Death in the City: Cemeteries of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey

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Abstract
With the advent of modernity, death is excluded from the routines of everyday life. Instead of individual graves which had been included in dwellings and cemeteries located in the vicinity of religious structures in the pre-modern period, mass cemeteries of modern cities are displaced to the margins of urban life. The mobilization of modern administrative mechanisms mark a breaking point in this process when the body underwent a nationalization process and came to be seen as the possession of the state. Hence, as spiritual functions were divorced from the political realm, death was stripped from its spiritual status and turned into a legal and medical phenomenon. In psychoanalytical terms, the spiritual aspect of death is repressed by the political and administrative machinery of modernity. How does this phenomenon reflect in the politics of the spatialization of death? How are the remains of spirituality articulated with the political and administrative structures and how is this articulation manifested in space? By means of answering these questions, this paper addresses the specific case of the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, where the modernization process dates back to the early nineteenth century. Through the analysis of legal and administrative documents, travelers' accounts and on-site observations we demonstrate how spatial and behavioral propriety of cemeteries were regulated and controlled by administrative power mechanisms and how everyday practices have the potential to disrupt the former.

Introduction

On a rainy October day in 2013, we were on an academic excursion on a street at a central area in İzmir. Lined by ordinary facades of residential blocks, cafes, and eateries, there was nothing unusual about the street until we encountered a stretch of unexpectedly tall and impenetrably solid walls along the sidewalk. The only visual access to the other side was allowed through the guardrails of a locked gate. The empty, squalid area beyond, hardly provided any clues about its use, had we not noticed a few tombstones that dotted the wild foliage on the ground. This was a haunting scene indeed. Our walk, our desire for a hot cup of coffee, and our academic conversation was uncomfortably disrupted by this momentary encounter with an "other" site, which was an unmistakable reminder of death. We were caught unprepared.

In our modern lives, cemeteries are well-guarded and orderly sites located on the outskirts of the city and cemetery visits involve pre-planned rituals, which usually coincide with loved ones' death days and religious holidays. Our discomfort with the seeming incompatibility of a deserted cemetery with the ordinary practices of everyday life, lead us to explore further. Why is the very ordinary phenomenon of death so alienated from our daily lives? What is the relationship between the realms of the living and the dead in contemporary cities? What kind of spatial and cultural regime regulates this relationship?

By way of answering these questions we set out to explore the changing cultural and urban context of cemeteries in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey.

Smooth Spaces of Pre-Modern Cemeteries

In his work on the network society, renowned geographer Manuel Castells states that "it is a distinctive feature of our new culture, to attempt to exile death from our lives." (Castells, 2010) Castells argues that recent developments in medical technology and biological research, which are based on the obsessive prolongation of life, are indicative of the "relentless will to reject the inevitable." (Castells, 2010) Supporting his argument by the growing proportion of death instances in hospitals rather than homes, and decreasing time devoted to mourning, Castells points to the isolation of death in space and time and contends that the dominant trend in our societies is to erase death from life.

This erasure, which can be tied to a generalized notion of modernization, has a history which followed different trajectories in different cultural contexts. In Turkey, the orderly cemetery with its guided gate, grid-plan, regular pathways, and clearly identified tombstones, which is located at a distance from the urban center, is a relatively recent phenomenon, the history of which runs parallel to the administrative and cultural modernization process of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.

To be specific, Ottoman cemeteries witnessed a major historical transformation in the early stages of the establishment of a modern administrative system, founded in 1839. At that time, the Municipal Council in Istanbul was given the authority to determine their location in the city (Ergin, 1995). Until then, cemeteries for the general population were located outside the city walls, whereas those for high ranked

administrative officials were situated on the grounds of religious complexes in the city. As historian Nicolas Vatin states, burials in private gardens or door fronts were also common practice for the former (Vatin, 2011). Cemeteries within religious complexes were called Hazire, where burials required special permission by the Sultan, the related endowment's board of trustees and the Chief Religious Official (Şeyhülislam).

Whether located inside or outside the city walls, Ottoman cemeteries were intimately connected with the routines of everyday life. The visibility of the tombstones from the surrounding streets was highly desirable in Hazires, which would allow the passers by to offer their prayers to the deceased (Laqueur, 2014). Hence higher ranked officials would be buried at areas closest to the streets. Sometimes a summary of the inscription on a tombstone would be doubled on its back side for higher visibility. In one extreme instance, a second tombstone was erected for a Pasha to be placed across the street from his real tomb at the Üsküdar cemetery. Burial within the city walls was clearly a class-based privilege, which ensured the deceased subject's continual existence in "the world and in words." (Foucault, 1967) Also at a different level, such burials enabled the spiritual practice of offering a brief prayer to the deceased to every urban inhabitant.

Despite the administrative complexities involved in the burials of inner-city cemeteries, the latters' spatial layout seems to have been left uncontrolled. As the remaining examples indicate, tombstones were rather haphazardly placed with no apparent order. It seems to be safe to speculate that the empty areas on the hazire grounds were filled on a first come first serve basis rather than in accordance to a pre-conceived site-plan.

Figure 1: Eyüp Ottoman cemetery, İstanbul.

If the burials of the members of the upper echelons of Ottoman society were somewhat ceremonially situated, those of the common folk displayed a contrary situation. As Ottoman historians and contemporaneous travelers' accounts indicate, the latter, which were located outside the city walls, were in a rather chaotic physical

state. Written and visual evidence indicates the haphazard growth and lack of maintenance of such cemeteries. As engravings, paintings and photographs from the nineteenth century show, they were dotted by broken or fallen tombstones meshed with wild foliage and trees. In 1877, Italian traveler Edmondo de Amicis, who visited the Galata cemetery reported "a myriad of little columns of stone or marble, that incline in all directions and are strewn in disorder all down the descent" and continued to say that,

> Footpaths wind in and out among the graves and trees, crossing and recrossing one another in all directions from one end of the cemetery to the other. A Turk seated in the shade smokes tranquilly; boys run about and chase each other among the tombs; here and there cows are grazing, and a multitude of turtle-doves bill and coo among the branches of the cypress trees; groups of veiled women pass from time to time; and through the leaves and branches glimpses are caught of the blue waters of the Golden Horn streaked with long white reflections from the minarets of Stambul (de Amicis, 1896).

Although the Orientalist tone of this description is embarrassingly obvious, similar scenes that are recorded by other travelers and illustrated in contemporaneous engravings confirm the chaotic physical environment that included the performance of everyday activities on cemetery grounds. This also meant that religious burial practices conveniently integrated with the latter when a funeral was performed.

In contemporary theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's terminology, pre-modern public cemeteries were manifestations of smooth spaces, that were left outside the scope of administrative regulation and control. According to the authors of A Thousand Plateaus, smooth space is non-formal and amorphous. It is based on speed and movement as opposed to striated space, which is the space instituted by the state apparatus. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) Organized around a center, striated space is defined, standard, and calculable. In that sense hazires can be considered to be spatially smooth, but administratively striated spaces. In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari clarify, these two spaces are not mutually exclusive: Smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.

Striation of cemetery spaces took a significant turn in 1868, when all inner-city burials were banned as health hazards following a series of plague and cholera epidemics that resulted in high death rates (Vatin, 2011). This marked a turning point in not only the spatial but also the socio-cultural history of death, whereby associated with disease, the latter was exiled from the routine practices of everyday life. From the second half of the 19th century, the tombs of the privileged, which had to be placed in public cemeteries, became distinguished landmarks with their elaborate tombstones and private boundaries delineated by law walls or fences. In describing the Üsküdar cemetery, De Amicis says, "Here and there may be seen small enclosures surrounded by a low wall or railing, in the middle of which stands a column surmounted by a huge turban, and all around it other smaller columns: this is the grave of some pasha or person of distinction buried in the midst of his wives and children." (1896) clearly, an unprecedented class-based spatial hierarchy was imposed on the smooth spaces of public cemeteries.

The decision that excluded cemeteries from urban boundaries and included the burials of the powerful and wealthy members of the society in public cemeteries marked the beginning of a new spatial regime which parallels the modernist denial of death. This process, which increasingly striated the cemeteries intensified in the following decades.

Striated spaces of modern cemeteries

Until 1930, administrative decisions regarding cemetery spaces were made on an ad-hoc basis to respond to a specific need or request. For instance, a state decree of 1890, related to a cemetery's possible relocation, stated that regardless of any physical and sanitary conditions, dislocation of dead bodies was unpermissable (Ergin, 1995). Another decree of 1893 responded to a request for a road construction at the site of a cemetery. Denying the permission, it stated that such construction on dead bodies would not be compatible with the sacred nature of the cemeteries (Ergin, 1995). As these cases clearly indicate, during the early phases of modernization, considerations of the sanctity and integrity of the cemetery grounds came before the economic efficiency of urban space.

The first comprehensive text that identified burial processes and cemeteries as a separate realm of regulation and control came with the Sanitary Code of 1930, following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The code consists of fourteen sections on topics ranging from the bureaucratic structure of the health related state departments to measures against various epidemic diseases. The tenth section, entitled "Cemeteries, burials and relocation of corpses," is mostly on the sanitary and administrative aspects of transporting dead bodies to or between cemeteries. The only clause regarding cemetery spaces states that, all municipalities "are required to establish one or more cemeteries outside the boundaries of the city and at a sufficient distance from residences, according to the population and death rate of the location." According to the same clause, the propriety of the site would be determined by licensed health officials (Umumi Hıfzısıhha Kanunu, 1930). The code banned all burials outside of the prescribed areas, which had to be surrounded by walls and maintained by the related municipalities.

These were significant decisions which definitively removed cemeteries from the everyday flow of urban life. Henceforth, as walled administrative units located away from the city, cemeteries and funeral ceremonies were to be isolated entities outside of everyday spatial practices. In Michel Foucault's terms, modern cemeteries formed an "other city" where every individual possessed his/her "dark dwelling" (Foucault, 1967, p. 19). In time, these other cities became spatially, administratively and socio-culturally autonomous units. Indeed, the reorganization and/or institution of various Ministries in the founding years of the Turkish Republic instituted a separate governance structure for cemeteries and burial practices. As administrative (read secular) aspects of cemeteries were left to the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (Sıhhat ve İçtimai Muavenet Vekaleti,1920), the regulation of burial rituals went under the domain of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 1924).

Despite all specifications, administrative precautions to exclude cemeteries from urban boundaries were bound to failure in major cities like Ankara, İstanbul and

İzmir, due to uncontrolled urban sprawl.[i] Hence, cemeteries which had formerly been located outside the city were unexpectedly surrounded by residential neighbourhoods. While some of the inner city cemeteries were declared as historical sites and remained in place, others were relocated outside the newly expanded urban boundaries. Hence the distance between the living and the dead remained to be an administrative battleground in growing cities. On the other hand, the interior organization of cemetery grounds were incessantly regulated by further regulations and by-laws.

The most significant and detailed set of rules on cemeteries that followed the 1930 code, namely Cemetery Regulations, was issued a year later by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. This was the first body of sanctions that was devoted solely to the administrative aspects of burial procedures and cemeteries.[ii] It established a distinct spatial regime that finalized the striation of cemetery spaces and the isolation of the realm of death from everyday life.

First of all, the new regulation specified the physical characteristics of cemetery boundaries, which had been made obligatory by the Sanitary Act. Accordingly, cemetery walls were to be two meters high and made of solid materials like stone, brick or mudbrick. Entry would be provided by a single gate to be controlled by a guard. Although the related clause stated that this was to prevent "people and animals from outside" to enter the premises, the two meters height requirement also rendered the cemetery invisible from the outside. In other words, the tall solid walls established a very visible barrier and a clear separation between the worlds of the living and the dead. Yet the spatial organization of the two worlds followed very similar codes based on hierarchy and zoning, which are grounded in bureaucratic codes of instrumental rationality. According to the 1931 Regulations, cemeteries had to have a broad main entryway; a circumambulatory road that ran parallel to the wall; and secondary roads that defined the burial lots. Primary and secondary roads were to be lined with trees and individual burials had to be aligned within the lots. The text contains detailed specifications on such issues as water provision and services to guarantee the proper maintenance of the cemetery grounds.

Secondly, the new regulation established not only a spatial but also an administrative and a behavioral regime that would govern the cemeteries. Administratively, burials were divided into three categories, conspicuously named as first, second and third class. Such naming reflected income categories in an embarrassingly obvious way. First and second class burial lots could be purchased by families and individuals. The former would be located along the primary road, where owners had to delineate their lots by walls or fences and finance the construction of underground sarcophagi. Located along secondary roads, second class burials belonged to individuals, where the provision of boundaries and sarcophagi was voluntary. Located "in an orderly manner" along tertiary roads, third class burials were free of charge (clauses 20 and 21). There, "based on the characteristics of the soil as reported by health officials, the bones and remains of the deceased can be removed and buried at a designated site after a period of time deemed suitable by the Municipality Council, which can be no less than five years, to make space for a new burial." (clause 22) The social order of the living, which privileged families and sedentary life, was re-staged in the realm of death.
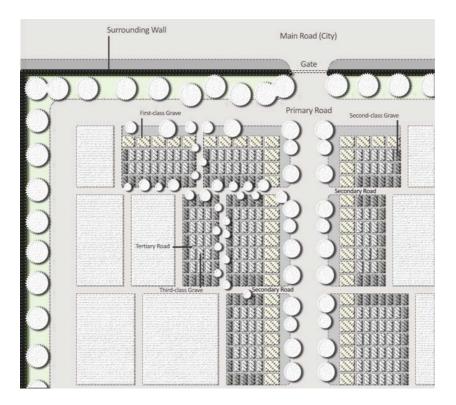
Figure 2: Typical modernized cemetery layout.

Needless to say, the 1931 Regulation dictated that proper recording of every burial had to be kept, including the name, reputation, age and address of the deceased; their father's name; the date, place and cause of death; burial number and burial authorization documents (clause 31). Hence every burial would be re-presented in the chronologically ordered database of proper history.

In terms of regulating the behavioral propriety in the cemeteries, the 1931 Regulation imposed a number of significant limitations that specified when, by who and how the premises could be visited. First of all, visitation times were to be determined by related municipalities and no visits were allowed after sunset (clause 19). Boundaries of individual graves were not to be crossed and pedestrian movement had to be restricted to designated pathways. Drunks, beggars, sales people, unaccompanied children and pets were not allowed to enter (clause 17). "Disrespectable behavior to the dead" was prohibited and visitors were obliged "to demonstrate due discretion and respect that is commensurable with the modalities of the location." (clause 38) Henceforth cemeteries were meant to be isolated stages where specific scenarios were to be acted out by the visitors.

The 1931 Regulation treated cemeteries as striated spaces per se. The symbolic interfaces of life and death were pushed outside the routines of everyday life and became contained sites of administrative regulation and control.

Conclusion

In explaining the interactivity of smooth and striated spaces Deleuze and Guattari say that (1987, p. 500):

> What interests us in the operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combination: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces. Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces.

In the context of the present argument, one of the best instances of the integration of smooth and striated spaces is illustrated at a war cemetery in İzmir. Located on a hilltop, and surrounded by walls, the cemetery is a monumental manifestation of military order and discipline. Upon entrance from ceremonial gates, the visitor is first invited to a memorial room which houses the photographs of the martyrs, that cover the walls in a gridded order. The central space of the cemetery grounds is occupied by a courtyard, the focus of which is a monumental sculpture dedicated to the martyrs. The rest of the grounds is filled by identical tombstones. Fronted by a flag, each one is engraved with the name, military rank and death date of the deceased.

More recent burials bear some traces of so-called individuality, as some families adorn the tombstones with photographs and the tombs with flowers. Most photographs are of young men in their uniforms with confident expressions compatible with their nationalist mission. Similarly, flower arrangements represent flags that cover the surface of the tomb. Far from being individualized signs of remembrance, these are reminders of the sacred nature of martyrdom: The sacrifice of life for a transcendental cause.

In short almost every detail of the highly striated space of the war memorial aptly manifests militant nationalism with hardly any trace of the personal encounter with the realm of death. This order is disrupted in one striking instance, by a subtly different burial. At first sight, the marble tombstone which is adorned by two flags and a photograph that features a young man holding a military salute against the backdrop of yet another flag is hardly different than the rest. Upon closer look, a mailbox, whose lid is held intact by an ornamental ribbon, is revealed among numberless flower pots. The middle-aged mother, who visits the cemetery every day, calmly explains that she uses it daily to place letters that she writes to her son. Regular correspondence was a mutual promise that they made before he had left for war. The promise was kept after his death; the arduous journey between her distant house and the cemetery was no obstacle.

Figure 3: War cemetery, the tomb and the mailbox, Kadifekale, İzmir

The order of the war cemetery is radically interrupted in this case, where the encounter with death is not suppressed by symbolic gestures of heroic nationalism. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms striated space is unexpectedly reversed and returned to a smooth space. Against all odds, the modernist regime that isolates death from everyday life is subverted. The sight of a simple domestic mailbox in a war cemetery is a powerful reminder of the violence that is involved in the policies that involve the expellation of death from the practices of everyday life. It is also a reminder that, beyond ceremonial mourning and administrative control, cemeteries can be seen as ordinary components of everyday sites that are intimately integrated with everyday urban practices.

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[i] . This phenomenon is mostly due to migrations from the countryside, especially after the 1950s, the reasons of which are beyond the scope of this article.

[ii] . Although various clauses of the 1930 Cemetery Regulations were continuously refined by other regulations and by-laws well into the 21st century, their basic content remained unchallenged. These were issued in 1931, 1941, 1994, 2005, 2010 and 2013 respectively. A detailed list including these and other related laws and regulations on administrative aspects of death was published by The Union of Turkish Municipalities (Çelik, 2010).