 13, 2002). This respondent emphasized the need or certainty of belonging somewhere (else). He stated that as long as Dutch public discussions on double nationality and the alleged lack of loyalty of Muslims continued, and as long as he had to keep explaining what brought him to the Netherlands, he

¹⁸ Two respondents reported that they did not have a specific wish regarding where to be buried.

would have no doubts about Morocco being the country where he wished to be buried. Because, as he explained: “No one in Morocco will ever wonder why I am buried in Morocco as opposed to if I were buried in the Netherlands” (Mamduh, personal interview, September 13, 2002).

The above-mentioned considerations and explanations given to me by my respondents show a clear sense of belonging to the ‘home country’ among many of the younger generations of Muslims in the Netherlands. It is surprising to see how different situations may affect the sense of belonging. One of the Turkish respondents explained how she felt very much Dutch and loved the Netherlands, but her bond with Turkey was stronger, “especially in the aftermath of 9/11” (Ceyda, personal interview, November 27, 2012). Similar answers were given to me by other respondents, where they emphasized that ‘feeling and being Dutch’ for them was something other than being buried in the Netherlands. Being buried in the Netherlands would assume being from Dutch descent and returning to Dutch soil, to which many of my respondents could not relate. I agree with Bolognani that if the elders’ myth of return was fed with a hope to improve their material conditions in their countries of origin, the youngsters’ orientations seem to be more idealistic and based on their own individual needs, perceptions and anxieties on the one hand (Bolognani 2007, 65), and a feeling of descent, belonging and family reunification on the other hand. For many respondents, decisions surrounding death and burial were considered to be markers by which your belonging to a country is measured and by which the attachment to a ‘home country’ is transmitted from older to younger generations. It might be a step too far to break with this line of transmission. Many Muslims, as we have seen, have a stronger sense of belonging to countries of origin in matters of burial, as opposed to a sense of belonging to the Netherlands in ‘everyday’ matters.

Conclusion

Burial in Islamic plots and creating these plots in Dutch cemeteries have gained more attention during the last years. As Ahmad Aboutaleb, the current mayor of Rotterdam (of Moroccan origin) stated in an article in the daily newspaper *Het Parool* on March 22, 2001: “If you want to be buried in the Netherlands, you are Dutch. And that’s what I want: to become one with the soil of the land on which I walk.” When visiting Islamic plots in the Netherlands, however, one especially finds Muslims with Surinamese and Indonesian backgrounds buried there, as well as many children. This corresponds with the results of my own interviews. For the majority of the Muslims I interviewed, the connection with their countries of origin is stronger in the considerations and motives that underlie their choice of burial location, than their sense of belonging to the Netherlands.

Although according to the above-mentioned statement by Aboutaleb one is Dutch when one chooses to be buried in the Netherlands, many of the respondents I interviewed felt very much Dutch but did not want to be buried here. It was not a matter of a lack of feeling Dutch. It was also not a matter of a lack of legal, religious or practical possibilities, as we saw in the discussion on the practice of legal and religious regulations concerning death and burial. The decisive consideration in the choice of burial location was an emotional aspect; the sense of belonging and the wish to return to home countries, which respondents even connected to a feeling of having descended from there.

The sense of belonging to a country or village outside the Netherlands and the wish to return there, were the most frequently mentioned considerations in the choice of burial location. In the introduction to this article I began with the cemetery managers who would often express to me their expectation that future generations of Muslims in the Netherlands would chiefly opt for burial in the Netherlands because of a decline in the connection with their countries of origin. This does not seem to apply to the results of my interviews, at least not for the second generation to which the greater majority of my respondents belong. The connection with countries of origin still seems very prominent in the decisions that are made with regard to burial location. I believe that the results of the research presented in this article can give us insight into how one's sense of belonging not only seems to be a decisive consideration in the question of where one wants to be buried, but also how it is flexible depending on whether the sense of belonging concerns 'everyday life' or burial location.

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Newspaper article

Met het gezicht naar Mekka, maar wel hier. *Het Parool*, March 22, 2011. Accessed January 24, 2012. <http://academic.lexisnexis.nl/?verb=sr&csi=259062>

About the author

Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany obtained both a Master's degree in Law in 2008 and a Bachelor's degree in World Religions in 2009 at the University of Leiden. Her MA thesis dealt with the legal and philosophical dimensions of repudiation in the Netherlands and Belgium. She is currently working on a PhD research in which she aims at providing insight in the current legal possibilities for Muslims to be buried in the Netherlands and Belgium according to the Islamic burial rules. Furthermore this research includes the perceptions of Muslim scholars and the desires of Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium with regard to Islamic burying. This research consists of three integrated phases; the legal, religious and social-anthropological.

Le choix de lieu de sépulture parmi les musulmans aux Pays-Bas: une question d'appartenance

Pour les musulmans des Pays-Bas, le choix d'un lieu de sépulture ne dépend pas seulement de ce qu'ils savent sur les possibilités et impossibilités pratiques, juridiques et religieuses. Il s'agit aussi de la manière dont les musulmans se perçoivent dans la société néerlandaise dont ils font partie. Cet article discute les pratiques funèbres islamiques parmi les musulmans des Pays-Bas par rapport aux normes juridiques néerlandaises et islamiques, et notamment les mobiles et considérations qui déterminent le choix du lieu de sépulture. Les résultats sont basés sur des entrevues individuelles avec des musulmans de diverses sectes islamiques. Les mobiles et considérations qu'ils ont exprimés semblent révéler un sentiment fort d'appartenir à leurs pays d'origine. Même les plus jeunes laissent voir un attachement émotif à leurs racines et le désir d'être enterrés là-bas. Les données des entrevues montrent aussi que les sentiments anti-musulmans en Europe semblent avoir diminué le sens qu'avaient beaucoup de musulmans qu'ils appartenaient aux Pays-Bas, de sorte qu'ils ne veulent plus y être enterrés. L'article inclut aussi les résultats d'un sondage parmi toutes les municipalités des Pays-Bas concernant la provision de sections islamiques dans les cimetières. Il s'avère que ceux-ci ont élaboré des solutions assez intéressantes pour faire face à la diversité des sectes.

Wensen en gebruiken omtrent begraven onder Moslims in Nederland: Een kwestie van thuishoren

Voor Moslims in Nederland is de keuze voor een begraaflocatie niet alleen een kwestie van goed geïnformeerd zijn omtrent praktische, juridische en religieuze mogelijkheden en onmogelijkheden; het is ook een kwestie van hoe Moslims zichzelf en de Nederlandse samenleving waarvan zij deel uitmaken beschouwen. Dit artikel bespreekt wensen en gebruiken rondom Islamitische teraardebestelling onder Moslims in Nederland in relatie tot zowel de Nederlandse als de Islamitische wettelijke normen. De focus ligt op de motieven en overwegingen die in de interviews aan de keuze voor een begraaflocatie ten grondslag liggen. De resultaten zijn gebaseerd op persoonlijke interviews met Moslims van diverse Islamitische denominaties. Uit de motieven en overwegingen die in de vraaggesprekken tot uitdrukking werden gebracht komt een sterk gevoel naar voren van behoren tot de landen van herkomst. Zelfs jongere generaties Moslims geven uitdrukking aan hun emotionele verbondenheid met hun wortels en hun wens om terug te keren naar de landen van herkomst om aldaar begraven te worden. De interviewdata geven ook inzicht in het feit dat toenemende anti-Moslim sentimenten in Europa een negatief effect lijken te hebben op het gevoel van Moslims dat zij in Nederland thuishoren, met als gevolg hun wens om daar niet begraven te worden. Dit artikel rapporteert ook resultaten van een survey gehouden onder alle Nederlandse gemeenten met betrekking tot beschikbare Islamitische begraafplaatsen en faciliteiten. Deze survey bevat interessante oplossingen ontwikkeld door Nederlandse begraafplaatsen in reactie op de diversiteit onder Islamitische gemeenschappen in Nederland.