

# Undertaking as a Vocation

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ABSTRACT: Undertakers occupy a unique niche in the world of professions. Although they operate within the legal framework of the market, their proximity to death and the disquieting idea that their livelihood is based on the grief and suffering of others is a source of stigmatization that they must overcome in order to attain social acceptance and professional credibility. Previous studies of the funeral industry have mainly focused on death workers whose socio-cultural and religious backgrounds align with dominant groups in society. Far less attention has been paid to undertakers who are members of and cater to ethnic and religious minorities. Drawing on four months of ethnographic research, this paper explores the nascent Islamic funeral industry in Germany. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Muslim undertakers face a similar set of challenges and contradictions related to social taboos around profit and death. While they deploy many of the same arguments to shore up their professional authority, I argue that what sets them apart from their German colleagues is the idea that cultural mediation is a central tenet of their occupational identity. In attending to the bereaved, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin serve as middlemen between ethno-religious minorities and the state. Their ability to navigate both the intricacies of the German bureaucracy and the cultural expectations of their customers is an important source of their expertise and professional authority.

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The thought of a corpse conjures up a mixture of emotions ranging from fear and repulsion to morbid curiosity. Dead bodies are dangerous because they are polluting on both a physical and symbolic level. Physical pollution stems from their association with disease and the threat of contamination, while symbolic pollution from the widespread fear of mortality and bodily decay. Because the corpse is a source of pollution and danger it must be separated from the living as quickly as possible and contained through proper rites and rituals. Hence the undertaker. Undertakers spend a lot of time with dead people. They pick them up from homes and hospitals, inject them with chemicals and other 'restorative' agents, and dress them up or down according to religious customs and/or aesthetic sensibilities. They bury them in cemeteries large and small in cheap pine boxes or costlier receptacles lined with silk and satin. They burn them in industrial grade machines that reduce the body to a heap of smoldering ash. In one way or another, they make them disappear.

Because of their proximity to death and dead bodies, undertakers are a stigmatized group. The troubling idea that their economic livelihood is based on the suffering of others is something that they must overcome in order to gain social acceptance and professional credibility. In their attempts to reduce stigmatization undertakers adopt a variety of discursive strategies to combat negative images of the funeral industry and justify their own position within it. Previous studies of the funeral market have largely focused on death workers whose socio-cultural and religious backgrounds align with dominant groups in society<sup>1</sup>. While these studies have shed much light

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the studies of the funeral industry in general and undertakers in particular focus on white, Christian males in Western European or North American contexts. See Bremborg 2006, Cahill 1999, Emke 2002, Fulton 1961, Harmer 1963, Howarth 1996, Hyland and Morse 1995, Mitford 1963, Thompson 1991. There are a few case studies that look at undertakers in other national contexts like Japan (Suzuki 2001) and Australia (Carden 2001), and others that are attentive to minority undertakers working with precarious populations such as blacks in the Jim Crow South (Smith 2010), not to mention a large body of anthropological literature that deals with funerary rituals in different cultural settings. Overall however, most of the literature on the funeral industry is constricted to undertakers who belong to majority groups in society.

on the processes of professionalization and socialization of undertakers in a variety of national and historical contexts, they have done so from a perspective that privileges the experience of ethnic and religious majorities. Much less attention has been paid to undertakers who are members of and cater to ethno-religious minorities. This omission is problematic for several reasons. First, it leads to an incomplete and misleading picture of the funeral market. Furthermore, it overlooks the important mediating role that undertakers play between minority groups and the state. Finally, it elides the question of how death is experienced and managed in migratory settings.

This chapter provides a case study of the nascent Islamic funeral industry in Berlin. Like their counterparts in other national contexts, Muslim undertakers in Germany face a similar set of contradictions and constraints related to social taboos around profit and death. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they also tend to deploy many of the same arguments in shoring up their professional authority. These include emphasizing the therapeutic dimensions of their work, maligning ethically questionable individuals within the trade, insisting on professionalism, downplaying profit motivations, and foregrounding the non-material benefits of their chosen occupation. What sets them apart from their German colleagues I argue, is the idea that cultural mediation is a central tenet of their occupational identity. In attending to the bereaved, Muslim undertakers serve as middlemen between ethno-religious minorities and the state. As such, their ability to navigate both the intricacies of the German bureaucracy and the cultural expectations of customers becomes an important source of their expertise and authority.

In developing this argument I first review some of the existing literature on the funeral industry and death workers. Much of the scholarly work on these topics addresses the ways in

which undertakers attempt to persuade the public that their occupation deserves social respect, professional status, and suitable economic compensation in light of social taboos and the denial of death. After outlining some of the common strategies that undertakers rely upon in their efforts to delimit stigma and legitimate their occupational roles, I turn to my case study of the Islamic funeral industry in Berlin. I present and analyze the narratives of Muslim undertakers in order to highlight some of the similarities and differences in how they understand the nature of their work and how they present themselves vis-a-vis their German colleagues. The very notion of a Muslim undertaker is somewhat of an oxymoron, since in most Muslim-majority countries, the task of burying the dead and performing proper religious rituals is carried out by the state at little or no cost to the consumer. The emergence of a private Islamic funeral market in Germany is the consequence of migratory processes that resulted in large-scale emigration from Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia in the 1960s. As such, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin are part of an emergent economic sector that offers insight into processes of professionalization. By attending to their experiences, my aim is to explore broader questions about the socialization of different groups in ethnic economies and the more specific problem of the cultural and structural dilemmas created by the marketization of death.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to explain why I think the study of death in the context of migration is an important political question. While death is a universal aspect of human life, I believe that the geographical character of loss is more salient in migratory settings where the country of birth is often different than the country of death. Death in the diaspora raises existential questions about the meaning of home and homeland. Consequently, the act of burial is a way to assert belonging, attachment, and perhaps even loyalty to a particular group,

nation, or place. It confers a sense of fixity or permanence to identities that are more fluid or ambivalent in life. As scholars of autochthony have argued, dead bodies are also important means to localize political claims. They help mediate assertions over who really belongs where. Determining where and how to bury a body then, is an eminently political act that is linked to broader identitarian concerns over the boundaries of national and political communities and the place of immigrants within them.

### **The Dirty Work of Undertaking**

In his oft-cited essay “The Pornography of Death,” Geoffrey Gorer argues that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed “an unremarked shift in prudery” wherein “copulation has become more and more 'mentionable,’” while “death has become more and more 'unmentionable' as a natural process.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Victorian prohibitions around sex and sexuality have been replaced by a new set of taboos around dying and death. According to historian Philippe Ariès, this has led society “to behave as if death did not exist.”<sup>3</sup> The invisibility and denial of death is encouraged by its medicalization and privatization. In contrast to earlier periods where death occurred with greater frequency and often in the home, contemporary death is increasingly confined to specialized institutions like hospitals, hospices and elderly care facilities. Much care is taken to separate the living from the dead and dying and to help both groups deny the reality of mortality.

Death is not only a dirty word, it is also dirty work. I use 'dirty' here not in the literal sense (although embalming can be quite messy), but in the symbolic sense employed by Everett Hughes who coined the phrase to describe the imputation of moral judgments about the division

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2 Geoffrey Gorer. “The Pornography of Death” *Encounter* (1955): 50.

3 Philippe Ariès. *The Hour of Our Death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991: 613.

of labor in society.<sup>4</sup> In any given social order there are certain jobs that most people prefer not to do. These often require little to no training, are not well compensated or considered prestigious, and involve 'dirty work' that others will not do but require or desire to be done for them. Individuals engaged in such occupations are often stigmatized and may be discredited or disqualified from full social acceptance. As stated above, undertakers are stigmatized because of their proximity to death and dead bodies. Unlike health-care workers and religious leaders whose connection to death is legitimized by their service orientation, the work of the undertaker has a negative valence because it is viewed as self-interested and profit-oriented. As Zelizer has argued in reference to life insurance agents, "to save and to heal is holier than to sell."<sup>5</sup>

In their attempts to overcome social stigma and establish professional credibility, undertakers rely on a number of rhetorical devices and strategies. These include symbolically redefining their work, insisting on professionalism, practicing role distance, and emphasizing the service dimension of their work.<sup>6</sup> Symbolic redefinition consists of avoiding any sort of death talk. A number of euphemisms are utilized when describing funerary services that at best, try to soften the reality of loss and at worst, deny it outright. People no longer die but "pass on" or "cross to the other side." The dead body is not a corpse but the "dearly departed" or "loved one" or sometimes given restored personhood as "Mr. or Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_." The funeral is no longer an occasion to mourn the death of a person but rather to "celebrate" his or her life. Coffins are "caskets," hearses are "coaches," cemeteries are "memorial parks" and undertakers themselves are transformed into Hollywood style "funeral directors" or scientific sounding "morticians." As

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4 Everett Hughes. *The Sociological Eye*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1971.

5 Viviana Zelizer. *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979: 136.

6 William Thompson. "Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead: Morticians and Funeral Directors." *Deviant Behavior* Vol. 12 (1991): 403-429.

Ruth Harmer has pointed out, it is possible to spend an entire afternoon with an undertaker and never hear a word that would suggest death or burial.<sup>7</sup>

Undertakers also insist on professionalization and professionalism. In her work on the British funeral industry Howarth draws on Millerson's (1964) typology of the six most important traits that distinguish a profession from an occupation: the possession of a specialized skill based on theoretical knowledge, formal training and education, a system for testing the competence of members, a code of conduct, the existence of professional associations, and a service for the public good.<sup>8</sup> In their attempts to bolster their professional credibility, undertakers in different national settings have developed or claim to embody many of these attributes by establishing trade organizations, journals, licensing guidelines and campaigns for better public relations.<sup>9</sup>

Another strategy to reinforce a sense of proper professional conduct is to actively malign ethically questionable individuals within the trade. In doing so undertakers fight an uphill battle. A cursory Internet search reveals a plethora of news articles chronicling the dubious adventures of the merchants of death. An entire genre of confessional novels with titles like *Mortuary Confidential: Undertakers Spill the Dirt* and *Over Our Dead Bodies: Undertakers Lift the Lid* is dedicated to exposing fraught practices in the funeral industry. No wonder then that undertakers have an exaggerated sense of insecurity. Building trust is an important component of their work and is often achieved by devaluing the services of competing firms.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Harmer, Ruth. *The High Cost of Dying*. New York: Collier Books, 1963

8 Geoffrey Millerson. *The Qualifying Associations*. New York: Routledge, 1964.

9 Glennys Howarth. *Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, 1996. See also Bremborg 2006. For a history of the professionalization of undertaking in the U.S. see Robert Habenstein and William Lamers. *The History of American Funeral Directing*. Milwaukee: Bulfin Press, 1955.

10 Dominic Akyel. "Qualification Under Moral Constraints: The Funeral Purchase as a Problem of Valuation." In *Constructing Quality: The Classification of Goods in Markets*. Eds. Jens Beckert and Christine Musselin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Members of the funeral industry also engage in role distancing in order to overcome stigmatization. Although the specific techniques vary depending on the individual and occupation in question, strategies of role distancing are meant to displace commonly held expectations associated with a given occupation and to allow people to express a sense of individuality within the restrictions of their occupational role. Amongst undertakers, the use of humor, emotional detachment, and countering stereotypes are common techniques of role-distancing.<sup>11</sup>

In describing the nature of their work undertakers often downplay economic considerations and motivations relying instead on the notions such as service, grief counseling, and bereavement therapy. Much like the discursive shifts in the descriptions of funerary services outlined above, emphasizing care and service is an attempt to shift attention away from two of the most stigmatizing elements of funeral work: the handling of dead bodies and retail sales. Although they operate within the legal boundaries of the market economy, funeral companies must eschew the language of profit because of deeply engrained beliefs about the sacrosanct nature of human life. Establishing the monetary equivalent of a person, which happens in the course of purchasing a funeral, contradicts long standing notions of the absolute value of man.<sup>12</sup> Hence members of the funeral industry prefer to speak about the therapeutic benefits of their services, namely the integral role they play in helping families overcome the shock of loss and their ability to help guide individuals through the grieving process.

In sum, contemporary death workers attempt to juggle a number of occupational identities in their attempts to establish professional credibility and authority. As Spencer Cahill

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Simmel. *The Philosophy of Money*. New York: Routledge, 2011 [1900]. See also Michael Sandel. *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2012.



has succinctly argued, the undertaker walks a thin line as a “scientifically informed and technically proficient caretaker of the dead, caring minister and insightful counselor to the living, and hard-nosed business person all rolled into one.”<sup>13</sup> Having reviewed some of the common strategies for delimiting stigma and establishing credibility amongst undertakers in Western European and North American contexts, I turn now to the Muslim undertakers of Berlin. In the next section I will highlight some of the common discursive techniques that they employ in speaking about their work and the ways in which they distinguish themselves from their German counterparts. I argue that a central tenet of their occupational identity is cultural mediation. In serving immigrant communities who are members of ethnic and religious minorities, the Muslim undertakers of Berlin are important middlemen between civil society and the state. Their intimate knowledge of the German bureaucracy, the laws of the dead, and the cultural expectations of their customers is an important source of their professional authority and expertise.

### **Islamic Deathways in Germany**

This section draws on four months of ethnographic research in 2013-14 with Islamic undertakers in Berlin. During the course of my fieldwork I shadowed several undertakers and participated in and/or observed every aspect of their work. This included picking up corpses from morgues and preparing them for burial, transporting them to local cemeteries or to the airport for repatriation, visiting various governmental offices and consulates to acquire necessary paperwork and transit permits, attending funerals and participating in funerary rituals, and observing undertakers in their interactions with customers. I also conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six undertakers during which we covered a broad range of topics including their

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<sup>13</sup> Cahill, 1999: 126

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.

The narratives presented and analyzed below have been culled from these interviews, which lasted around two hours on average. All of the undertakers are 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 a family connection to the funeral industry before becoming an undertaker in Germany. They have been in the funeral market for 5 to 30 years with an average length of 18 years.

The timing of my research proved to be an opportune moment to talk about the Islamic funeral industry in Germany. Two weeks before I arrived in Berlin (June 2014), German police raided the offices of an Islamic funeral home and 18 other properties across the city in a coordinated effort to crackdown on a network of human traffickers. Although the criminal investigation is still on-going, two Muslim undertakers were taken into police custody and interrogated about their alleged involvement in the selling of the passports of deceased customers to human traffickers in Syria and Palestine. This scandal offered an auspicious opening for members of the Islamic funeral industry to reflect on the behavior of their colleagues and competitors and to offer a defense of their own professional integrity.

In what follows I will first address the ways that Muslim undertakers attempt to overcome the problem of profit in the funeral business. In their efforts to establish credibility they rely on a number of discursive strategies including vilifying their competitors, insisting on professionalism and emphasizing the non-monetary benefits of their work. I then turn to the

relationship between bureaucratic competence, cultural knowledge and professional expertise. I argue that an important dimension of Muslim undertakers' expertise lies in their familiarity with the laws of the dead and their ability to anticipate and manage customer expectations. As we shall see, the Islamic undertakers of Berlin read their customers' lack of knowledge about the German bureaucracy as a sign of poor social integration. This enables them to assert jurisdictional boundaries and claim professional status.

### **The problem of profit**

In describing their work, my interview partners frequently accused their competitors (both German and Turkish) of being excessively profit oriented:

“A German company wants to earn money. They wouldn't bury someone for free. But we are providing a public service. The Germans would laugh at our prices. If we charge around 2000 or 2500 euros for a funeral, theirs cost 5, 6, 10,000.”

When asked about the substantial variation in price, they responded that the largest source of profit for German companies was coffin sales. Markups on the price of coffins could range up to 300 or 400 percent. Another reason for price variation has to do with billing practices. German companies provide an itemized bill in which every product or service is accounted for. As one of my informants put it “the Germans will charge you for the nails they use to seal the coffin.” Detailed billing practices were held as evidence that German companies were overly concerned with the bottom line.

While German funeral homes were criticized for price-gouging, Islamic undertakers were chastised for undercutting prices. Competition within the Islamic sector was seen as inhibiting profit:

“Let's speak honestly here, we don't earn a lot of money. We'd like to but we can't because there's a lot of competition. You price a funeral at 2500 euros and then some guy comes along and says he'll do it for 2300. It's all downhill from there. The other Turkish and Arab companies don't have a long term perspective. They are happy with whatever profit they can manage, even if it's only 300 euros.”

The costs of an Islamic funeral are on average, substantially lower. I was quoted prices that ranged from 1,100 euros to 2,700 euros. The price did not change significantly when the corpse was to be repatriated to another country for burial or buried locally. This is because most of the shipments occurred to countries where individuals did not have to pay a large sum for the cost of grave plot. In Berlin the cost to lease a cemetery plot for twenty years is 865 euros. In other parts of Germany, particularly in the Western parts of the country, the costs are much higher, ranging up to 2000 euros for a twenty year plot.

Islamic funerals are also typically cheaper because of the rituals involved. The dead are washed, shrouded and buried without a coffin. They are never embalmed or dressed up for a wake or viewing. Flowers are atypical at Muslim funerals as are elaborate tombstones, although these customs are changing in the diaspora. Because Muslim undertakers cannot offer large markups on material goods like coffins, their profit margins are based on the services they provide-- namely preparation of the body, transportation to and from the morgue to the cemetery, and burial. As such, there is quite a bit of variation in price.

According to the undertakers I spoke with, providing cut-rate funerals was seen not only as short-sighted, but also dishonest and unprofessional:

“There has to be a system in place. If it were up to me, you should be required to have a morgue, a washing room, and most importantly, a hearse in order to open a funeral home. There are people who I call “kitchen undertakers” because they work out of their kitchen... They tell the family they can ship a body to Turkey for 100 euros... And because it costs 80 euros to keep a body in a morgue overnight, they just leave the corpse in the trunk of their car. It's crazy.”

Stories about shady undertakers were commonly used to discredit competitors in the Islamic

funeral industry. Since there are no educational or licensing requirements to become an undertaker in Germany, the barriers to entry are very low. Although such stories might be little more than urban legends (I never personally encountered a “kitchen undertaker”), they function to distinguish ethically sound and morally dubious funeral workers.

In calling for better standards in the funeral industry, Muslim undertakers attempt to sidestep taboos around death and profit by foregrounding qualities such as professionalism or by making claims that they provide an essential “public service.” Many of my interview partners insisted that it was impossible to become rich in the Islamic sector of the funeral industry and argued that they were motivated non-material factors. Some believed they were helping Muslims fulfill their religious duties and would be rewarded accordingly in the afterlife. Others spoke about the efficacious therapy provided by their services. As one put it: “Our work isn't essentially about the deceased. Our work is with the family members that our left behind. Our customers. How we interact with them is very important. How we talk to them. You have to be very empathetic, very understanding, very patient.” He argued that it was very important for family members to actively participate in the funeral service and that part of his job was to encourage them to do so in order to overcome their grief:

“As an undertaker I try to encourage them to take part. To at least observe the procedure [the washing of the corpse] or maybe even help a little. And when people do they come to me afterwards and say “thank you very much. It was really nice.” Because they hadn't expected that they'd be doing that. But it's your father in there. Go! Wash your father with your own hands! My job/mission [*vazife*] is to encourage and support this.”

Others spoke about the sense of self-satisfaction derived from a job well done or the pleasure of helping bereaved families in their hour of need. They asserted that undertaking was unlike any other profession and used words like “fate,” “karma,” and “kismet” to describe their own entry to

the industry. As one of them put it:

“There's a saying about undertakers. In German there is a word play, “*Beruf und Berufung*.” *Beruf* is a job, but *Berufung* is your fate [*kismet*], your karma. Undertakers will say “*Das ist kein Beruf, sondern eine Berufung*.” [“this is not a job but a vocation”]. In other words, this isn't just some job, it's something that comes from inside you.. It's part of your character. It's not like a task that was assigned to you, but something where you came to gradually realize that this is what you've been put on earth to do. It is your genuine profession, not just something that you learned to do, but something that comes from within you. It is a job that you are devoted to... If you're asking yourself should I be a truck driver or an undertaker.. If you see these two things as viable alternatives then you shouldn't become an undertaker. Because you don't choose to become an undertaker. One way or another it chooses you...”

This quote provides an exemplary illustration of Max Weber's notion of a vocation. In his well known lectures on the topic, Weber refers to a 'vocation' as consisting of 'inward' and subjective conditions or 'external' and objective conditions.<sup>14</sup> Both motivate individual behavior, although in different ways. Citing the example of a politician, Weber argues that one can live 'for' politics or 'from' politics, the difference being that “he who lives 'for' politics makes politics his life, in an inner sense” whereas those that live 'from' politics “strives to make politics a *permanent source of income*” (emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup> Those that live for politics are driven by the fact that their life is given meaning in the service of a particular cause. They are not motivated by material factors but by the objective rewards they receive in the course of their work. As evinced by the quote above, undertaking also bears the hallmarks of a vocation in the Weberian sense. In this account, those who view undertaking like any other job, say driving a truck, are misguided and mistaken. One should not strive to live *from* undertaking but rather, should live *for* it.

## **Bureaucratic competence**

In confronting death in diasporic settings, immigrant communities face a particular set of

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<sup>14</sup> Max Weber “Politics as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber*, eds. Gerth and Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 84-85

challenges, which include navigating different bureaucratic systems, methods of disposal, and alternative memorial practices that are potentially incongruous with their expectations, wishes, or traditions. In such situations, undertakers play an important pedagogical role. They must educate their customers about the rules and regulations governing burial. Practically all of the undertakers whom I spoke to informed me that this was one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of their job. In describing the German legal landscape an oft-repeated line was “It's not like Turkey here” or “This isn't Turkey.”

Recognizing that the average person would not have in-depth knowledge about burial laws, they insisted that their customers' expectations were unrealistic and evinced poor integration into German society. One undertaker told me “our people have been here fifty years and they still think they can ship a body on a Saturday or Sunday. They think this is like some village in Turkey. But there are a lot of formalities here.” Another undertaker, using almost the same language argued that:

“Our people have been living here for fifty years. 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!”

Asked to describe the various bureaucratic procedures involved in the implementation of a burial or repatriation one undertaker told me that:

“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.... Our people think that when there's a funeral you can bury it within two hours 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.

The trope of the anatolian village was quite common in my interviews. In contrast, it is the

undertaker's knowledge of bureaucratic procedure that endows him with authority and insider status. While their customers' lack of familiarity with the bureaucracy is read as a stubborn refusal to adapt to the conditions of their country of residence, the undertaker's bureaucratic competence functions as a boundary mechanism that delineates both social integration and expertise. As one of the undertakers quoted above put it later in our interview: "I grew up amongst two cultures but I guess I picked up a lot of German traits. I work with appointments. I follow the rules. I'm closer to Germans in this regard."

Alongside their knowledge of law and procedure, Muslim undertakers must be able to properly size up their customers and provide services that are in accordance with their religious beliefs or cultural expectations. "Our first principle" explained one of my interview partners "is whoever comes to us-- a Christian, an Atheist, whoever-- we ask them their religion. Just as everyone who speaks German isn't necessarily a Christian, not everyone who speaks Turkish is a Muslim. We ask people about their beliefs and we try to fulfill our duties accordingly." Most of the Muslim undertakers I spoke with only provided funerary services for Muslim customers. However, funerary rites and customs vary tremendously according to sectarian or regional differences. Undertakers must bear this in mind when serving their customers: "We have to be really careful. Our customers are *Alevi*, *Sunni*, *Shi'a*. These are three different traditions. They have their own *hocas*, *dedes* [religious leaders] who wash the body, who say the funeral prayer." There is little room for error in funeral ceremonies. As other authors have noted the funeral ceremony is a special kind of performance that incorporates props, costumes, scripts, lead and minor roles, and an audience, who are all caught up in the ritual.<sup>16</sup> An important aspect of the undertaker's role is, as the master of ceremonies, to ensure that things go according to script. This

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16 Howarth 1996



means having an intimate knowledge of religious ritual and customer expectations. In practice, this can involve the blending of religious and professional authorities. As one undertaker put it, “I’m kind of like a half imam.”

## **Conclusion**

By way of a conclusion, I'd like to end with an example that I think illustrates how funerals and burial practices become politicized acts in migratory contexts. Funerary rituals are performances that reproduce social and group boundaries. Consequently, the type of funeral that is performed communicates information about the deceased and their community. The link between funerals and identity was made explicit by one of the undertakers who spoke disparagingly about second and third generation Turks living in Germany who had lost touch with their roots. In his mind, the choice of a funeral company reflected broader social processes of assimilation and the loss of culture. Asked about German funeral companies he told me:

“Since they are more expensive than us, most of our citizens don't patronize them. Those that do are the kind of Turks who have completely lost their sense of self and identity. You have these people who don't speak Turkish. You have people and families who haven't had any relationships with other Turks for forty or fifty years. And since they've chosen to have a German culture, to have German friends, when they have a funeral they prefer to hire a German company.”

Here we can see clearly how the link between burial practices and identity operates. Bemoaning the loss of language, culture and identity, the exasperated undertaker suggests that such people are so far gone that even in death they prefer German traditions. Through their consumptive choices they express their allegiance to a purported German culture. As such burial practices take on added political significance amongst immigrant groups in diasporic settings. By illustrating the contours of membership in national and political communities they shed light on the symbolic boundaries that structure political life.

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