

The Indigent Moslems Burial Fund

By Nazneen Ahmed

On 10 January 1930, a little girl called Zohra was buried at Brookwood Cemetery in Woking. She was just ten months old. Her burial was attended by 17 people. The family were unable to afford the funeral and sought financial assistance from a recently set up fund for burial assistance. After the sad event, Zohra's parents, Mr and Mrs Makarab, wrote a letter to the fund expressing their 'grateful thanks to the committee for their help in a time of great need'. The family were Muslims, resident at 61 Cable Street, London, but hailed from India, and this was the one of the first burials supported and organised by the Indigent Moslems Burial Fund.

The history of the burial fund is to some extent also a history of the Muslim diaspora in Britain. Set up in 1925, it aimed to provide Muslim burials to those unable to afford them. At the time of its establishment these were mostly seafarers residing in the East End who passed away due to ill health or succumbed to maritime accidents, which numbered three to four per year. Records show a marked increase in burials during the Second World War, with a peak of 18 in 1944 – which we can attribute to casualties from the bombings that rained down upon the East End, where the majority of Muslims lived. But the fund is still active today, its contact details on noticeboards in hospital mortuaries around the country, who ring up the fund when a Muslim, perhaps homeless or estranged from family, dies without the finances to pay for his or her own funeral. The fund receives three to four applications for assistance each week.

Funeral rites are an important way for diasporas to enact religious duties, a way to make foreign earth become that final iteration of

home. Before the establishment of the fund, Muslim seafarers who died in Britain were lucky if they had a semblance of a religious funeral. Those with close friends and perhaps family on their ship could hope for a burial following Qu'ranic instructions, such as the burial described in 1823 by Samuel Johnson's first employer, in the popular monthly periodical *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

As they filled the grave they sprinkled water over it, from an earthen vessel, and burying a shovel at the feet of the corpse, poured down upon it the remains of the water... Over this they all stood muttering some words, as if by way of prayer, and thus the ceremony ended, without the attendance of a priest of any persuasion whatever. They sat up in rotation, two at a time, provided with lights and implements of defence, for several nights. (The Gentleman's Magazine 1823)

The nightly vigil hints however at the precariousness of these graves, their difference rendering them vulnerable to vandalism and grave robbing. Those without family were buried in mass paupers' graves in non-denominational cemeteries, their resting places left unmarked and unmourned. There are several records, for example, of men with Muslim surnames buried in West Ham Cemetery, including Sheik Hasan Sheik Ahmed, buried in 1899, Dien Mohamed, buried in 1902, and Subder Khan, buried in 1918.¹ But even they were lucky, compared to some:

There is a place in the neighbourhood where they used to be buried wholesale, and a person who went to dig in his garden found skeletons of them but poorly covered by the earth! He has taken up a skull to preserve it for a curiosity. These creatures came to an untimely grave through ill treatment, and were buried here in quick despatch out of sight. (Peggs 1844)

From 1924, the fund paid the London Necropolis Company to transport Muslim bodies to Brookwood Cemetery, location of the only Muslim burial ground at the time. For this, the London Necropolis Company provided separate washing and preparation facilities for the bodies of Muslims at its London terminus in

Waterloo. All burials were conducted within a week of death. The funerals were officiated by Khalid Sheldrake, a British convert to Islam who was part of the social circle around Abdullah Quilliam, imam of the Liverpool Mosque and translator of the Qu'ran. Sheldrake dutifully travelled from London to Brookwood for every funeral funded by the burial fund until 1932. Whilst the predominantly working class, South Asian seafarer congregants of the East London Mosque have always been perceived as being quite remote from the aristocratic British Muslim converts involved with Woking Mosque and its English-language journal *The Islamic Review*, the Indigent Moslems Burial Fund records indicate co-operation and collaboration between the groups and signal the beginnings of a British Muslim culture.

The records of the Indigent Moslems Burial Fund also tell us some surprising things about the history of Muslim settlement in Britain prior to the Second World War. Although the majority of Muslims in London at this time were male seafarers, there were also women and families with young children who were settled enough in London to want to have their kin buried there. Some records, such as that of the death of Dorothy Eva Hassan, suggests intermarriage took place even in this early period. The records give us first ethnicities, including 'Pathan from Peshawar', 'Arab', 'Malay', 'Somali' and 'Bengali', and, later, places of origin of the deceased, who originate from a diverse range of places from Singapore to Lahore to Morocco.

The fund is also indicative of the transformation of Muslim associational culture over the twentieth century. At its inception, the fund's Board was made up of illustrious international names that reflected the imperial times: Indian politicians such as Syed Ameer Ali, diplomats from Persia and Egypt, British politicians with links to British India and aristocratic white British converts to Islam. However, after the Second World War, Bengali seafarers from the East End were increasingly not only beneficiaries of the fund, but also took an active part in its maintenance. While the 1910 London Mosque Fund minutes state that the Mosque fund was to remain separate and distinct from aid for burials, in practice there was considerable overlap in terms of personnel between the running of the East London Mosque and the burial fund. Suleiman Jetha, Haji

Taslim Ali and Salahudeen Haleem were all involved in running both the East London Mosque and the Indigent Moslems Burial Fund. The efforts of this committed group of devout ex-seafarers in the very early period of settlement complicate the popular narrative of Bengali migration to East London which depicts the lives of early settlers in the 1950s–1970s as largely secular and areligious until a process of ‘Islamicization’ took place from the later 1980s onwards (Eade 1989; Eade and Garbin 2006; Kibria 2008).

The fund continues to respond to the changing burial needs of the Muslim community in Britain. Its records show efforts by Suleiman Jetha in the 1970s to set up a burial society, modelled on Jewish burial societies, in order to enable the growing British Muslim community to save for their funerals. In 1975, the fund unsuccessfully attempted to halt the passing of the Brookwood Cemetery Act, which enabled developers to sell off unused land in the cemetery. More recently, in the early 2000s, reacting to increasing pressures for Muslim burial space in Britain, the fund invested a significant part of its capital in the setting up of the Islamic Gardens of Peace, currently the largest Muslim cemetery in Europe, and reserved a number of graves for those who may need the fund’s assistance in the future. Tracing the history of this small, little-known charity tells us the story of how diasporic Muslims have lived and died in Britain from the early twentieth century onwards. □

Endnotes

1. Data derived from <https://www.deceasedonline.com>

References

- Eade, J. (1989) *The Politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London*. Aldershot: Avebury.
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- Peggs, J. (1844) 'The Lascars' Cry to Britain: An appeal to British Christians on behalf of the Asiatic Sailors, who resort to London, Liverpool, etc.'. London: s.n., p.12.
- The Gentleman's Magazine (1823) 93/1: 80.