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Between Civil Society and the State: Bureaucratic Competence and Cultural Mediation among Muslim Undertakers in Berlin

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intercultural negotiations around the death and burial of Muslims in Germany. In particular, it examines the mediating role that Muslim undertakers play between immigrant families and the German state. Drawing on an ethnographic study of Turkish funeral homes and the Islamic funeral industry in Berlin, it argues that undertakers' ability to navigate the regulatory structures of the German bureaucracy and the cultural expectations of their customers is a defining feature of their occupational identity and a principal source of their professional authority. As intermediaries between civil society and the state, undertakers guide families through the cultural, religious, political, and legal landscapes that structure the transitions from life to death. In burying the dead and tending to the living, they must reconcile competing sets of administrative and cultural norms surrounding death and interment. In doing so, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin preside not only over end-of-life decisions and their theological implications, but also over pedagogical moments in processes of political and cultural integration in contemporary Germany.

KEYWORDS

Migration; undertakers and undertaking; Islamic funerary services; intercultural encounter; Muslims in Germany; Berlin; Necropolitics

Undertakers occupy a unique niche in the world of professions. Although they operate within the legal parameters of the market, their proximity to death and the disquieting idea that their livelihood is based on the grief and suffering of others can be a source of stigmatisation (Thompson 1991, Cahill 1995). Conversely, their ability to help guide families through difficult and often painful situations can earn undertakers a great deal of respect and admiration from the communities they serve (Laderman 2003, Smith 2010). While their primary task is the disposal of the dead, a central component of undertakers' professional responsibility involves attending to the living. In this capacity, they assume different roles and perform a wide range of activities from bereavement support and religious counselling to legal arbitration and conflict resolution (Lynch 1997). The work of undertaking takes on political salience in multicultural settings where different ethnic and religious groups have divergent views on death and dying, end-of-life care, and the proper treatment of corpses. In situations where there is some uncertainty

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about funerary traditions and burial laws, undertakers often play a critical part in navigating the political, legal, religious, and cultural landscapes that structure transitions from life to death.

This article explores the intercultural negotiations around the death and burial of Muslims in Germany. In particular, it examines the mediating role that Muslim undertakers play between immigrant families and the German state. The rites and rituals associated with death are remarkably varied across cultures, as are the laws and institutions that regulate the governance of dead bodies. When a death occurs in migratory situations, families are often compelled to negotiate alternative systems of burial and memorialisation (Oliver 2004). The laws of the dead can be at odds with the cultural traditions and religious beliefs of immigrant groups, leading to conflicts around the handling of corpses (Renteln 2001, Carpenter, B., et al., 2015). Moreover, death rituals themselves might undergo change in migratory contexts when immigrants encounter different ways of performing funerary rites and adapt their own practices in response to institutional constraints in the host society (Venhorst 2012).

Immigrant families are faced with a number of other choices, including the method of disposal (burial, cremation, or other alternatives) and the site of the funeral (in the country of origin, settlement, or both). Such decisions are influenced by various factors such as costs, territorial attachments, the availability of appropriate burial grounds, family ties, and feelings of social exclusion (Attias-Donfut *et al.* 2005, Balkan 2015a). In recent years, a growing number of private companies, governmental agencies, and funeral funds have been established to subsidize, facilitate, and in some cases, encourage the transportation of corpses and human remains both within and across international borders (Félix 2011, Marjavaara 2012, Jassal 2014, Balkan 2015b). The increased mobility of the dead has led to a proliferation of new strategies for mourning and memorialisation that may or may not draw on existing repertoires of grief (Prendergast *et al.* 2006). By augmenting the period between death and burial and extending it over geographical space, transnational funerals have impacted both the ritualization of death and the meanings attributed to the place of burial. While this article is less concerned with broader transformations in mortuary rituals in the wake of heightened mobility (see Gardner 2002, Mazzucato *et al.* 2006, Zirh 2012), it is important to point out that undertakers play an important role in this process, particularly as intermediaries between grieving families and the state.

When Muslim migrants with different social and sectarian backgrounds disagree about what constitutes a proper Islamic funeral, undertakers are able to intervene to bridge the gap between what is permissible and what is possible under Islamic law. Previous research on the funerary rituals of Muslim minorities in Germany has shown how Muslim undertakers mediate religious disputes by developing practical solutions to seemingly unsolvable theological problems (Jonker 1996). Although they usually lack the requisite training to make authoritative pronouncements on religious questions, their expertise in matters related to the dead provides Muslim undertakers in the diaspora with a certain amount of religious credibility. As such, they are able to offer religious guidance to Muslims in Germany and to mediate disagreements that arise within the community.

While knowledge of different religious and sectarian traditions is critical to the provision of appropriate funerary services, this article contends that a different type of mediation is also central to the work of undertaking in a migratory context. As private

actors who negotiate issues of citizenship and sovereignty in relation to the dead, Muslim undertakers serve as political and cultural mediators between immigrant families and the German state. In the following analysis I argue that their ability to navigate the regulatory structures of the German bureaucracy and the cultural expectations of their customers is a defining feature of their occupational identity and a principal source of their professional authority. In burying the dead and tending to the living, Muslim undertakers must reconcile competing sets of administrative and cultural norms surrounding death and interment. In doing so, they preside not only over end-of-life decisions and their theological implications, but also over pedagogical moments of political and cultural integration in contemporary Germany.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. I first provide an overview of the German funeral industry and the legal structures governing burial in Germany. I then move to a description of my field site and methods. This article draws on ethnographic and qualitative research conducted among Turkish undertakers who provide Islamic funerary services in Berlin. I present and analyse narratives drawn from my interviews to show how the undertakers offer political and cultural mediation between civil society and the state. I focus on two dimensions of their mediation that relates to their knowledge of the German bureaucracy and their efforts to combat stereotypes about Muslims in Germany. I conclude with a discussion about the role of undertakers in intercultural negotiations around death and dying.

Becoming an undertaker

The German death-care business is estimated to be a 15 billion euro industry (Akyel 2013). Although there are some larger companies that have subsidiaries throughout the country such as the well-known *Ahorn-Grieneisen*, it is a sector that is mostly dominated by small, family-owned firms with a long company history (*Ibid*). According to the website of the Federal Association of German Undertakers (Bundesverband Deutscher Bestatter e.V., 2015), there are approximately 4000 funeral homes in Germany that oversee the burial and cremation of 860,000 people annually (Bundesverband Deutscher Bestatter e.V., 2015). While it is difficult to estimate the total number of Islamic funeral homes in Germany, they currently represent a small share of the overall market. In the city of Berlin, which is the focus of this study, there are around 300 funeral homes, 6 of which are explicitly oriented towards the city's Muslim communities.

Although there are no educational requirements to become an undertaker in Germany, individuals wishing to enter the funeral industry can receive hands-on training through Germany's vocational education system (*Berufsschule*). In 2003, undertaking was added to the list of 350 officially recognized professions that vocational students can apprentice in. The creation of the first Federal Training Center for Undertaking in the Bavarian city of Münnerstadt in 2005 has enabled death workers to receive further training in mortuary sciences. The Centre offers one- to three-year educational programmes that cover topics such as grief psychology, business administration, and coffin construction. While the goal of the Centre is to help institute standardized training in the funeral industry, in practice, little more than a business license is necessary to open a private funeral company in Germany.

Consumers can freely purchase funerary services through the commercial marketplace, but the handling and disposal of corpses is strictly regulated by the German state. Up until the 19th century the organization of funerals in Germany as in other parts of Europe was primarily the domain of the Church (Kselman 1993, Walter 2005). With the growth of towns and cities and concomitant problems of sanitation and disease, the state took a more active role to contain the public health risks posed by dead bodies by creating new institutions to oversee the burial of the dead. Cemeteries were placed under the control of municipal authorities and comprehensive burial laws were established at the state level, dictating everything from the depth and width of a grave to the number of years that a burial plot could be leased before it is recycled and reused.

As Schulz (2013) has observed, modern German sepulchral culture is highly regulated and regimented. The decentralized nature of German burial law means that there are important discrepancies in terms of what burial practices are legally permissible across Germany's sixteen states. Schulz (2013) points out that six states prohibit the use of open caskets at funeral ceremonies; two states prohibit burial at sea; and only one state allows the establishment and ownership of cemeteries by non-municipal or non-religious entities. All states require that corpses and cremains are buried in public or officially licensed cemeteries, which means that practically speaking, it is illegal to keep ashes in one's home. Moreover, only five states allow for burial without a coffin (shroud burial) in line with Islamic and Jewish traditions.

Having an authoritative command of burial law helps constitute the undertaker as an expert. Planning a funeral can be a bewildering and emotionally draining process and one of the ways that undertakers alleviate some of the uncertainty surrounding funerary proceedings is by advising families on the rules governing burial. Their ability to provide accurate answers to questions about interment and to explain the procedural steps leading up to the funeral endows them with professional credibility. This is all the more evident in situations where people have different assumptions and expectations about what a funeral entails.

There are a number of important discrepancies between Islamic funerary traditions and the laws of the dead in Germany that can create confusion and cause problems for families and undertakers alike. According to Islamic tradition, a corpse should be washed, shrouded, and buried as soon as possible in a grave facing the Qibla in Mecca. The dead are to be buried amongst other Muslims rather than in mixed-confessional parcels and the grave should be left undisturbed in perpetuity. In practice, Muslims in Germany face a number of legal and practical impediments in the mortuary realm, including mandatory waiting periods of 48 hours between death and burial, time limits ranging from 5 to 20 years on the leasing of grave plots, the obligatory use of a coffin for burial in 11 out of 16 federal states, and the limited availability of Islamic cemeteries or sections of cemeteries that are reserved exclusively for Muslims. Of the approximately 32,000 cemeteries in Germany, only 250 – less than 1 Per cent – have parcels that are reserved for Muslim graves (Initiative Kabir 2015).

Since the 'success' of a funeral ceremony is judged by the degree to which it conforms to customer expectations, undertakers must balance the interests and desires of bereaved families with the laws of the state. If they promise more than they can realistically deliver, they run the risk of harming their reputation and losing future business. Conversely, if they appear too rigid and inflexible, they may be viewed as insensitive and criticized for acting against the interests of families.

Method

This discussion is situated within a larger research project on Islamic deathways in Germany that explores variations in how death is managed and memorialized by ethno-religious minorities in a migratory context. My primary research site was Berlin, a city with roughly 3.5 million inhabitants, 15.3 per cent of which are foreign nationals and 30 per cent of whom have a 'migration background' according to figures from the most recent census (*Statistik Berlin Brandenburg* 2014).[1] Berlin is not only one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Germany, it is also a place where migrants are more actively involved in local politics relative to other German cities, particularly on issues related to integration and citizenship rights (Koopmans 2004). As such, it is an opportune site to investigate the link between burial practices and political integration.

Over the course of a four-month period in 2013–2014, I conducted 40 interviews with Turkish and Kurdish families, Muslim undertakers, cemetery personnel, religious leaders, government officials, health-care professionals, and representatives of funeral assistance funds. In selecting my interview partners, I was guided by contacts at mosques and cultural centres that cater to a wide range of Berlin's immigrant community, including members of Sunni, Shi'a, and Alevi faiths, and individuals with Turkish and Kurdish backgrounds. My fieldwork included extensive participant observation of the Islamic funeral industry in Berlin, a sector that is largely dominated by Turkish firms. Out of the six officially registered companies that offer Islamic funerary services, five are owned and operated by Turkish Muslims. I spent a significant amount of time shadowing these undertakers and observed every aspect of their work. This included picking up corpses from morgues and hospitals, preparing them for burial, and transporting them to the cemetery or to the airport for international shipment, visiting different municipal offices and foreign consulates to acquire and file the requisite paperwork for burial or repatriation, attending funerals and funeral services at mosques, and observing interactions with customers, families, religious leaders, and other service providers such as cemetery workers. In total, I shadowed seven undertakers from five of Berlin's six Islamic funeral homes. I was unable to meet with anyone from the sixth funeral home, in spite of repeated attempts to make contact.

Lengthy semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 of the undertakers, all of whom were Turkish or Turkish-German men between the ages of 35 and 60. Two of them were born and raised in Berlin, two emigrated with their families as teenagers, and two came to Germany as adults. None of them had any previous experience or had a family connection to the funeral industry before becoming an undertaker in Germany. Collectively, they had worked in the funeral business for between 5 and 30 years with an average length of 18 years. While the number of women in the funeral industry has increased in recent years, the division of labour tends to be highly gendered and women often hold administrative roles, whereas men are tasked with handling, transporting, and preparing the corpse for burial (see Parsons 1999, Bremborg 2006, for exceptions see Pringle and Alley 1995, Doughty 2014). Of the five Islamic funeral homes that I studied, only one had a female employee and her primary role in the company was as an accountant. Although my own positionality as a Turkish-speaking male may have helped earn the trust of my informants and positively impacted their willingness to participate in this study, several of the undertakers mentioned that they had been previously

interviewed by other researchers, both men and women and Germans and Turks alike. Most of them were enthusiastic participants and were eager to share their stories and experiences.

Many insights were gleaned from unprompted comments and interactions in the field, but the more formal setting of the interview allowed me to collect data in a more systematic manner. All of the interviews took place at the undertakers' place of work and lasted between one to four hours. They were often followed up with clarifying questions at a later date. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and translated, transcribed, and thematically coded by the author. The names of the undertakers have been changed to protect their identities. A broad range of topics were covered, including their own personal histories and entry into the funeral industry, the laws of the dead and the feasibility of Islamic burial in Germany, differences between Christian and Islamic funerary traditions and funeral companies, and the attitudes and expectations of their customers. When the theme of cultural and political mediation emerged as a dominant and recurring trope in the transcripts, a series of sub-themes were identified, including bureaucratic competence, socio-political integration, and combatting stereotypes about Muslims. The discussion that follows will largely focus on these three issues.

The timing of this research project proved to be auspicious. In May 2014, two weeks before I returned to the field, German police raided the offices of an Islamic funeral home and eighteen other properties across Berlin in a coordinated effort to crack down on a network of human traffickers. Although the criminal investigation is still ongoing, two Muslim undertakers as well as a city official were taken into police custody and questioned about their alleged involvement in the sale of passports of the dead to human traffickers in Syria and Palestine (see New York Times 2014). This scandal offered an opportune moment for members of the Islamic funeral industry to reflect on the behaviour of their colleagues and competitors and to offer a defence of their own professional integrity.

In the next section, I draw on these narratives to analyse the relationship between bureaucratic competence, cultural know-how, and professional authority. As stated above, an important dimension of the undertakers' authority is premised on their familiarity with the laws surrounding death and their capacity to anticipate and manage customer expectations. In their dealings with bereaved immigrant families, a lack of knowledge about the German bureaucracy was taken as a sign of poor integration. The undertakers' ability to mediate between civil society and the state enabled them to assert jurisdictional boundaries and to claim professional status.

Bureaucratic competence

'It's not like Turkey here', says Mert, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. We are sitting in his office, located on a busy commercial strip in the neighbourhood of Neukölln. The funeral home is situated on a block that is lined with restaurants, cafes, hookah bars, bakeries, supermarkets, and travel agencies. Most of the signage is in Arabic or Turkish, reflecting the demographic composition of the neighbourhood. Around a quarter of Neukölln's residents are immigrants, hailing from many different countries in the Middle East. Walking around the neighbourhood, some might quibble with Mert's assessment given the conspicuous signs of ethnic identity, but

Mert is not speaking about the cultural topography of his block. His comments pertain to the German way of death.

In confronting death in the diaspora, immigrants are compelled to navigate different bureaucratic structures, burial practices, and rituals of memorialization that are incongruous and potentially antithetical to the rites and traditions in their country of origin. In such situations, undertakers play an important pedagogical role. They must instruct their customers not only about the laws of the dead but by extension, the legal-rational order of the host society. 'Our people have been here for fifty years and they still think they can ship a body on a Saturday or a Sunday', Mert continues. 'They think this is like some village in Turkey. But there are a lot of formalities here. We haven't been able to teach this to our people'.

The notion of the Anatolian village was a recurrent theme in my interviews. Turkey, or some idea of Turkey, informed much of the undertakers' judgements and observations about the German system. Some, including Mert, had spent time between both countries and drew on their own personal experiences when making assessments about the differences between the two countries. Bora, another undertaker whom I interviewed, has been in the funeral business for eighteen years. He emigrated to Berlin with his parents from a village near Ankara at the age of 11. While his childhood was spent in Turkey, most of his formative years were in Germany. Nonetheless, the Anatolian village serves as a major point of reference during our conversation.

'Our people have been living here for fifty years', he tells me.

> They could live here for another hundred and fifty years and they still wouldn't understand the system! They don't understand the German system, nor do they want to understand it. Whatever pre-existing mentality they brought with them from Anatolia, that village mentality, it's still there.

Although we are discussing burial practices and the German bureaucracy, Bora and Mert emphasize something much broader. They insist that their customers have unrealistic expectations that indicate poor integration into German society. Both men refer to the half-century of Turkish migration to Germany and speak to what they see as a lack of acculturation to German norms. For Mert, a customer who assumes that a corpse can be repatriated on a Saturday is clearly unfamiliar with the working hours of state offices in Germany, which are closed on the weekends. Such assumptions are seen not merely as misunderstandings, but as evidence that some migrants stubbornly refuse to adapt to the German order. In a similar vein, Bora posits that Turkish immigrants have anachronistic ideas about the way things work in Germany owing to their 'village mentality'. Bora is critical of his customers for what he sees as their unwillingness to acknowledge or accept the structural constraints of the 'German system'. Their mentalities are seen as durable and portable dispositions, not unlike a habitus, that frames the ways in which they approach and navigate German space.

Even undertakers who have little personal experience in the ways of rural life in Turkey refer to the Anatolian village when talking about Turkish immigrants in Germany. Ertan was born and raised in Schöneberg, a middle-class neighbourhood in West Berlin. His grandfather was part of the first-generation of Turkish labour migrants (*Gastarbeiter*) who came to Germany in the 1960s. Ertan is 35 years old and has worked as an undertaker for six years. I ask him about the bureaucratic procedures involved in the steps leading up

to a burial and he gives me a rundown of all the different government offices that he must visit to acquire the necessary papers and permits:

> I go to the *Bürgeramt* [civil office] and do an *Abmeldung* [unregister] and then I have to go to the *Standesamt* [registry office] and get the death certificate. Then I have to go to the *Gesundheitsamt* [health department] and get a health report, then go back to the *Bürgeramt* to get the *Leichenpass* [transit permit for a corpse] and then to the Consulate.

He underscores the fact that these operations take a lot of time, noting that his customers are unaware of the complexity of the procedures involved. Like Mert and Bora, he interprets their position as reflecting a rural mindset and makes no attempt to hide his sarcasm as he tells me

> Of course, since the customer knows everything, they say, when you pick up the corpse, let's just fax the paper to the *Standesamt*. I tell them, it's not that simple. I have to go to five different government bureaus first. When they hear that they are really surprised. Our people think that when there's a funeral, you can bury it within two hours or whatever, just like in the village. But this is Germany! There are bureaucratic procedures we have to do. But our people don't know this. Or they know it and don't want to admit it. And because of these situations, we are under a lot of stress. Our work isn't easy.

Although Ertan has no first-hand experience with rural funerary traditions, he uses the notion of the Anatolian village as a strategy to distinguish his own structural position from that of his customers. For all three undertakers quoted above, bureaucratic competence is a mark of distinction that delineates social integration. Germany is described as a highly regulated and bureaucratized country and one's ability to comprehend and navigate its bureaucracy is evidence of proper integration. In making the claim that knowledge of the legal-rational order is an important metric by which to judge social status, the undertakers draw on existing public discourses in Germany that take immigrants, particularly Muslims, as objects of pedagogical intervention by the state. In recent years the German government has launched a number of programmes aimed at creating institutional spaces for inter-religious dialogue, most notably the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (German Islam Conference). Such programmes have come under scrutiny for flattening differences across Muslim communities, creating divisions within German society, and for treating Muslims as a group that is to be governed and governable (see Peter 2010, Dornhof 2012).

While socio-political integration of immigrant communities has been a stated policy of the German state, in the examples presented above, the agents of change are not state actors, but private individuals from the immigrant community. What endows them with credibility to make judgements and interventions on topics beyond their immediate area of expertise – the burial of the dead – is linked to their own ability to move between the bureaucratic spaces of the German legal system and the cultural expectations of their customers. As Bora tells me later in our interview, 'I grew up between two different cultures but I must have picked up a lot of German traits. I work with appointments. I explain the rules to people. I tell them how the system works. I know very well that other [funeral] companies tell their clients

> 'Don't worry, we can ship the body tomorrow'. But it's a lie. I explain all the procedures to my customers. I tell them about the different governmental offices that I need to go to, the different paperwork that is required. I tell them this so that they have the information. But when I

> tell them this, I'm the bad guy. They'd rather hear 'don't worry, I'll take care of it'. Even if it's impossible. I don't like to do that and for that reason I guess I've become more German when it comes to these matters. That's how I am.

For Bora, educating his customers in the particularities of the regulatory structures governing the handling and disposal of the dead is a crucial, though risky, part of his job. While he admonishes his competitors for providing false information to bereaved clients, he also recognizes that his inability to meet customer expectations can hurt his reputation in the eyes of his clients. Nonetheless, his insistence on transparency and full disclosure demonstrates how an important aspect of his occupational identity is premised on cultural and political mediation. While his knowledge of the bureaucracy helps constitute his expertise, his ability to help guide families through an unfamiliar bureaucratic terrain is central to his work as a mediator between civil society and the state.

Alongside the immigrant communities that Berlin's Muslim undertakers serve, they also work hand-in-hand with various agencies and agents of the German state. Another dimension of the mediating work that they perform involves combatting negative stereotypes about Muslims in Germany. In the next section, I will analyse some of the strategies they use to establish their credibility as cultural representatives. By presenting themselves as responsible, professional, well-integrated, and knowledgeable individuals, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin attempt to demystify popular assumptions and misconceptions about Muslim immigrants in Germany. In some cases they take on the role of a spokesman and pedagogue willingly but in others they are put in a position where they are compelled to speak on behalf of others.

Countering stereotypes

Previous studies of death workers in Western Europe and North America have argued that undertakers often develop techniques to curb negative perceptions of the funeral industry and to reduce personal stigmatization. In his ethnographic study of funeral directors in four American states, Thompson (1991) claims that death workers use a variety of role-distancing techniques to combat stigmatization, including emotional detachment, humour, and countering stereotypes. Likewise, Howarth (1996, 88–91) suggests that undertakers adopt different strategies to allow them to 'pass as just another ordinary human being', including habitually distorting, omitting information, or evading questions about their occupation. In my own research, I found that stigmatization was not a major issue for the Muslim undertakers of Berlin, at least in terms of the stigma attached to their professional occupation. A larger and more politically salient problem that they faced in the course of their work was the stigma related to popular perceptions of Muslims in Germany. Consequently, one of the important tasks that they saw themselves performing was combatting negative ideas about Islam by countering stereotypes and prejudices through their own behaviour.

'I teach a lot of classes in hospitals and police stations about the things that people should pay attention to when there is a Muslim funeral' explains Ismail. He is a clean shaven, smartly dressed man in his early 50s, wearing a neatly pressed suit and tie. Ismail migrated to Germany at the age of six with his parents and was the first in his family to earn a university degree. Our interview takes place in his office, a light-filled building with its own morgue, sitting room, and garden. He has worked in the funeral

business for seven years, having started as employee of the German firm *Ahorn-Grieneisen*. In 2011 Ismail left *Grieneisen* to start his own company, which he runs to this day. We have been talking about the Islamic funeral industry in Berlin and Ismail has spent the last few minutes chiding his competitors, whom he views as unprofessional and inexperienced. Unprompted, he switches gears to tell me about his efforts at educational outreach. 'Since 9/11' he continues,

> people in Germany get a little uneasy when they hear the word Muslim. I try to alleviate those fears in my classes. I often invite people to come visit my business because it's much easier to allay their concerns when they come in and see things for themselves.

In his classes, Ismail covers topics related to the handling of Muslim corpses, offers advice on how to treat dying Muslims and on steps that can be taken to establish bonds of trust with their families. 'Germans are really afraid of Muslims', he tells me.

> And after those events in the US they are even more afraid. When someone says 'Bismillahirrahmanirrahim' (In the name of Allah), the Germans will look around and say, 'What's going on? Is there a bomb? […] In the courses I teach I try to take away this fear.

For Ismail, negative stereotypes about Muslims in Germany are pervasive and have been heightened in the post-9/11 era. The conflation of Islam with violence is a symptom of a broader problem of misrepresentation and prejudice. Although his account might be slightly embellished, it is clear that Ismail sees a need to correct unfavourable images of Muslim immigrants by educating those who have regular contact with Muslims in their line of work. One strategy that he employs is explicitly pedagogical. By visiting hospitals and speaking with staff members his goal is to educate them on Islamic death rites and rituals so that they can provide proper care. Another strategy has to do with his own appearance and self-presentation.

> Most people who visit my funeral home expect to see a bearded man, a *hacı hoca* [Turkish slang for an ostentatious religious figure]. When they see me they are surprised. They ask me, "wait, are you a Muslim?" because they were expecting someone with a big beard [laughs].

Ismail expresses a certain pleasure in this sort of misrecognition. By not conforming to the expected image of a Muslim undertaker he challenges preconceptions about what a Muslim should look like. In embodying and presenting an alternative Islamic identity, Ismail hopes to dispel some of the myths that circulate in the German public sphere. As an undertaker, he does not represent any particular group or community. Yet as these examples demonstrate, Ismail willingly embraces the role of a public figure with a political mission. In challenging expectations about Muslims in Germany, Ismail provides a type of corrective cultural mediation.

Appearances can be deceiving however, and individuals who bear certain physical signs of a purported Islamic identity can face a different set of challenges related to racial profiling and discrimination. On a sunny afternoon I accompany Ertan to the *Landschaftsfriedhof Gatow*, a cemetery in the neighbourhood of Spandau, on the Western outskirts of Berlin. *Gatow* is one of the two cemeteries in the city with dedicated sections reserved for Islamic graves. We are greeted by two gravediggers and a cemetery administrator whom Ertan has known for many years. The four men have a cordial relationship and make frequent jokes with one another. As we approach them, they point to Ertan and

exclaim 'Taliban! Look out! The Taliban is here!' Although it is all in jest, Ertan has frequently experienced such taunts in his private and professional life. He sees it as a challenge that he must personally overcome in order to correct misconceptions about Muslims in Germany. With his long beard, he knows that he might appear threatening to some people but attempts to counter the stereotype of the violent, fundamentalist Muslim through his personal interactions with civil servants and public officials.

> When I go to municipalities in the East, places like Pankow, Hellersdorf [neighborhoods in what was formerly East Berlin], people look at me and size me up. Dark hair, beard, Turkish, foreigner. When they see the beard they think Muslim

he explains, highlighting the link between physical appearance and presumed religiosity.

> When they make that connection it's over. Maybe they imagine Osama Bin Laden, or a bomb, or the twin towers. But when I start speaking to them in German, they are really surprised … I can sense a change in their tone of voice. And maybe because of this, I'm able to give them a different example of what a Muslim or a Turk looks like.

As mentioned above, Ertan was born and raised in Berlin. He has native fluency in German. Yet because of the way he looks, people make certain assumptions about him, concluding that he is unlikely to speak proper German. Language is an intrinsic part of social identity and questions of linguistic competence are particularly salient in debates around immigration and integration in Germany. With the reform of Germany's citizenship laws in 2000, proficiency in the German language was established as a precondition for naturalization and the acquisition of German citizenship (Piller 2001). This legislation reflects the popular perception that immigrants in Germany lack the requisite language skills to fully participate in German society. Given the tenor of these debates, it is not surprising that Ertan encounters some degree of disbelief when he is able to communicate clearly and effectively. By doing so, he is able to challenge some of the misconceptions about immigrants' linguistic capabilities.

Alongside his efforts to correct stereotypes about language, Ertan is often compelled to speak on behalf of Muslims or Turkish immigrants in Germany. Unlike Ismail, who seeks venues to speak to public officials on topics related to Islam, Ertan's interventions and mediations occur during routine visits to bureaucratic offices during the course of his work. During our interview I ask him about the funeral company that has been accused of selling passports and whether it has impacted his own business in any way. He explains that he faces heightened suspicion in the municipal offices and interprets this as part of a broader pattern of discrimination. 'If one person makes a mistake' he tells me, 'we all suffer for it'. Ertan questions whether German funeral companies have had to face a similar degree of scrutiny in the aftermath of the passport scandal, and recounts how he has had to explain to numerous civil servants in the municipal offices that he has no connection to the company that is under investigation. 'These are people I've known and worked with for years', he continues, in reference to the civil servants whose offices he regularly visits to file paperwork.

> Now they ask me questions like, "Why are Turks so angry? Does Islam allow that?" And I tell them this has nothing to do with Islam, it has to do with the person. Being hot tempered is a personality trait!

The erasure of difference and the homogenization of diversity is one of the pernicious effects of stereotyping. Ertan's comments draw from his own personal experiences but reflect a broader practice of taking individual behaviour as indicative of an entire group. Although as an undertaker, Ertan would not be expected to weigh in on theological issues or to provide sociological analyses of group dynamics, as someone who is read as a Muslim he frequently finds himself in a position where he is required to do so. This suggests that a certain type of cultural and political mediation is characteristic of professionals like the Muslim undertakers of Berlin, who operate between civil society and the state.

More broadly, it points to an important feature of the lived experience of Western Muslims in Europe and North America today. To a certain extent, there is a constant demand placed on Western Muslims to speak for, and on behalf of Islam or the ethnic or national communities, they are perceived as being a part of. Such demands not only essentialize minorities by foregrounding certain aspects of their identity, but also place an undue burden on individuals belonging to minority groups to speak on behalf of the entire community. As Norton (2013, 42) has argued, the compulsory speech acts required of Muslims in the West attest to the 'radical narrowing of the right to free speech'. While Ertan and Ismail's efforts to counter existing stereotypes about German Muslims can be seen as small steps in bringing about broader shifts in public perceptions, it is important not to overlook the asymmetrical dynamics of power at work in such interactions. The demand that all Muslims be prepared to speak on behalf of Islam threatens not only to trivialize politics, but to strengthen the divisive binaries that posit a hierarchy of citizenship amongst those who belong and those who do not in contemporary Germany.

Conclusion

This article has sought to highlight the work of political and cultural mediation that is performed by the Muslim undertakers of Berlin. As intermediaries between immigrant communities and the German state, undertakers help families navigate the cultural, religious, political, and legal landscapes that structure the transitions from life to death. Their cultural capital and professional credibility is derived from their ability to anticipate and manage the expectations of their customers while guiding them through the German bureaucracy. Weber (1978, 225) famously asserted that 'bureaucratic administration is domination through knowledge'. As this article has shown, the authority of the Muslim undertaker is in part a function of his knowledge of the bureaucracy.

In mediating between civil society and the state, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin not only help instruct immigrant families in the legal-rational order of the German bureaucracy, but also engage with members of that order to counter and dispel stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in Germany. Their role as a spokesperson is at times taken up willingly, but can also be thrust upon them. Consequently, their ability to serve as cultural translators or political brokers can be seen both as a positive effort to fight prejudice and as an example of the uneven power dynamics that frame contemporary discussions about Islam in the West.

Recent scholarship has stressed the need for the provision of culturally appropriate palliative and end-of-life care in places such as hospitals and hospices, while insisting that

practitioners remain mindful of the diversity of lived experiences that exist as much within cultures as across them (Gunaratnam 2013). This article has attempted to demonstrate that the intercultural negotiations around death and dying do not conclude with the death of an immigrant. Post-mortem procedures are governed by a different set of rules and regulations that raise culturally inflected questions about the proper treatment and handling of corpses. In migratory settings, undertakers play an important role in mediating between the expectations of their customers and the laws of the state. As such, they are not simply professionals that oversee the burial of the dead, but cultural and political mediators that preside over pedagogical moments in the transitions from life to death.

Note

1. A 'person with a migration background' is an official category employed by the Federal Statistics Office that includes everyone who migrated to the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949 as well as all foreigners born in Germany after 1949, and all Germans born in Germany with one parent who immigrated to Germany after 1949, or one parent who was born as a non-German citizen in Germany.

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