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.1 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.3

One thing that virtually all practising Muslims in Europe fear is that they might become absorbed into a secular culture. However, this does not always happen in diaspora; religious rites, including death-related ones, serve a variety of functions. For example, they inform the community 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.4 Hence, rites ensure the perpetuation of Islamic identity outside of the homeland. Subsequently, the need to restore that equilibrium also exists when the community’s deceased is deceased and can be seen as emblematic symbols which imbue with the collective sentiments of the community. They are reflective reminders of the saliency of the community, encouraging the make-up and continuity of group consciousness. Furthermore, these markers, as well as recording the history of the community, demarcate an area of sacred space – a piece of Muslim earth in an otherwise 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 have Muslim communities (approximately 4,000) and also a Bengali community (approximately 2,000). The earliest burial sites 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 thought.4 The researchers were told by a member of the community that this style of grave marker was common to Muslims of the Gujarati and reflected the ‘puritanical’ ethos of this group and the important role of the grave in the daily life of Muslims. This doctrine gives rise to a form of Islamic that provides a space for holy men and to those that are clearly designed out of religious identity of its deceased, most notably for the Bosnians.

Stapenhill: Burton Upon Trent and East Dundee (UK)

There are approximately 2,500 Muslims in Burton Upon Trent, mainly of Pakistani origin.4 Unlike the Gujaratis of Leicester, their understanding of Islam is rooted in the folk traditions of the Bareli movement5 although they are also Surveys Muslims of the Hanafi school. Unlike the Deobandis, the Bareli see the Prophet Mohammad as the successor of the Prophet, and they believe in the strength of communal identity. Hence, rites ensure the perpetuation of Islamic identity outside of the homeland. Subsequently, the need to restore that equilibrium also exists when the community’s deceased is deceased and can be seen as emblematic symbols which imbue with the collective sentiments of the community. They are reflective reminders of the saliency of the community, encouraging the make-up and continuity of group consciousness. Furthermore, these markers, as well as recording the history of the community, demarcate an area of sacred space – a piece of Muslim earth in an otherwise Profane and alien land.

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Malmo (Southern Sweden)

Sweden’s Muslim community has its roots in the country’s recruitment of labour during the early 1960s and the role it has played in receiving refugees.4 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 Malmo’s Muslim burial sites shows patterns of grave markers that clearly reflect the ethnic identity of its deceased, most notably for the Bosnians.

Malmo Cemetery

This cemetery is located on the south side of the city and contains the city’s only Muslim burial site. It also boasts a purpose-built janazghal (funeral mosque). The city’s Muslim community is predominantly Sunni and originates from the Bulsar district of Gujarat, India (approximately 16,000 people). There is also a significant Sunni Pakistani community (approximately 4,000) and a Bangladesh community (approximately 2,000). The earliest burial sites 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.

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Notes
1. See, for example, Mivardi, Ziauddin (1995), Islam and Europe, Selly Oak: CSIC Papers.
2. See, for example, Bellah, N. (1970), Beyond Belief. Religion and Ethnicity, Kirk Farm: Kampen Netherlands.