

Burial: here or there?

While the “eternal return” to the land of their roots is still the preferred option for many older people of Moroccan origin, another trend is developing, with increasing demand for burials in Belgium. This demand is growing in particular because many of the oldest immigrants are now widowed but live with their “Belgian” descendants, in the homes of mixed couples and the first generations who came to Belgium at a young age. Family connections, which have developed over the decades, are another important reason for some people to want to remain in Belgium.

This shift highlights the complexity of identities and transnational attachments. To sum up, **the choice of burial location indicates not only a connection with the country of origin, but also a feeling of belonging in their current home.** This is an act loaded with symbolism, reflecting the multiple dimensions of cultural and religious identity in a globalised context.

The fact remains that logistical aspects play an important role and Belgium has been slow to adapt its legal frameworks to respect the religious and cultural norms of the Muslim community. The question of how to reconcile the burial process in municipal cemeteries with Muslim rites poses a complex challenge. In accordance with the legislation in force, cemetery management falls within the remit of the various municipalities. In the Eighties, the first plots for deceased Muslims were created in the cemeteries of Liège, Farciennes, Antwerp and Houthalen. However, the political authorities hesitated to respond to this demand for a long time, arguing that Islamic burial rites posed problems in the area of public hygiene.

Many municipalities, including those with a large proportion of Muslims within their population, then attempted to solve the problem. However, there were difficulties along the way and the numerous discussions meant that it took a very long time for the possibility of Muslim burials to become a reality. It was not until 2002 that the first so-called “multi-confessional” cemetery was inaugurated in the Brussels region. This cemetery was intended to serve all philosophical or religious communities recognised by the federal State.