

## **Tina Palivos**

Ph.D. Candidate, Anthropology

“Eternally Displaced: The experience of death, repatriation, and funerary rituals among Nigerian Muslim immigrants in Athens, Greece.”

Athens, Greece

### **Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report**

Article 13 of the *Constitution of Greece* states, in part, “All known religions shall be free and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of the law.” While the freedom of religion is officially recognized, in practice, the Greek state’s failure to legally sanction many non-Greek Orthodox religious institutions suggests the opposite. Over the past few decades, the Greek government has made some progress toward expanding religious freedom, such as the removal of religious affiliation from national identity cards, the passing of legislation that permits conscientious objection based on religious grounds, the legal acknowledgment of civil marriage, and the right to cremation. However, since the principle of the separation of church and state has not been fully attained in Greece, people of different faiths (including non-Greek Orthodox Greek nationals) must go to great lengths to practice various aspects of their religion.

In recent decades, the issue of religion has become increasingly significant, as Greece has undergone major demographic changes resulting from the inflow of 1.5 million migrants from 50 countries over the course of fifteen to twenty years. In Athens, where the majority of immigrants reside, social integration has proven to be a herculean task for Greeks and for migrants alike, as they all struggle to coexist and reconcile their cultural differences.

In 2006 and 2007, I conducted an ethnographic study of the experiences of black sub-Saharan African migrants with Greek immigration policies and various forms of racism and discrimination in their daily lives. With the generous support of the *Women, Religion, and Globalization Project*, I returned to Athens in July 2009 to follow-up on this study and to refine this theme by focusing on Nigerian Muslim women, specifically. I was curious about their religious practices in Athens, where the power of the Greek Orthodox Church, the inefficiency of the Greek bureaucratic apparatus, and the resistance of various Greek groups have prevented the construction of an official mosque and a Muslim cemetery. This inquiry fit into my broader research plan, which is based in anthropology, law, and the study of human rights. Placing immigrant women at the center of analysis, this project explores the relationships between the state, immigration, globalization, citizenship, and religion.

I began my summer reconnecting with the migrant community leaders, Greek policy analysts, and human rights activists and attorneys with whom I had worked during my previous study. Unfortunately, the political, economic, and cultural situation had deteriorated for most of the people I revisited. I heard numerous updates from women and men who informed me not only of their financial worries due to less available work, but also of their fears of losing their residency permits that are based on the number of hours worked. The non-profit migrant organization where I worked during my last trip was forced to leave their office space and temporarily disperse due to economic hardship,

a particularly challenging blow to the thirty plus migrant communities and countless individual migrants that it supported. Due to this pattern of dispersal, after following through with several leads, I was unable to locate a Nigerian Muslim women's community. Given the urban environment, the only way to locate immigrant Muslim women would have been through the slow and gradual process of social networking. Considering my time constraint, I decided to follow the paths that were open to me.

First, I broadened the scope of my initial research question, which asked how Nigerian Muslims practice their religion in the absence of institutional support. Based on several Muslim community leaders from different countries and regions, I discovered the answer depended on a complex nexus of cultural, political, and economic factors. Secondly, during my interviews with immigrants from varied religious affiliations, I learned that the major concern regarding religion was the failure of the Greek state to legally recognize their status as religious institutions. As noted above, the Constitution of Greece formally acknowledges the freedom to practice one's religion. In practice, however, religious organizations are only permitted to register as "legal entities of private law," meaning that religiously based life cycle rituals, such as those occurring with the birth, marriage, and death of individuals are not legally sanctioned by the Greek state.

Based on my research this summer, I have decided to focus on one element of the life cycle—the experience of death, the repatriation of immigrants' remains, and the related funerary practices. This study will explore at what point the rights of individuals end and to what extent the state, international institutions, and community organizations are expected to provide protection for those rights. The next phase of my research will involve tracing the movement of migrants' remains from Greece to Nigeria, and to explore how this process both shapes and is shaped by Muslim women. Several African migrant women explained how each community would gather the funds to repatriate the remains of someone from their shared country of origin. The processes involved in gathering the resources, managing complex Greek bureaucratic procedures, preparing the paperwork for the international transport, and arranging for the eventual reception of the remains in Nigeria requires an incredible amount of effort, commitment, and belief in the religious and symbolic importance of sending the deceased home. My project will explore these facets of the experience of death in diaspora.

I would like to thank the *Women, Religion, and Globalization Project* for providing me with the opportunity to revisit my field site and to hone my doctoral research plan. As an essential part of the life cycle, the freedom to practice religiously defined funerary rites is an important human rights issue that I hope to pursue further in my doctoral research.