

# Till Death do us DEPART: Repatriation, Burial, and the Necropolitical Work of Turkish Funeral Funds in Germany

OSMAN BALKAN

## Abstract

*This paper analyzes the transnational funerary rituals of the Turkish community in Germany. It focuses on the operations of two funeral funds administered by the longest-standing Turkish associations in Europe, Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği (DITIB) and Islamisch Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş (IGMG). These funds were established to help facilitate and subsidize the provision of Islamic funerals in Germany. Drawing on contracts, membership forms, informational literature, and interviews with fund representatives, I argue that the funeral funds encourage a form of necropatriotism by providing material incentives for the repatriation of their members to Turkey for burial. In highlighting the ways that institutions, economic incentives, and legal constraints help determine burial choices, I suggest that end-of-life decisions are never entirely shaped by sentimental reasons.*

## Introduction

Where does a dead body belong? For minority communities in migratory settings, the answer is far from obvious. While death is a universally shared human experience, the geographical character of loss is foregrounded in situations where the country of birth and death are not the same. Determining where to bury a family member is tied to larger processes of social positioning, boundary construction, and identity formation. As a place-making project, the act of burial helps shape individual and collective identities by communicating information about the deceased and their community. It signals not only who the deceased was but where they belong.

This paper considers the phenomenon of repatriation for burial, a practice that is common amongst the Turkish diaspora in Germany. It focuses on two funeral funds administered by the largest and most established Turkish Islamic associations in Europe, *Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği* (The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, hereafter DITIB) and *Islamisch Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş* (Islamic Community Milli Görüş, hereafter IGMG). I contend that the funds encourage a form of necropatriotism by

providing material incentives for the repatriation of dead bodies to Turkey. Although they do not explicitly require that their members be repatriated for burial, an overwhelming majority of fund members (upwards of ninety to ninety-five percent) choose to do so. Due to space constraints, this paper does not address the complex constellation of reasons that compel people to partake in this transnational ritual. Instead, it focuses on the institutional dimension of funeral provision amongst the Turkish community in order to highlight the structural parameters that shape and constrain individual actions and end-of-life decisions. In contrast to accounts that read repatriation as a reflection of migrants' low level of integration in their country of residence or as a sign of nostalgia for their homeland, I argue that institutionalized incentive structures and economic calculations play a considerable role in determining where dead migrants will be buried.

In what follows, I first provide a brief overview of previous approaches to the study of death in diasporic settings. While scholars of migration have generated many insights into the causes and consequences of the movement of living persons, they have been less attentive to the possibilities that the voyages of the dead offer toward understanding the relationship between belonging, identity, and place. Moreover, existing works have largely overlooked the institutional dimension of the organization of transnational funerals. I address this omission by outlining the terms of membership and services offered by the funeral funds operated by DITIB and IGMG. Drawing on membership applications, contracts, informational literature, and interviews with fund representatives, I show how economic incentives and legal constraints structure burial practices. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that end-of-life decisions are never entirely shaped by sentimental reasons.

### **Death in the Diaspora**

“In a society of migrants,” writes Engseng Ho, “what is important is not where you are born, but where you die.”<sup>1</sup> The place of death is consequential because it has the potential to become the site of burial. While the myth of return, a belief in the temporary nature of migration and the concomitant expectation of eventual return to the homeland is a common framing device in tropes of migration, the sort of glorious homecoming envisioned by this myth is not always achieved in practice, at least while the individual is still living.

Repatriation for burial is neither unique nor limited to the Turkish

community in Germany. It is a practice that is common to minority groups in a variety of national settings, including Mexicans in the United States, Sylhetis in Britain, Zimbabweans in South Africa, and Algerians in France.<sup>2</sup> A more well-known example of this phenomenon concerns the recovery and repatriation of the remains of soldiers killed in action, a task that costs the U.S. government nearly 100 million dollars annually.<sup>3</sup> While migrants and soldiers provide two distinct optics for analyzing the cross-border circulation of corpses, both types of posthumous journeys are symbolically charged and undergirded by an intricate bureaucratic apparatus.

Scholars of nationalism have analyzed the political significance of dead bodies by showing how burials and re-burials of elites and non-elites alike confer historical depth to imagined communities.<sup>4</sup> In migratory settings, transnational funerary rituals highlight the emotional costs of living between two places and how these costs are distributed differently between men and women and between first- and second-generation migrants.<sup>5</sup> Repatriation for burial has been understood as a spatial practice of community-making that extends beyond national cartographies.<sup>6</sup> It has also been viewed as a practice that is intimately connected to migrants' uncertain, precarious, or vulnerable lives.<sup>7</sup> Others have suggested that the strength of ties to their country of origin helps explain why members of certain minority groups are reluctant to bury their dead in their country of residence.<sup>8</sup> While these studies have shed considerable light on the costs, effects, and motivations behind repatriation, they have largely ignored the ways in which migrant funerals are organized and implemented in practice. As a result, little has been said about how structural constraints affect decisions about the place of burial. In order to better understand the role that institutions play in the provision of transnational funerals, I turn now to the necropolitical work of Turkish funeral funds in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

### **Dead Bodies on the Move**

The first Turkish funeral fund was established by DITIB in 1991. The administration of Islamic funerals is one of many services provided by the organization, whose scope of activities includes religious education and religious services (*eid* celebrations, Friday prayers, Koran courses, *haji* pilgrimages), socio-cultural activities (musical and theatrical performances, conferences, interfaith dialogues), language courses, and women's and youth groups.<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1984 as an outpost of the Turkish Directorate of

Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), DITIB is an important hub for Islam in Germany because of the institutional hegemony it enjoys vis-à-vis other Turkish and Islamic groups.<sup>11</sup> According to its website, its funeral fund was created to “provide a lasting, practical, and secure solution to the serious problem faced by our people who, having spent a lifetime in *gurbet* and out of a longing for their homeland, desire to have their bodies repatriated to our country for burial.”<sup>12</sup> It is the largest of several funeral funds operating in Germany, with approximately 300,000 members in Europe and an annual operating budget of around 15 million Euros.

The second largest funeral fund, with roughly 74,000 members and an annual budget of around 3.5 million Euros, was established in 2002 by IGMG, an organization that has gained a strong foothold as a diasporic network of Turkish Muslims in Europe. In Germany, the organization has brought forth several high profile court cases advocating for greater religious freedom in public life. These include the right to public religious education for German Muslims, the recognition of Islamic practices such as ritual slaughter, the right for Muslim teachers to wear religious attire in schools, and the provision of Islamic services in social and medical institutions.<sup>13</sup> It came under increased scrutiny and surveillance after the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* (Germany’s domestic intelligence agency) stated in its reports that its activities posed a threat to German democracy.<sup>14</sup> According to its membership literature, the funeral fund was instituted with the “recognition that every mortal being will one day migrate from this world where they are a guest.” Like DITIB, the provision of funerals is one of many services offered by the organization, which also include Koran courses, mosque services, *hajj* pilgrimages, religious education for children, sports activities, language classes, and youth and women’s groups.

There are several notable differences in the membership criteria of the funds, which serve to produce boundaries along different axes like religion and nationality. One of the major differences concerns citizenship. Whereas DITIB’s fund is only open to Turkish citizens or EU citizens with Turkish roots (i.e. individuals who have renounced their Turkish citizenship in order to qualify for an EU passport), IGMG has no citizenship requirement and is open to all nationalities. Another difference is religious affiliation. IGMG only accepts Muslim members (including converts), while DITIB’s fund is open to members of all religious faiths. These differences reflect the political and

religious orientation of the two organizations. DITIB, which has institutional and economic links to the Turkish government, espouses a vision of Islam that is in line with the Turkish state and has a nationalist orientation that privileges Turkish identity. IGMG, on the other hand, is a transnational civil society organization that has no official connection to the Turkish state (though the majority of its members are supporters of Erdoğan and the AKP), and foregrounds a Muslim identity in its efforts to attain greater recognition of Islamic practices in Europe.

Membership fees vary by age for both funds (See Tables 1 and 2), and membership covers the individual, his/her spouse and any unmarried children under the age of 18. IGMG's fund also extends coverage to unmarried daughters and mentally disabled children of any age, and children under the age of 27 who are students. To qualify for coverage these individuals must have no source of income (either through employment or welfare payments). In spite of extended coverage benefits, it should be noted that the funeral funds do not operate like life insurance agencies, the major difference between the two being that the funds will not reimburse any of the principal costs or premiums that members have paid if they decide to cancel their membership or withdraw from the fund before they die.

Table 1: *DITIB membership fees (in Euros).*

Source: *DITIB Cenaze Fonu Şartnamesi 2014 (DITIB Funeral Fund Contract)*

Age	Cost
0-30	0
31-50	60
51-60	75
61-65	150
66-70	300
70	500

Table 2: IGMG Membership fees (in Euros)

Source: IGMG Cenaze Fonu Şartnamesi 2014 (IGMG Funeral Fund contract)

Age	Cost
0-24	0
25-50	50
51-55	75
56-60	120
61-65	240
66-70	360
71-79	600
80	1000

The services offered to members and their families are largely uniform across both funds. Upon death, a funeral company is assigned to attend to the bureaucratic tasks involved in the preparations for burial or repatriation. The family of the deceased is obligated to work with the company appointed by the fund or risks the termination of their contract and non-payment of benefits. In practice, IGMG’s fund works hand-in-hand with specific funeral parlors run by members of its organization and DITIB utilizes an in-house funeral company that is incorporated as a private business, ZSU GmbH. As such, there is an element of cronyism that determines where the business will be allocated.

In the preparations leading up to a member’s burial, the funeral parlor will obtain a death certificate, terminate the deceased’s residency permit, and procure a certificate from the health department that confirms that the corpse has no infectious diseases. If the individual is to be interred in Germany, the company must acquire a burial permit and make an appointment with the municipal cemetery to determine the time and date of the burial.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these bureaucratic operations, the company will also arrange for the ritual washing (*ghusl*) and shrouding (*kafan*) of the corpse. If the family requests it, a funeral prayer (*namaz*) will be held before burial or repatriation.

If the deceased is to be repatriated to Turkey for burial, a *leichenpass* (literally, “a corpse’s passport”) notarized by the Turkish consulate is required.<sup>16</sup> This permit allows the corpse to be shipped across international borders. The body is transported by plane and must be placed in a hermitically sealed coffin. Both funds provide a free round-trip companion ticket for a family member to accompany the deceased and pay for the costs of ground transportation to any destination in Turkey. These benefits are positive incentives for repatriation.

Importantly, if a fund member is to be buried in Germany, the fund will only cover the costs associated with the washing, shrouding, and transportation of the corpse from the site of death to the cemetery. Neither fund pays for any of the burial expenses if the member is to be interred in a German cemetery, which include the acquisition of a cemetery plot, municipal cemetery fees, and the purchase of a coffin and a tombstone.<sup>17</sup> As such, there is a disincentive for German burial. The price of a cemetery plot varies from state to state in Germany, but is typically leased for a period of twenty to forty years. In Berlin, the cost of a twenty-year plot was 865 euros in 2014 with the option to renew for another twenty years for an additional 520 Euros. In other states, particularly in the Western parts of Germany, the price of a twenty-year cemetery plot can reach upwards of 2500 euros. If the owner of the plot does not renew their lease, a new corpse will be laid in the plot and the original tombstone will be removed.

While the information available on the funds’ websites, membership applications and contracts offers no clear justification why the fees associated with German burial are excluded from their benefits package, these restrictions undoubtedly play an important role in family decisions about where to bury a fund member. In effect, both funds provide economic incentives to repatriate dead bodies to Turkey, citing, amongst other things their members’ “longing for the homeland.” Affective connections to the ancestral soil and living in a condition of estranged exile are presented as motivating factors behind the establishment of the funds. Yet by privileging repatriation over local interment, the funds themselves are important actors in the production of nostalgia for the country of origin. They help promote necropatriotism by incentivizing the return of the dead to their natal soil. And for the most part, they are highly effective. Though there are limited statistical records on this issue, the information that I was able to compile shows that of the 3,185 DITIB fund members who died in Germany in 2013, the vast

majority—3062 or 96.13 percent—were repatriated to Turkey for burial.<sup>18</sup> (See Table 3 for a detailed breakdown). A similar pattern was observed by Zirh, who observed that 95 percent of DITIB fund members who died in Germany in the year 2011 were buried in Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

Table 3: *Burial statistics of DITIB members, 2013*  
 Source: *DITIB Cenaze Fonu Website*

Age	Buried in Turkey	Buried in Germany
Male	2033	82
Female	1025	39
Stillborn	4	2
Total	3062	123
Total (%)	96.13%	3.86%

## Conclusion

What is at stake in claiming a dead body as one's own? I contend that the dead inject life into political communities, but not by their own accord. They do so with the help of institutions, organizations, and associations, some of which are connected to the state, others which operate somewhat autonomously in the realm of civil society. The funeral funds administered by DITIB and IGMG are both examples of institutions that manage the symbolic power of the dead through the organization of transnational funerals.

While it is difficult to assign a single meaning to the practice of repatriation for burial, part of the symbolic value of this ritual derives from the relationship between death, soil, and the nation-state. States possess the power to kill and at times ask their citizenry to die. Yet the territories that they govern are made meaningful by virtue of the generations of dead that lay within its soil. The dead sacralize the land and endow it with historical depth, political significance, and symbolic meaning.

Burial endows physical space with a sense of sacred placeness. It helps shape individual and group identities by producing feelings of belonging, ownership, and communal solidarity. As this paper has demonstrated however, we should be careful not to read burial decisions as mere reflections



of sentimental attachments to place. By paying attention to the economic and legal constraints imposed by funerary institutions, we can appraise the role that material calculations play in determining where a body will be buried. In doing so, we are better positioned to investigate why certain groups are invested in necropatriotism and to understand the ways in which economic incentives are used to harness the dead in the service of politics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>2</sup> David Fitzgerald, *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages its Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), Katy Gardner, “Death of a Migrant: Transnational Death Rituals and Gender Amongst British Sylhetis,” in *Global Networks* 2 (2002): 191-204, Lorena Nunez and Brittany Wheeler, “Chronicles of Death Out of Place: Management of Migrant Death in Johannesburg,” in *African Studies* 71 (2012): 212-233, Yassine Chaib, *L'Émigré et la Mort: La mort musulmane en France* (La Calade: Edisud, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), Myron J. Aronoff, “Establishing Authority: The Memorialization of Jabotinsky and the Burial of the Bar-Kochba Bones in Israel Under the Likud,” in *The Frailty of Authority*, ed. Myron Aronoff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986): 105-130, Susan Gal, “Bartok’s Funeral: Representations of Europe in Hungarian Political Rhetoric,” in *American Ethnologist* 18.3 (1991): 440-458, Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-Socialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Gardner, “Death of a Migrant.”

<sup>6</sup> Besim Can Zirh, “Following the Dead Beyond the ‘Nation’: A Map for Transnational Funeral Routes from Europe to Turkey,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35.10 (2012): 1758-1774.

<sup>7</sup> Nunez and Wheeler, “Chronicles of Death Out of Place.”

<sup>8</sup> Nathal M. Dessing, *Rituals of Birth, Circumcision, Marriage, and Death among Muslims in the Netherlands* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> My understanding of “necropolitics” differs from that of Achille Mbembe, who views it as a function of sovereign power and the distribution of life and death. In contrast, my usage of the term emphasizes the ways in which the dead are harnessed in the service of political projects. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” in *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>10</sup> Gamze Avci, “Religion, Transnationalism and Turks in Europe,” in *Turkish Studies*. 6.2 (2005): 201-213.

<sup>11</sup> The Directorate of Religious Affairs was established in 1924 shortly after the founding of the Turkish Republic. With the abolishing of the Caliphate and the creation of the *Diyanet*, the nascent

Turkish state embarked upon a campaign of laicization, best understood not as the separation of religion and politics, but rather, as the extension of state control over religion. Inspired by the French model of *laïcité*, the founders of the Republic created institutions to manage and propagate an ‘official Islam.’ In doing so, the *Diyanet* ensured that Islam retained a prominent and state-defined position in public and political life. See Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> *Gurbet* does not have a direct equivalent in English. It means to live abroad, away from one’s homeland, but has strong connotations of alienation, estrangement and longing. To live in *gurbet* is an undesirable condition, and Turks living outside of Turkey are sometimes referred to as “*gurbetçi*” (one who lives in *gurbet*). *DITIB Cenaze Tanıtım Broşürü*. Available here: <<http://www.ditib.de/default1.php?id=6&sid=14&lang=en>> Accessed January 16, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Nermin Abadan-Unat, *Turks in Europe: From Guestworker to Transnational Citizen* (New York: Berghahn, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Gökçe Yurdakul and Ahmet Yükleven, “Islam, Conflict, and Integration: Turkish Religious Associations in Germany,” *Turkish Studies* 10.2 (2009): 217-231.

<sup>15</sup> There are approximately 32,000 graveyards in Germany of which 250 have dedicated areas reserved for Islamic burials. For more information about Muslim cemeteries in Germany see “Muslim Funeral Culture and Graveyards in Germany” <[www.initiative-kabir.de](http://www.initiative-kabir.de)>. Accessed May 15, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> The first treaty concerning the cross-border transportation of corpses was signed in 1937 as the “International Convention on the Transport of Corpses” and updated in 1973 with the “Agreement on the Transport of Corpses.” The agreement requires that corpses being shipped across international borders be furnished a *laissez-passer* or *leichenpass* (Article 3). For the full text of the Agreement see “Agreement on the Transfer of Corpses”

<<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/080.htm>> Accessed June 10, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> German burial laws vary from state to state. Some states (Nordrhein-Westfalen, Baden-Württemberg, Hessen, Berlin and Hamburg) allow for burial according to Islamic tradition, in which a corpse is wrapped in a cloth shroud and buried without a coffin. In recent years, German Muslims have successfully lobbied for the creation of Islamic cemeteries and the relaxation of burial laws to accommodate different religious traditions. However, most states still require that an individual is buried in a coffin. See Michael Scott Moore, “Homeward Bound: Muslims in Germany Choose to be Buried Abroad” *Der Spiegel*, February 21, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> DITIB periodically posts a list of its members who have passed away in the current calendar year on its website: <<http://www.cenazefonu.de/v1/defaultvefatedenuyeler.php?p=4>> Accessed January 14, 2014. Unfortunately, IGMG does not keep public records about the burial location of its members, but based on my interviews with IGMG fund administrators, around 80-90% of fund members are repatriated to Turkey for burial. What remains to be seen is whether or not individuals who are not members of funeral funds are repatriated for burial in such high numbers.

<sup>19</sup> Zirh, “Following the Dead Beyond the ‘Nation.’ Of the 2,866 funerals of DITIB members in 2011, 2,718 were repatriated to Turkey for burial.