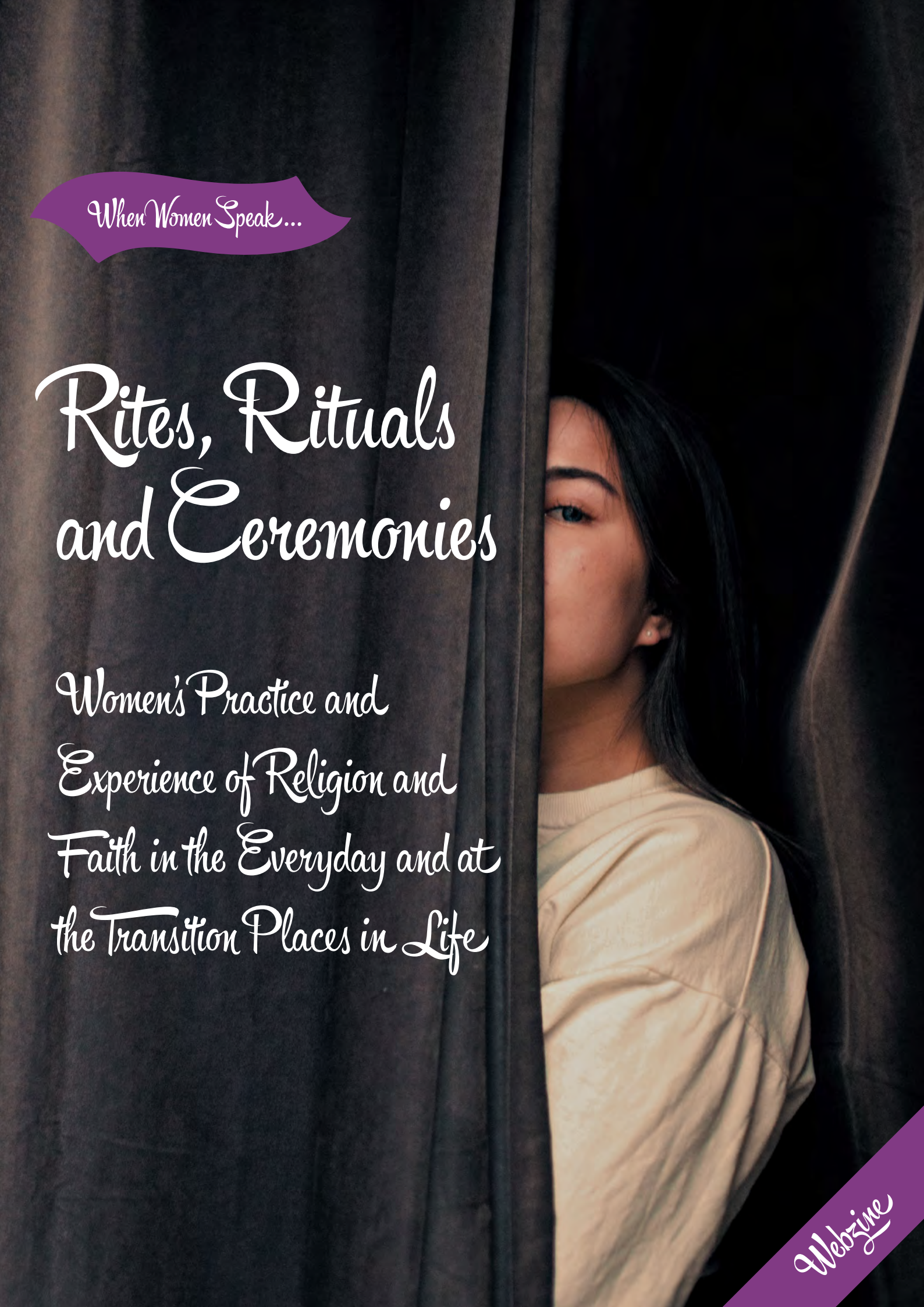
When Women Speak...

# Rites, Rituals and Ceremonies

## Women's Practice and Experience of Religion and Faith in the Everyday and at the Transition Places in Life



Webzine

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# Editorial

Weddings, birthday parties, baby showers, graduation ceremonies, funerals, holidays and holy days... The moments of commemoration, celebration, ritual and remembrance, are the memorable moments of life. We value them not only for the special occasions that they mark, but also for the wider life developments which they symbolise. Weddings are beautiful events, but they are a symbol of a marriage and the beginning of a life between two people. Graduation ceremonies are proud events, but they represent the years of hard work and intensive learning which led to that moment. Funerals are often painful, but they are about remembering the entirety of a person's life and an expression of how they will be missed.

Women across the world often play a particularly central role in creating and maintaining rites and rituals, especially within their families. We can see examples across many cultures and many communities of women's leadership in rites and rituals. They may do the inviting, the cooking, or the decorating for a special affair. They often are the ones who make sure the family is together at the special occasions.

In my doctoral research, studying Arabs of a Muslim background who chose to follow a Christian faith, it often seemed that the most significant moment in their faith journey was not that in which they made a decision to follow Christ or become Christian, but rather the moment they made a declaration of that decision. For many people, baptism may not have been the moment their heart changed but it was the moment in which it was solidified, confirmed and became a point of no return. For others, it was the difficult day on which they "came out" to their families and embraced the risk of rejection this would entail.

Baptism is a particularly poignant example of a Christian rite of passage, and there have been centuries of debate as to what it means, how it should be done, and even whether a person could truly be "saved" if they passed on before being baptised. In Christianity, most of us take this embodiment of faith in the physical seriously, which is why most churches which encourage infant baptism also ask that young community members take a vow on their day of first communion or otherwise profess their faith publicly.

This tells us something about Christianity, and the way in which Christians understand faith. The importance of profession of faith, or confession, is often linked to verses like Philippians 2:10-11: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." One cannot just somehow automatically become a Christian: confession matters. Even if in a church where infant baptism is considered enough, that ritual still exists and reminds the Christian community that the declaration of faith matters.

But it also tells us something about culture, both denominational culture and ethno-geographic culture. Different church traditions offer different guidelines for how one is to profess faith, with expectations about questions such as ideal age of profession, how much water should be used, and who should stand in solidarity with the new congregant. The ritual also plays out

differently in different cultures. While in some Latin American countries, a young teenage woman saying first communion may wear a white dress, in England I recently attended a baptism event where the new congregants, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties, were wearing T-shirts with the church's motto printed on it.

This webzine explores how women in the Muslim world engage in rituals and rites of passage from a few different angles. The first two articles explore rituals in Muslim communities which may have a religious feel, but in fact express an interwoven thread of faith, history, health concerns and culture. Linda Kay's article, "Rites and Rituals: A Window into the Worldview of Women" explores the Folk Islamic rituals in a Sundanese Indonesian community related to birthing and care for young mothers. These practices, which bring together traditional medicine and spiritual beliefs, are deeply imbued with faith, are shaped around the pregnancy cycle and women's health needs, and are a means by which families express the various emotions surrounding the emerging life of a new child. Elizabeth Lee and Nur Han's article, "An Exploration of the Spiritual Roles of a Woman in the Central Asian Family: The 'Emitting the Fragrance' Rite", similarly explores the link between culture and faith through a weekly ritual led by many Central Asian women. The 'emitting the fragrance' rite is practiced by many Muslim women and is an expression of respect for ancestors as well as a part of the weekly routine of their families, but the authors suggest that it can be an expression of Christian faith as well. Emitting the fragrance is deeply interwoven into Central Asian culture, and is a means by which many women are able to support their families.

Other rites and rituals are shaped more distinctly around religion and beliefs. Brooklyn Qiao's reflection, "Lily: One Hui Woman's Journey to New Life" considers the various considerations that a Hui woman from China has taken in the process of deciding how to integrate the rites and rituals of her family and community with a process of exploring the Bible and growing community with Christians. Similar to Elizabeth and Nur's article, the story of Lily illustrates the complexity of making decisions about rituals and traditions while trying to remain true to her faith. Finally, Louise Simon's piece provides a thoughtful consideration of arguably the most visible and distinctly religious rite of passage undertaken by many Muslim women: that of taking on the hijab, or veiling. She considers the reasons why women choose to veil, the interplay of cultural, religious and personal motivations for veiling, and in so doing suggests that this ritual, known to be distinctly religious, is also a reflection of faith, orthodoxy, culture and personal identity.

Together, these articles create a compelling pictures of both commonality and diversity among Muslim women around the world when it comes to rites and rituals. We see commonality in the experience of womanhood, in the way women see themselves as keeping their families together, maintaining honour and dignity, and ensuring that, through the practice of a range of rites and traditions, meaningful messages are passed from generation to generation. But we see diversity in Islam itself, because the variety of rituals practiced and described, and the various ways in which they are practiced and described, present an array of cultural expression which illustrates the importance of both honouring tradition and investing in understanding the traditions we are honouring.

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# Rites and Rituals:

## A Window into the Worldview of Women

*Linda Kay has been living in West Java, Indonesia, the heartland of the Sundanese, for over 20 years. During this time, I have made wonderful friends who have shared many aspects of their lives with me. We have engaged in lively cross-cultural discussions which helped us try to understand one another and how we see the world. As we shared our lives it became clear to me that women were intricately involved in the ritual realm in their communities. These experiences led me to design a research project to examine the role of rituals and the status of Sundanese women.*

## Abstract

This article seeks to show the importance of rites, rituals and ceremonies as it relates to understanding and engaging with women who live under Islam. The ritual world provides us with a marvellous entrance point into understanding a community and its culture. Attending rituals, especially lifecycle rituals, is a way to discover and engage the concerns, values and beliefs of a local culture. To demonstrate the possibilities, we will look at a local worldview, how it shapes ritual and daily life, and the role women play. Then a case study of a birth rite will be presented so we can see the richness of what can be seen and learned by participating in and being curious about rites and ceremonies.

Most cultures have lifecycle rituals; these are rituals to mark and transverse important stages of life. Examples of common lifecycle rituals are birth, coming of age (i.e., circumcision), marriage, pregnancy and death. More traditionally-oriented societies tend to have a more complex series of lifecycle ceremonies. Many societies in which Islam is the predominant religion are also shaped by traditions and rituals often referred to as Folk Islam. Folk Islam is a term used to describe forms of Islam that incorporate traditional (folk) beliefs and practices. In Indonesia, where I live, the majority of Muslims follow Folk Islam and integrate their Islamic beliefs with traditional beliefs and practices known as *adat*.

For most, Folk Islam and Islam are not distinguished but seen as one in the same or at least mutually compatible. In Indonesia, Islam is not a monolithic and homogenous force. There is recognition of different types of Muslims, from nominal adherents who tend to follow ancestral traditions to orthodox adherents who piously follow the five pillars of Islam and everyone in between. For example, I have had the privilege of living amongst the Sundanese, the largest ethnic group in West Java, for over 20 years. During my time here, I have learned that Islam and *adat* have mutually influenced and remoulded one another. The five tenets of Islam have been accepted along with daily practices such as five daily prayers, weekly worship, the fasting month and other Muslim calendrical holidays. At the same time, lifecycle rituals have been

retained along with a belief in spirits and the importance of taboos. Islamic beliefs and practices have been incorporated into *adat* and vice versa until many, including most of the participants in my research community, no longer mark a distinction between the two[1]. For most, to be Sundanese is to be Muslim.

In trying to understand this dynamic, and what it means to be Sundanese, especially a Sundanese woman, I looked carefully at Sundanese lifecycle rituals, which are an integral part of Sundanese *adat*. What I discovered was that in my local culture, Sundanese *adat* is still the foundational belief system which incorporates and adapts Islamic and modern beliefs and practices to varying degrees[2]. Thus, if I really want to understand Sundanese women, it is important to understand their *adat*.

*Adat,* which can generally be defined as traditional beliefs and customs, actually has a deeper meaning. Wessing defines *adat* as 'rituals, usages, obligations, and prohibitions which are the guide to proper life.'[3] According to Ibu Yanti, a Sundanese

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[1] This is not to say that they have been synthesized into new form but rather that ritual life contains several elements of belief and practice concurrently. A Sundanese friend explained it like this, "Sundanese people sometimes wish to adapt something new, so it becomes a composite, it's blended. What is Sunda is there and what is imitated from others is there, thus it becomes a composite." She preferred the word for becoming a 'composite' rather than a 'mixture' to describe the process because a composite carries the idea that the items being blended are still identifiable as separate items.

[2] Much of this material came from research I did for my dissertation which focused on the status of Sundanese women which was then published in book form. Lentz, Linda. 2017. *The Compass of Life: Sundanese Lifecycle Rituals and the Status of Muslim Women in Indonesia*. Ritual Studies Monograph Series. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

[3] Wessing, Robert. 1978. *Cosmology and Social Behavior in a West Javanese Settlement*. Southeast Asia Series, No.47, Papers in International Studies. Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 77.

Muslim friend, 'The traditional pattern of thinking [following *adat*] is like this, you must, if you want your child to be safe and well [when he or she] steps into a new stage of life, you must have the proper ceremony.' However, it is not just a series of rituals to guide one through life. *Adat* is also seen as an inheritance from the ancestors that is holy. Putting these ideas together, Rikin defines *adat* as 'an ancestral inheritance which is proper and fitting to be kept and respected to reach life's goals throughout the lifecycle.'[4]

In order to come to a more thorough understanding of the meaning of *adat* in the Sundanese social fabric, it is helpful to be aware of some foundational perceptions of the traditional Sundanese view of the cosmos and how the Sundanese fit into it; namely, their idea of boundaries, balance and cosmic power. The universe is understood as a closed system in which natural and supernatural entities and phenomena are inter-involved.[5] Cosmic power is constant but it also constantly flows as part of the creative process that maintains the universe. The centre maintains the flow of power and vitality of the system. The function of the centre is to draw power

[4] Rikin, Mintardja W. 1994. *Peranan Sunat dalam Pola Hidup Masyarakat Sunda*. Publisher Unknown, 11.
[5] Wessing, 1978

from the cosmos in order to return it to the same cosmos. For example, a king is the centre of a kingdom. As king he draws power from the cosmos and then redistributes it throughout his kingdom. If he is unsuccessful in drawing on this power then his kingdom will decline.[6] Thus, each person is a potential centre in which he or she draws on cosmic power and then distributes it in his or her own sphere of influence. The point being that whatever power flows into a person (as the centre) must be used or redistributed so that the level of cosmic power remains full and in balance. If the two are out of balance, bad luck or illness will result. The amount of power a person can accumulate (and redistribute) can expand through attaining specialized knowledge such as ritual or mystical knowledge. For example, a wedding planner will fast and meditate for 10 days before a wedding by which she gains cosmic power which she then shares with the bride so that the bride will glow with inner and outer beauty.

This idea of balance is another important concept. Garna explains it this way, in attaining life's goals, an important standard of measurement is that someone is in balance. In whatever goals a person wants to reach, he or she should do so while maintaining a state of equilibrium, not a state of lack or excess, if he or she wants to

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[6] Anderson, Benedict. 1972. "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture". In *Culture and Power in Indonesia,* edited by Claire Holt. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Cited in Wessing, Robert. 1978. *Cosmology and Social Behavior in a West Javanese Settlement*. Southeast Asia Series, No.47, Papers in International Studies. Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 27.

obtain serenity, happiness, and a peaceful life free from heavy burdens. This idea is expressed in the Sundanese saying, '*hendaklah tidur sekedar menghilangkan kantuk, minum tuak sekedar menghilangkan haus, dan makan sekedar menghilangkan lapar, janganlah berlebih-lebihan,'* which means, sleep just enough to take away drowsiness, drink palm wine just enough to satisfy thirst, and eat just enough to satisfy hunger, do not be in excess.[7] Even in day-to-day living it is important to live in a state of balance in order to be content and in harmony with one's environment.

This leads to the importance of boundaries and domains in one's environment. Domains can be people, entities, objects, or ideas that are grouped as belonging together. To return to the example of the king and his kingdom, the kingdom is the domain, not just physically but also relationally between the king and his subjects. To clarify further, young people can be grouped together as children (a domain), or the kitchen can be conceptualized as a female domain. Boundaries separate domains. As explained by Wessing,

> *[T]he most significant, and often most dangerous, cosmic powers come into play on the border between two spheres (such as inside and outside the house). It is on the border between the river and the dry land that certain spirits live … During festivities, such as weddings, borders are especially marked.*[8]

[7] Garna, H. K. 2008, *Budaya Sunda: Melintasi Waktu Menantang Masa Depan*. Bandung: Lembaga Penelitian Unpad dan Judistira Garna Foundation, 187.
[8] Wessing, 22

Borders, or boundaries, are ritually established so the ritual venue is set apart as a protected space during a transitional time. The lifecycle ceremonies mark a person going from one domain to another. The transition leaves a gap between domains, which is a dangerous situation since cosmic power is no longer contained within the boundaries of a domain. As a result, *adat* practitioners are needed to deal with this dangerous situation. Without them there to manage the power, the person going through the transition is exposed to the dangers of this power or deprived of its benefits. For example, a wedding planner will establish a protected, ritual space with mats on the floor covered in ritual offerings and incense. A wedding ritual will be performed within this space that helps the young bride and groom go through the transition from being in the life stage, or domain, of young singles to the domain of married adults in a state of blessing.

These ideas (cosmic power, domains and boundaries) are important notions in the Sundanese understanding of the structure of the universe. *Adat* has developed as a way to conduct oneself in harmony with the universe and to deal with the supernatural. From birth a Sundanese member of society learns to interpret and navigate his or her world by following the compass of life provided by *adat*. Lifecycle rituals, in particular, provide a safe and blessed way to move through the different stages of life in harmony with one's culture and community. Beyond the accepted lifecycle ceremonies, *adat* also provides a framework for dealing with specific life situations as will be seen below.

In West Java, the interaction of Folk *adat* with Hinduism and then Islam, has created diverse ritual practices that vary in style and complexity. It is through these ritual practices that Islam and *adat* are intertwined and formed as local religious

expression.[9] The role of men and women in creating, maintaining, and (re)producing ritual practices can be seen as a reflection of gender roles within the local culture. For example, in describing *kejawen* Islam (a type of Folk Islam) as practiced in a Javanese village, Smith emphasizes the importance of women in maintaining and co-creating the village religious environment, which she defines as a religion of practice.

> *The notion of orthopraxy is key to understanding how women are absolutely significant to the village religious environment because it is religion that is practiced rather than thought, it is part of everyday experience. For example, women 'practise' their kejawen Islamic religiosities rather than 'believing' in them or subscribing to doctrine—they arrive at their religious understandings through praxis. This orthopraxis engages the otherworld, which is alive and is known and felt. Its existence is not questioned. And it is through this praxis or action, this knowing and participating in the forces of the cosmos, that women keep alive or (re)produce the religious life of the village.*[10]

By viewing *kejawen* Islam as a religion of practice she is able to show how women are significant in maintaining and (re)producing village religion through the critical role they play in ritual practices. This notion of religion as practice can be applied to

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[9] This idea is explored more in depth in Beatty, Andrew. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[10] Smith, Bianca J. 2008. "Kejawen Islam as Gendered Praxis in Javanese Village Religiosity". In *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: How Women Negotiate Their Muslim Identities*, edited by Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith and Siti Syamsiyatun, 97-118. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 103.

Sundanese *adat,* which also provides a framework for living in and interacting with the cosmos in day to day practice. In Sundanese *adat* there are foundational principles that are clearly seen and maintained in religious ceremonies. These same principles are also put into practice in dealing with day to day problems and situations. There is more localized variation and flexibility in this kind of practice than there is in ceremonies. For example, a neighbour hit and killed a cat with his motorcycle. This act puts him in danger since he is now out of balance in the spiritual realm as a result of this negative, harmful act. Based on Sundanese *adat* he needs to rectify this situation. In this case, he went to a local *adat* practitioner to find out what he should do. He was told to wash the tire of his motorcycle with prayer water to wash away the negative and potentially harmful spiritual energy and thus bring things back into balance. Then he was instructed to hand out small amounts of money to the local children to put the spiritual forces back in his favour through this positive act. He was relieved to be able to do so. Thus, *adat* principles were locally interpreted and applied to an everyday problem. This is part of the ongoing power of *adat*, the ability to create meaning and provide practical solutions for daily life. As will be seen in the following Birth Rites, women play key roles, and thus have significant influence, in the ritual practices of the local form of religious expression.

Birth rites point to key values of a culture and provide a framework for understanding and managing the birth process. Childbearing is an integral system of beliefs, values and behaviour. In order to understand this system, customs associated with birth need to be placed within the larger cultural system. Birth rites are also a prevalent form for transforming a woman in readiness for her new stage of life, as well as introducing a new baby into the family and community. According to McClain (1982:36), 'There is recognition that certain inherent biological risks accompany

reproduction in most societies. This recognition may be responsible in part for the near universality of ritual observances surrounding childbearing in traditionally-oriented societies. Birth rituals not only dramatize status changes for the infant, the mother, the father and the family, but significantly, also celebrate a successful birth.'[11]

In Sundanese birth rites, the traditional midwife (*paraji)* is an important and influential ritual specialist. According to Soeganda, the *paraji's* instructions are complied with because she is considered to have more knowledge about the spiritual forces. Through the acquisition of mystical knowledge the *paraji* gains cosmic power and the ability to deal with and manage spiritual entities for the protection and benefit of a pregnant woman.[12] In the rural and urban villages, *paraji* are still called on to oversee important parts of the birth process. They receive honour and respect as bearers of traditional skills and knowledge that can meet the physical and spiritual needs of pregnant women.

## The Ceremonies

The birth rituals begin as soon as a Sundanese woman finds out she is pregnant and typically continue until 40-days after delivery. There are typically a series of ceremonies and customs to be followed: the Four-month Ceremony, Seven-month Ceremony, Pregnancy, Labour and Delivery,[13] Afterbirth Ceremony, Umbilical Cord Ceremony, 40-day Ceremony, and Baby-weighing Ceremony. For this article, the

[11] McClain, C. 1982. "Toward a Comparative Framework for the Study of Childbirth: A Review of the Literature". In *Anthropology of Human Birth*, edited by Margarita Kay, 25-29. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 36.
[12] Soeganda, Akip P. 1982. *Upacara Adat di Pasundan*. Bandung: Sumur Bandung.
[13] This is not a single ceremony but rather a description of the beliefs, taboos and ritual practices running throughout the pregnancy, birth and delivery.

Seven-month ceremony will be described, followed by a discussion of the ceremony and how it relates to relevant concepts.

## Seven-month Ceremony

The Seven-month Ceremony (*Tingkeban*)[14] celebrates the fact that the pregnant woman and the baby in her womb have made it safely to the seventh month and gives thanks to God that the foetus has become human and complete in its development, according to traditional beliefs. When I attended one such ceremony, a man was outside the house with a large mortar and pestle pounding the spices together for the spicy fruit salad called *rujak*. For the Seven-month Ceremony, *rujak* is made with seven kinds of fruit. Earlier in the morning, women had gathered together to cut the fruit which was now ready to be added to the spices. Inside, the pregnant woman, Tini,[15] was with a traditional midwife and female relatives. When we entered, the *paraji* was rubbing an egg in circular motions around and then straight down Tini's stomach. Then she rubbed oil around and down her stomach. After that she tied a thread, which had been rubbed with turmeric, around Tini's stomach and attached a safety pin to her sarong as protection for the baby while saying prayers under her breath. The *paraji* then took some oil and rubbed it onto Tini's hair. On the floor was a bowl of burning incense. On a tray there was a bowl of uncooked rice with a few coins in it and glasses of coffee, *rujak*, banana, garlic and coconut. Tini was directed to drink some of the coffee. The

[14]The Seven-month ceremony is a traditional, Folk adat ceremony. The Four-month ceremony is an Islamic ceremony. Some muslim organizations, such as Mohammadiya, promote the Four-month ceremony, which is more recent ceremony, over the Seven-month ceremony. The largest muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, allows for both. In my research communities, the Seven-month ceremony is the most prevalent while the Four-month ceremony is still seen as optional.
[15] Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

rest was an offering to her ancestors to inform them about the pregnancy and ask for their protection and blessing. She then went outside where family and neighbours had gathered.

Making Rujak (Spicy Fruit)

On the porch there were seven new batik cloths. The *paraji* wrapped Tini in one of the batik cloths and led her into the yard where there was a bucket of water in which floated seven different kinds of flower petals. There was also a clay pot filled with flower petals, a gold bracelet, coins and two baby eels. The *paraji* called Tini's mother forward. Her mother dipped out some of the flower water and poured it over Tini's head while saying a prayer. Tini gasped as the cold water hit her and the women and children all laughed and made jokes. Then the *paraji* wrapped a second cloth around her and took off the first cloth and invited another female relative to pour the water over her. This process was repeated six times amid much laughter and conversation. The

seventh time, the *paraji* approached with the clay pot and Tini laughed nervously while the women shrieked with laughter. The *paraji* poured the water from the clay pot over her head and then smashed the clay pot on the ground so the bracelet, coins and baby eels splashed out. Tini was right to be nervous. In other seven-month ceremonies I've witnessed, the jewellery, coins and baby eels were also poured over the woman's head and the baby eels slithered down the woman's body.

Ritual Bathing during Seven-month Ceremony

Finally, the *paraji* dropped a coconut so it rolled down the woman's pregnant stomach and then caught it before it hit the ground. Tini's husband then split the coconut open down the middle with one blow. He gave the coconut to Tini so she could drink the water then she handed it back to him so he could drink and then it was passed on to some of the women.

Cutting Open the Coconut

The women brought out the *rujak* and explained that if it was too sour the baby would be haughty, if it was too spicy the baby would be mean and if it was too sweet the baby would be sweet-natured. Then the *rujak* was sold by Tini to neighbour women and children for a small amount of money. The women decided the taste was sweet. Tini's family also gave out seven combs and seven small mirrors. The neighbours stayed for a short time and then drifted away home.

## Explanation of Seven-month Ceremony

As one might guess from this ceremony, the number seven is very important in Sundanese cosmology. This ceremony is held during the seventh month of pregnancy on the 7th, 17th or 27th day of the month. The *rujak* is made with seven kinds of fruit. The pregnant woman is wrapped in seven different batik cloths and bathed seven times with water gathered from seven different wells and containing petals from

seven different kinds of flowers. Although none of the women seemed to know the reason behind the importance of the number seven, it's likely that it came from a Sundanese legend with a Hindu origin about Dewi Sri, the rice goddess, throughout which the number seven crops up repeatedly.[16] What is important currently is the idea of having the ritual acts organized around and unified by the number seven. To help ensure everything (e.g. the position of the baby, the development of the baby, the mental preparedness of the woman, the physical preparedness of the woman's body; the attention of ancestors) is as it should be in the seventh month of pregnancy the number seven is evoked. This is a critical time for mother and baby and all the physical and spiritual forces need to be brought in line to bring about the safe development of the pregnancy and a successful delivery.

Pregnancy is considered a dangerous time. High infant mortality and maternal mortality[17] has probably influenced the felt need for special care and protection. The Sundanese believe that a pregnant woman gives off an odour that attracts malevolent spirits.[18] Therefore, she needs to be protected. Religious imagery[19] (invocation of the spirit world) is used to ensure her safety by appeasing or distracting the appropriate

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[16] For more on the Sundanese version of this myth, see Soeganda, 1982.
[17] According to the *Survei Demografi dan Kesehatan Indonesia* (Indonesian Health Demography Survey), in West Java there were 39 infant deaths for every 1000 live births in 2007 and 321 maternal deaths for every 100,000 births as compared to 34 infant deaths for every 1000 live births and 228 maternal deaths for every 100,000 births in Indonesia in 2007.
[18] There is one spirit in particular, called *Kuntil Anak*, who is the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth and now roams around looking for a replacement baby. She will try to take the baby of a pregnant woman and she is able to trick the woman and her family members into dangerous situations that will enable her to harm the baby. For example, she can make herself look like someone the woman knows and trick her into going out at night. *Kuntil Anak* is stronger at night and will be able to harm the woman or her baby if she catches her outside at night.
[19] For a more detailed discussion of religious imagery see, Bates, Brian and Allison N. Turner. 2003. "Imagery and Symbolism in the Birth Practices of Traditional Cultures". In *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Lauren Dundes, 85-97. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York and Oxford: Altimira Press.

spirits. The *paraji* will tie a thread around the pregnant woman's stomach to tie together the woman and her baby so they cannot be separated. She will pin *panglay*, an aromatic root similar to ginger, to her clothing as a protective object. The malignant spirits do not like sharp objects and the odour of the *panglay* will mask the odour of pregnancy. The pregnant woman also needs to enlist the help of her ancestors. She should honour them by announcing the imminent arrival of a new descendant and ask for their blessing and protection in the spiritual realm. The incense gets their attention and the offerings honour them. Throughout this process the *paraji* chants under her breath. She has special prayers that have been passed down to her which are considered powerful. She is praying to both the ancestors and to God and does not seem troubled by this ambiguity. If asked directly she will admit that she is asking the ancestors for their blessing but emphasizes that she is praying to God. The *paraji*, as an *adat* practitioner, has specialized knowledge that enables her to carry out the *adat* rituals and practices that will protect Tini from evil spirits, appease and appeal for help from her ancestors in this spiritual battle, and prepare her for delivery. This need for help and protection from the spiritual realm is a strong motivator for maintaining this ritual as an integral part of the birth rites.[20]

[20] Folk adat is still the foundational belief system. Islamic rituals can be added, such as the Four-month ceremony, but they are still seen as optional. Islamic elements can be included in and adapted to traditional ceremonies but only if the defining ritual elements remain. *Adat* practitioners, like the *paraji*, are usually responsible for inclusions and adaptations which will satisfy most participants. It is more likely a ceremony will be discontinued rather than change significantly. For a more thorough discussion on *adat*, Islam and ritual change, see Beatty, Andrew. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Lentz, 2011.

Bathing symbolizes spiritual cleansing in readiness for a new stage in life and prepares the woman for delivery. The use of simulative imagery (also known as sympathetic magic) is particularly prevalent in this ceremony.[21] Thus, birth rituals focus on bodily functions with the aim that the simulative imagery will stimulate the physiological process. In this ceremony, the water flowing down her body, the baby eels slithering down her body, and the coconut rolling down her stomach represent the baby smoothly coming down the birth canal and exiting her body. The splitting of the coconut with one blow symbolizes the baby coming out quickly without being blocked by anything. For a woman trying to become a mother for the first time, and who thus does not have previous experience to help her, ritual bathing acknowledges this major change in her life and provides spiritual and psychological support.

This is a family-sponsored ceremony and there is an emphasis on family continuity and connectedness. The ancestors are invoked with incense and offerings, the idea being that they can still be contacted and are still concerned about their descendants. There is a fear that if they are not honoured with the news of an upcoming birth they may be offended and bring bad fortune on the new baby and family. Thus, they are still influential in the spiritual realm which can impact the physical realm. There is not a clear distinction between the two realms. This is not often articulated but the offerings are always present. Family connectedness, especially among the women, is also seen during the ritual bathing. It is the women in the family who have already given birth who do the bathing along with the *paraji*. They recognize that the pregnant

[21] In their discussion on imagery and symbolism in birth practices of traditional cultures, Bates and Turner (2003, 85) explore more in-depth 'how images associated with childbirth can ease the experience.'

woman is in a transitional stage as she moves toward a significant change in status. In preparation for this change, she is welcomed into the ranks of women who have given birth and become mothers. She is inducted into the family line of women who have undergone the same ceremony and who are passing on their knowledge and support to help her get through the dangerous time of late pregnancy and birth. There is power in the unbroken line of keeping the traditions which have been passed down through the generations. Furthermore, Tini gets a stronger sense of what it means to be a Sundanese woman who is valued, cared for, and under the protection of her family (through their ritual intervention on her behalf) as she moves toward a new stage of life. The men in the family also help with some of the ritual preparations but are mainly absent from the ritual itself except when the husband is called on to cut the coconut. This is reflective of the minor, but important, role he plays in insuring a successful delivery. The birth rites, even more so than the other rites, are part of the women in the family's sphere of influence.

The Seven-month Ceremony is communal. Female family members, friends and neighbours bring their knives, graters and cutting boards to help prepare the *rujak*. There is a party atmosphere as the women work and joke around with one another. Family members, however, are responsible for mixing all the ingredients together at the end. It is believed that the baby will influence the taste of the *rujak* depending on his/her character. No matter how careful the family is, it is the baby in the womb who will determine the flavour of the *rujak*. The family's friends and neighbours will judge if the *rujak* is sweet, sour or spicy after they buy some and taste it. Friends and neighbours also return to watch the ritual bathing. By participating in the ceremony, they are adding to and sharing in the blessings and spiritual protection generated by the ritual. Thus, there is reciprocity between the family who sponsors the ceremony

and the friends and neighbours who help and participate in it. Along with this reciprocity is an expectation that the lifecycle rituals will be carried out. There is communal pressure in the sense that if something goes wrong later with the pregnancy or delivery, the family will be blamed, because they did not follow the traditional ways. Furthermore, carrying out these rituals plays an important role in keeping spiritual forces in balance, which affects the whole community. Women, then, have a significant responsibility in building these reciprocal relationships within the ritual realm which in turn impacts the well-being of the community.

## Conclusion

Rituals, especially lifecycle rituals, are an integral part of a local culture. As community events, they are accessible venues in which we can participate, observe and learn from our friends and neighbours. In my experience, my Sundanese neighbours were delighted that I was curious and wanted to learn about their culture. They felt their views and practices were being valued and respected. We were able to engage in meaningful discourse that led to a deeper understanding of their primary concerns and values as well as their beliefs about how to understand and live together in this world.

# An Exploration of the Spiritual Roles of a Woman in the Central Asian Family:

## The 'Emitting the Fragrance' Rite

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## Abstract

In a typical Central Asian family, a woman has important spiritual roles in addition to other traditional roles in everyday life. From the lens of Muslim background women believers in Christ, this paper focuses on the 'emitting the fragrance' rite which is a traditional Islamic practice in Central Asian families. Drawing from learning gleaned from informal conversations with four Central Asian women, this article suggests three spiritual roles of a woman related to the 'emitting the fragrance' rite including spiritual honour keeper, spiritual mediator and spiritual nurturer. Missiological reflections and insights concerning contextualisation issues in relation to women's spiritual roles in the 'emitting the fragrance' rite are presented in a letter addressed to the Central Asian churches.

‘We say that a woman has forty souls’, said Gulzira with a smile, a young Kazakh shopkeeper at a big modern shopping centre who grew up in a village and came to the city to work. ‘You see, a woman has so many things to do and roles to carry in her life as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, then mother-in-law and grandmother. She has to make sure everything in the family runs smoothly and no bad words are spoken about the family… It is also the woman’s role to plan and schedule the weekly ‘emitting the fragrance’ to remember and honour our ancestors. This involves preparing *shelpek* (fried flat bread) and reciting the Quran which bring protection and blessing over our households. You see, this is our Muslim way’. Though said with a smile, the weight of life as a Central Asian woman is well captured in the saying above. How does a woman negotiate the everyday expectations, needs and responsibilities from and for the world around her in Central Asia? How is her pursuit of life that is shaped by her sense of meaning, values and the transcendence (in other words, her spirituality) expressed in her daily roles?

Understanding the spiritual life and role of a woman in the Central Asian family relates closely to the social, cultural, and religious context in which she is deeply rooted in everyday life. It is often said that ‘To be Kazak is to be Muslim,’ or ‘To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.’ This Muslim-ness is lived and observed in homes more than attending the mosque in Central Asia. The Muslim piety is regularly observed through a series of funeral meals and other memorial feasts in Central Asian homes. In commemoration of ancestor spirits special meals are prepared on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth days after death by the family members in their own homes. These occasions are usually well attended by relatives, friends and neighbours of the hosting family. The memorial meal is concluded with Quran recital in Arabic followed by a blessing in local language dedicating the food and Quran reading to the spirits of the

deceased. Then throughout the year these memorial feasts are repeated on a much smaller scale around the family meal table with the flat bread fried in oil specially prepared in honour of ancestor spirits and some verses of Quran recited over it by one of the family members. Embedded in the everyday life, this rite is practiced weekly in some families or more intermittently in others, including any other sad and happy occasions. The responsibility of observing this rite primarily lies with the women. The Inner Asian[22] heritage of ancestor practices and Islam are often conflated in the mind of Central Asian Muslims. This is especially true for women who often have little contact with the mosque, the formal religious institution[23]. Although there is a continuity with Inner Asian ancestor practices, Privratsky points out the obvious influence and relationship with Islam and Muslim tradition elsewhere[24] in these Muslim memorial feasts and its replica of domestic ancestor rite. Reconfigured in a visibly Islamic mode of religiosity, the Muslim ancestor practice in Central Asian homes is a contextualization of Islamic belief and ritual. With this complex reality of Muslim domestic ritual life relating to ancestor practices in mind, Islam in Central Asia may be better understood as a lived religion[25] in the memory and daily life of Muslims –

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[22] Inner Asia denotes a broader description than Central Asia. Geographically, it usually includes the 'heartland' of the Eurasian landmass, corresponding to the present-day Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang in China, former Soviet republics of Central Asia, and some portions of Siberia, as well as European Russia. Culturally, Inner Asia includes the region of Turko-Mongolian culture. See DeWeese, D 1994, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, pp.7-9; Privratsky, BG 2001, 'Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory', Cruzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, p.2.

[23] Sauma, R 2002, 'Ancestor practices in the Muslim world: a problem of contextualization from Central Asia', *Missiology: An International Review,* vol. 30, no. 3, p.339.

[24] The similar concepts of the spirit-world that honor ancestors and saints with the Quran and food are known across the Muslim world from Java to Lebanon to Morocco (Privratsky 2001, p244).

[25] See McGuire, MB 2008, *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.185.

'Muslim way' as phrased by Gulzira. Thus, the spiritual life of women in Central Asia is vividly captured in the domestic setting through Muslim ancestor practices.

In summary, in order to understand spiritual role of a woman in the Central Asian family this paper focuses on the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, named after the aroma that results from frying flat bread in oil which takes place in memorial meals, also called the Thursday rite[26]. The views of four Central Asian women who have had first-hand experience of this rite are examined using semi-structured interviews. Through a lens of Central Asian women believers from Muslim Background (BMBs) in Christ, findings from these interviews highlight three dimensions of a woman's spiritual role in the 'emitting the fragrance' rite including spiritual honour keeper, spiritual mediator, and spiritual nurturer. Then, further missiological reflections on the findings are summarised, addressing issues of contextualisation of the rite with its connections to discipleship of Central Asian BMB women in particular.

## Research methods and Participant introduction

This research was carried out using semi-structured interviews, with four Central Asian women from Kazak, Kyrgyz and Uyghur ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, views from other Central Asian ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen are not directly represented due to the limitations and scope of the research.

Among the four participants are Gulzira[27] and Gauhar who are both are Kazaks, Mihrigul is Uyghur and Altynai is Kyrgyz. Gulziar grew up in a close family and

[26] Privratsky, BG 2001, 'Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory', Cruzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, pp.128-134.
[27] All names have been changed.

community network in her village yet is familiar with city life and in touch with younger generation. Therefore, her participation is valued as it informs the life of Central Asian Muslim women from Muslim perspective. Apart from Gulziar, three other participants are mature BMBs who have chosen to follow Christ. These three BMB participants were purposefully selected for interview because they were not only born in Central Asia and grew up in traditional Muslim families of their respective ethnicities and familiar with Muslim traditions but also for their years of experience in working with and discipling other BMB women as well as in the life of their own Uyghur, Kazak and Kyrgyz BMB communities. The ages of the participants vary from 22 to 50 years old. Interviews were conducted at home, in a café and in a place of work which provided space for the women to share openly and freely. The aims and purpose of the study were explained to the participants and their consent to share their thoughts and experiences was given on the condition that their personal information and identity is kept confidential in any published materials or public presentations.

## History and description of 'Emitting the fragrance' rite

In recent years there has been a noticeable rise in numbers of Central Asian Muslims observing orthodox Muslim practices, including women wearing head coverings, men growing beards, and increase in participation of mosque-centred rituals such as the praying five times a day (*namaz* or s*alat*) and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Gulzira, who has long wavy hair reaching down to the elbow, wears modest make up and has a smart casual look suitable for a shopkeeper, remarks, 'These people (women with head scarfs and men with beards) are not extremists. They have decided to be more serious about who they are as Muslims. But they consistently remember the

ancestors at the end of the *namaz* just as I would do at home with my family after the meal.' Honouring the ancestors is at the heart of Muslim Central Asians' devotion.

Remembering the ancestors through 'emitting the fragrance' is one of the principal practices among the Muslims of Central Asia, and is observed and celebrated at least intermittently in most homes[28]. The rite survived through the Soviet era, despite concerted efforts by the Soviets to stamp out religiosity and the spirituality of the people[29]. Maintaining this rite acted as an identity marker for Central Asians, in particular Turkic ethnic groups with Islamic heritage, in the context of harsh Soviet rule and colonization.

On Thursdays or Fridays seven pieces of deep-fried round-shaped flat bread called *shelpek*, also called *qudayi nan* (the bread of God), are prepared in memory of the ancestors and placed in the middle of the family meal table (*dastarhan)*. When all the members of the family sit around the table, some portion of the Quran is recited in dedication to the ancestor spirits, then the names of the ancestors are recalled. Finally, the bread is broken and the family meal begins. Some families eat the food first and at the end of the meal do the Quran reading, blessings and breaking the *shelpek*[30]; the participants in this research confirmed that the meal can be eaten before or after the recitation and blessings. After the meal on the same evening, the remaining *shelpek* is distributed to neighbours, often by the children of the household. Gauhar, a teacher at a Kazak-speaking public school, says that when the recipient of the *shelpek* is a young

[28] Privratsky 2001, pp.132-133.
[29] Privratsky, 2001, p.146.
[30] Privratsky, 2001, p.131.

child it is considered to be better. Children are thought to have purer souls and intentions, and when they pronounce the blessing for the family with 'May it be accepted!' or 'May it touch [them]', this is said to be more readily received by the ancestors and touches the unseen world.

There are variations in details and nuances of the practice among different ethnic groups of Central Asia and from family to family. However, the general patterns of 'emitting the fragrance' ritual are similar, and most importantly, in relation to the main focus of this paper, the consistency of women's active participation in the practice is found across Central Asia[31]. So, what are the specific spiritual roles of women in observing this rite in the Muslim homes of Central Asia?

## The role of women in the 'emitting the fragrance' rite

### *Spiritual honour keeper*

In carrying out the 'emitting the fragrance' rite a woman acts as a spiritual honour keeper for the family.

The 'honour (*namys*)' and 'shame (*uyat*)' undergird the everyday life context of Central Asian homes. Altynai, a mature Kyrgyz BMB, explains, '*Namys* means honour, reputation and dignity. Sometimes people kill others who disgraced them to restore their own honour. It belongs to a nation, community, tribe and family. And it belongs to girls who will grow and become wives, hence it is said "The

[31] Bellér-Hann, I 2008, *Community matters in Xinjiang: 1880-1949: towards a historical anthropology of the Uyghur*, BRILL, Boston, Massachusetts; Dubuisson, E-M 2017, *Living language in Kazakhstan: the dialogic emergence of an ancestral worldview*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Privratsky 2001.

household's honour is kept by women"... It is a norm of life, especially in Central Asia. *Namys* is not what people talk about, it is what they keep and how they live their daily life.'

A woman has to keep the family from others' bad and dirty words. This keeping of the family honour is primarily tied to the purity of young girls before they are given in marriage. A young girl carries a very important responsibility to keep the family's and her father's good reputation and honour by behaving with modesty in her clothing and in her social interactions. When a woman gets married, she is to keep her husband and his family's honour by learning from and following the instructions of her mother-in-law. She is to be a good wife who places her husband in a high position of respect in the home. 'A good wife takes her husband to the high place of the house but a bad wife takes him to the grave,' is another widely known saying among Central Asians. When children are born the mother carries the main responsibilities of bringing them up, their discipline and education. She has to cover any shameful situations within the family and solve things in such a way that no bad words go outside the gate of the house. The list goes on, as the expression of 'forty souls' of women portrays well.

She is to be a good host in showing family hospitality. Culturally, in Central Asia, guests who visit a home are honoured by the degree of hospitality shown by the host which means providing food (*chai*) at any time of the day[32]. It doesn't matter when the family have their regular meals, if any visitor comes to the

[32] Dubuisson 2017, p.29.

house, whether relatives, family members, neighbours, friends or travellers, tea and food should be prepared for the guests who have come. 'Sometimes, we cook and serve 6 or 7 meals a day!' says Altynai. It is the woman's responsibility to show hospitality to family guests. Neglecting guests is considered an offence and it brings shame to the host. In a similar vein 'emitting the fragrance' is showing hospitality and respect to ancestor spirits[33]. It is believed that these spirits visit the family every Thursday and Friday to be fed and it is the woman's role to conduct this spiritual rite of 'emitting the fragrance'.

The word used for the ancestor spirits in Central Asia is '*aruaq*' which is an Arabic collective noun and is conceptually united with the spirits of Muslim saints and prophets. Hence, this term *aruaq* makes the ancestors into Muslims. When the ancestors are called *aruaq*, therefore, they are conceived as living spirits possessed of *bereke* (divine blessing), the same spiritual power that resides in Muslim saints and their shrines. These Muslim ancestor-spirits are considered as mediators between men and God, asking blessing and protection on their behalf. As Gauhar explains, 'these people went to God and met God in other world after the death... They can ask and make request before God on our behalf. "Please, my daughter has emitted the aroma, and she is going through hardship, give me favour to intervene." Because these spirits are close to God they can pray for and ask on behalf of the living.'

[33] Dubuisson 2017, p.30; Privratsky 2001, pp.133,134.

Offering honouring hospitality to ancestor spirits is a way to ensure the blessing and favourable intervention on behalf of the family in the unseen world. This reciprocal connection between the dead and the living is highlighted in the following well known Central Asian saying: 'Unless the dead are satisfied, the living cannot become rich'[34]. It is believed that if a family neglects their ancestors by not practicing the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, it is seen shameful (*uyat*) for the family[35]. There is also fear of misfortune due to causing dissatisfaction and offence to ancestors, who will then no longer protect the family from bad luck and calamity caused by evil spirits[36].

The spiritual honour of the household is upheld by remembering the ancestors who come as spiritual visitors and agents of blessing. Drawing from her tight community upbringing in her village, Gauhar says: 'when a family has peace and their life goes well, people talk about the woman of the house (may it be referring to the wife, the daughter-in-law, the mother) as God given. God has blessed [the man/the household] with the woman who prays to God always.' Thus, the fragrance of the fried bread and then the bread shared in neighbourhood upholds moral integrity of the household and serve as spiritual merit to the family. On the other hand, 'if she neglects and does not prepare the bread, when something bad happens in her family, it is assumed to be the fault of the woman,' Altynai points out and continues with evidently heavy emotions in her tone, 'shockingly enough, in some

[34] Privratsky 2001, p.133.
[35] Privratsky 2001, p.140.
[36] Privratsky 2001, pp.136-138.

families, if the husband decides to beat her no one would defend her. Because it is assumed that she deserves it. Even her children will blame her.'

The cultural, social, and spiritual contexts of Central Asian Muslim women's everyday life demonstrates that the crux of women's role is honour keeping. Throughout different life stages, a woman serves as an honour keeper of her family socially and spiritually. She carries the honour of her father's house in her physical body as young girl. As a married woman, she is an honour keeper of her husband and his household. The flip side of this responsibility is that she is also the bearer of shame when things go wrong. Or, at least, she is the first one to be blamed for bad things and misfortune.

## *Spiritual mediator*

From her kitchen to the family meal table, a woman serves as spiritual mediator with a priestly-type role in dedicating the fragrance to God and ancestor spirits in her own home.

### *Fragrance of frying oil*

*For most Islamic ceremonial occasions where animals are slaughtered as sacrifice, men are in charge of the food and women are excluded from the process. In contrast, women take the lead role in the 'emitting the fragrance' rite[37]. It is considered a sacred practice and therefore the woman who prepares and fries the bread should have pure intentions and*

[37] Bellér-Hann 2008, p.370.

*attitudes, and go through a purification cleansing ritual beforehand. During menstruation women do not carry out the 'emitting the fragrance' rite. Following the purification ritual, a mother or grandmother assisted by younger female members of the family prepare the mixture of a basic dough consisting of flour, water, and salt. Apart from Uyghur tradition, other Central Asian ethnic groups leaven the dough using yeast.*

*According to Mihrigul who has learnt more detailed aspects of 'emitting the fragrance rite' from a well informed Uyghur neighbour in her village, the first round piece of dough out of the seven shelpek is dedicated to God and set apart on a separate plate. The second one is dedicated to the lord of water and soil/land. The third one is made in memory of a specific dead person being remembered, especially when the occasion is part of the funerary ceremonial meal. The fourth one is dedicated to the memory of other close family members, the fifth to relatives and family acquaintances, the sixth to orphans and people with no families (also called people with no owners/lords) and the seventh to the young children/babies died young who are said to be like birds. These specifications were not mentioned by other participants from Kazak and Kyrgyz ethnic backgrounds.*

*Next, the oil gets heated in a frying pan to the point where the aroma of the cooking oil spreads. This is an equivalent of cooking the fat*

*of sacrificial animals[38]. As each piece of bread is fried in sizzling oil, the woman prays on behalf of her household, saying, 'May it touch [them][39]. After the bread is fried, the doors and windows are opened to let the aroma escape. Then a pile of shelpek is brought out to the meal table.*

***Quran reading***

*'My mum used to take about an hour in reading the Quran and remembering all the names of deceased relatives, saints and prophets. As children we used to get tired sitting through this part of the evening. My mum was so devout and sincere that she would go through a long list of names! After the blessing (bata) is pronounced, we all say "aumin". Then she takes the bread and tears it, and all sitting around take it and eat,' told Gauhar from her childhood memory.*

*Imams, the religious leaders, tell people that Quranic reading should be led by a man in the family, usually the grandfather or father. When major funeral related remembrance meals (as beru) take place on day seven, day forty, and the one year anniversary, the male religious leader or those who are trained to recite the Quran are invited by the family according to Islamic custom. However, in everyday practices, especially for the family remembering the dead ancestors on Thursdays or Fridays, the grandmother or mother of the family, who are more active*

[38] Bellér-Hann 2008, p.360; Privratsky 2001, p.135.
[39] Bellér-Hann 2008, p.365.

*in observing the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, may end up not only preparing the food but also leading the family in Quranic reading and prayer. Usually it consists of naming God (bismillah), sometimes saying the shahada, and reciting a few verses from the Quran memorised from a booklet (often bought from streets near sacred sites such as shrines and mosques). The ancestors were Muslims and therefore this Quranic recital is dedicated to them in honour of their faith. Following the Quranic reading is the naming of the ancestors including family members, relatives, neighbours, close friends, local saints, and prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Daniel, Isa, and Mohammed.*

***Dreams***

*In general dreams have an important place in the life of people in Central Asia. They are not to be ignored. When ancestor spirits appear in a dream, it becomes even more significant[40]. In connection to the 'emitting the fragrance' rite of honoring ancestor spirits, a dream serves as a sign of reminder or warning. It is believed that ancestor spirits come in dreams as spiritual visitors to the family home as agents of blessing. Ancestors are said to appear in dreams if they are not shown proper hospitality. People also emit the fragrance when they lose something or other uneasy pressing things happen in their dreams. Or, in reverse they find something*

[40] Dubuisson 2017, p.41; Privratsky 2001, p.122.

*precious or meaningful in their dreams, they emit the fragrance asking for the kind of blessings.*

*Often women have an important role as receiver of dreams as well as being the one who prepares the shelpek. If any other members of family see dreams, then they will tell the woman in the family to not forget to 'emit the fragrance.' Women also act as interpreters of dreams. If people cannot understand the meaning of a certain dream but feel that it is very important, then they would go and ask elders. It could be a man or a woman those who are known as wise man or wise woman in the community.*

*Thus, on Thursdays and Fridays or any other days of the week when a nudge from the unseen world is communicated through a dream, women are not mere cooks. In each step of preparation and facilitation of this rite, they are spiritual mediators invoking protection against bad luck and calamity, and blessing of secured future happiness and prosperity on behalf of the whole household.*

## ***Spiritual nurturer***

Mothers ensure their daughters learn from their example in order that this 'emitting the fragrance' rite is passed properly to the next generation. Gauhar states: 'It (emitting the fragrance rite) is like a special spiritual assignment given to us. It has been passed on to us from our ancestors. It is a spiritual tradition. Our parents, especially mothers teach us (daughters) about it. Our grandmothers teach us that in order to be a good wife, you need to 'emit the fragrance' to bring

peace on your family.' According to Altynai, if a young woman has little understanding and is not familiar with things related to the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, she has no honour till she learns to do it.

In the heart of a Central Asian woman the 'emitting the fragrance' rite touches her spiritual longing to be close to God. Carrying the weight of life's demands, needs and questions of the everyday, she is compelled to search the ultimate source beyond the visible world around. 'Women are very close to the spiritual realm. My mother used to say that if I don't keep this (emitting the fragrance), I may lose touch with God and become far away from Him,' says Gauhar. She recalls how her mother sincerely carried out each step of the rite and taught her and her sisters. After the '*Aumin*' pronounced at the end of the rite, her mother would sit for a while to pray for peace, protection and blessing over her own family, for the neighbours and others around them and for the nation. Gauhar used to sit beside her mother and joined in with the prayer. 'Emitting the fragrance' was not a mere duty for her to perform, it served as a sacred spiritual ritual in and through which she was seeking touches of God for herself and for all around her.

This process of involving daughters and younger women in the family demonstrates how the tradition of 'emitting the fragrance' rite is passed on to future generations and highlights the important role of the woman as a spiritual nurturer. Women may hardly attend mosques and have little knowledge of the sacred text, their piety is lived out and vividly captured in the middle of ones' everyday household and then passed on to the women of the next generation.

## Missiological reflection

An important question to consider is how the spiritual role of Central Asian BMB women relates to issues of contextualization for Central Asian churches? There has been little discussion or attention given to the issue of Muslim ancestor practices among the churches in Central Asia, and even more scarce is consideration of women's spiritual roles related to these matters.

One of the BMB participants says, 'I used to do this (emitting the fragrance) so that the dead spirits may be pleased. But now I do this in the name of *Isa*. My younger sister who is not yet a committed believer, does it every Friday. In my case, I may only do it once a month. If my sister sees disturbing dreams about me, she will ring me and say that we need to emit the fragrance and read the Quran. But now I do it in Isa's name and they (family members) just say "*Aumin*"'. With a slightly sheepish smile on her face she continues, 'In the early days of my faith walk, some said frying the bread should be completely thrown away. And we were forbidden to do so by some foreign workers. But we felt so lost in which way we may pray and ask help.' This points out one of the distinctive felt needs of Central Asian BMB women. The woman carries a more active role in preparing and cooking the bread which contributes to building the whole family's spirituality, their devotion and moral integrity in the community. Simply treating the role of a woman as cook according to traditional cultural gender divisions would dismiss the significance of the spiritual roles examined in this present study.

Unlike other Muslim majority countries, the growth of visible Protestant churches with converts in Central Asia with converts from a Muslim background has been remarkable during the past three decades, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding Muslim ancestor practices, various responses and treatments have been

expressed by different church groups influenced by cross-cultural workers from the West and East, and Russian background churches in the region. People were usually told to reject anything to do with ancestor practices. This is true with the teaching of the most Russian background churches that says ancestor spirits are demons, and the Muslim funeral meals are the Corinthian table of demons[41]. In contrast, other church groups have carefully investigated and sought more balanced biblical approaches to these matters. One example is a letter written to Central Asian churches entitled 'An appeal to the Messianic assemblies concerning God and the ancestor spirits'[42] in which the study of 1 Corinthians 10:25-11:1 regarding food sacrificed to idols and 2 Kings 5:1-19 with Elisha's dealing on Naaman and Syrian temple practices are included[43].

The captivating moments of the present study were conversations with three BMB participants towards re-imagining their kitchen and dining table at home with their new faith in *Isa* the Messiah in light of the scripture. A summary of the reflections of these conversations are put together below as a letter written in a similar manner to the preceding letter mentioned above, which was addressed to Central Asian churches. What is shared in the letter below should not be read as definitive suggestions by any means. Yet some elements, if not all, could be beneficial in the ongoing contextualisation and self-theologising conversations of the churches

[41] Sauma 2002, p.341.
[42] The letter was drafted in English first by several expatriates including Rabban Sauma, all trained in American seminaries, with field experience and competence in a Turkic language. Then it was translated, checked and reviewed by BMB pastors and church planters (Sauma, 2002, pp. 329, 330).
[43] Sauma 2002, pp. 323-345.

as well as among cross-cultural workers in their support and service for the good news in the Central Asia region.

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*Precious brothers and sisters in Isa Messiah,*

*Grace and peace to you, the church of God in Central Asia, from the One God our Father and Lord Isa Messiah.*

*As fellow servants in the ministry of the Most High, we rejoice and give praises to Him for His redeeming work fruitfully evident amongst the people of God in Central Asia. Truly it is the work of His Holy Spirit that many brothers and sisters from Muslim backgrounds have been added into the family of God in our region, following the steps of people of faith in enduring the hardship and persecution.*

*This is our prayer for each one of you, dear brothers and sisters. May God's church in Central Asia be firmly rooted in the truth of His Word so that each one of the members of His body may grow in confidence and fully experience the gift of His abundant life according to the freedom of the good news.*

*Concerning the problem of the ancestor spirits that are worshiped in many Muslim homes in our region, there has been a preceding letter44 addressed to you in support of dealing with the difficulties faced by our*

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[44] Sauma 2002, pp. 323-345.

*brothers and sisters. In this letter, building upon the constructive teachings and guidelines laid out in the previous letter in light the Scripture, we would like to highlight some aspects of the same issue specifically from the perspective of our sisters in Isa the Messiah and their faith growth in mind.*

*What will you say to the member of your fellowship when she comes to you and says, 'Pastor (or brother / sister), I am pressured by my unbelieving family members to fry the bread because my husband saw his grandfather in his dream.' What will you teach and how will you guide your sisters who have to prepare the food for the funeral and memorial meals of which shelpek is always an integral part? How will you help your sisters to be good witnesses in their homes? It is foolish to think that the problem will be solved by forbidding everything about the Muslim ancestor practices, when God has not dealt with His people in such manner.*

*First of all, let us be reminded that honouring the dead in remembrance is in accordance with God's Word, i.e. God's commandment to honor our fathers and mothers (Exodus 20:12), and Ruth, Naomi and Boaz honoured the dead by fulfilling the law of God (Ruth 3, 4). However, God's Word forbids worshiping the dead by devoting offerings or sacrifices to ancestor spirits, as our people do when they 'emit the fragrance,' believing that these spirits could advocate before God, intervene on their behalf and help them. When we turn to the way of Isa with repentance, we have God's own Holy Spirit as our comforter and*

*counselor according to Isa's promise (John 14:26; 15:26). And God appointed Isa as the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5, John 14:6).*

*Therefore, we should not seek help nor guidance from ancestor spirits, getting into the habit of seeking after all kinds of spirits. If any of you see your mother or father in your dream, you should not be afraid that you have seen a demon, as these dreams are often a natural thing with no significant meaning attached45. God's angel may sometimes appear in our dreams and visions, for example, to Joseph (Genesis 37) and to Joseph the husband of Mary (Matthew 1:21-22, 2:13, 19). In fact, some of you have encountered Isa with His presence as a bright light in your dreams that served as guidance to your search for the truth. However, you should be wise and careful that you may not be deceived by Satan in the figure of your ancestor spirits in your dreams, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1). If someone in your family, relatives, neighbourhood or from your church come and tell you about their dreams, be ready to listen carefully, trusting His Holy Spirit's guidance and offer to pray and intercede for the person and respective family in the name of Isa the Messiah.*

*God does not forbid us to show respect in our relationship to others from different religious faiths but wants us to act honourably with*

[45] Sauma 2002, pp. 333.

*wisdom and pure intention. One clear example from the Old Testament is found in 2 Kings chapter 5. In the story, Naaman a Syrian general came to Elisha the great prophet of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. By washing seven times in the river nearby according to Elisha's instruction, Naaman was completely healed by the power of the God. Then he immediately repented from his pagan idolatry and promised to worship only the God of Israel. However, Naaman pleaded with the prophet for understanding of his difficulties to be faced back in his homeland and said, '...your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord. But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also – when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this." Then the prophet Elisha gave his blessing to Naaman and said, "Go in peace"' (2 Kings 5:17b-19).*

*Naaman demonstrated his pure heart intention and sincere determination to worship only the Lord but also to act honourably in his own context especially in relation to the religion of his own people. Because of this the prophet permitted Naaman the freedom and gave a blessing to serve God among his own people of Syria and show respect to their religious traditions and practices that were unacceptable to God (i.e. Exodus 20:2)!*

*In light of this Scripture, the previous letter addressed to us states that Muslim memorial meals and eating the food at such occasions are*

*permitted with a pure heart and intention of followers of Isa to serve the One true God and worship Him alone while showing respect to others. We may help our Muslim relatives when they give the funeral and memorial meals, like Naaman did for his king. And when the blessing is spoken at the end of the meal after the Quran is read, you may also receive the blessing by stroking your face, just as Naaman bowed before Rimmon. Also, out of respect to the fellow believers, we should refrain from eating when another brother or sister considers eating the meal dedicated to ancestor spirits as sin (1 Corinthians 10; Romans 14:15-16). Likewise, believers should not condemn anyone who takes the meal with a pure conscience and no objections from other believers present46.*

*However, what should a believing sister in Isa do in her own kitchen at home before other Muslim family members in relation to 'emitting the fragrance' rite? When a woman's heart intention is pure before the One true God, seeking His protection and blessing for her own self and her household, she may fry the bread as an act of worship to the One true God in whom she has put her sole trust and hope, saying: 'May this fragrance touch the One true God, to the praise of His Holy name'. Whilst preparing and cooking the bread, she may bring all petitions, longings and thanksgivings about herself, her families, and her community and people in the name of Isa the Messiah. In this way, she acts honourably in her*

[46] Sauma 2002, pp. 334-338.

*home before her unbelieving family members and community around her but stays pure before the One true God, as Naaman did.*

*What if a believing sister was also to facilitate the family meal with Muslim as well as the believing members of family present? She may start with 'bismillah' (in the name of God in Arabic) and 'allahu akbar' (which translates 'God is the greater than all' in Arabic) and carefully pronounce the blessing at the end to dedicate the whole meal to the One true God, 'May the bread and food eaten touch the Spirit of the One true God, to the praise of the unity of the Most High from whom everything comes from, the life of our ancestors before us and our own.' And all may say 'Aumin,' receiving the blessing by stroking one's face. Her spiritual leadership is exercised in her home in worship to the One true God but shows respect to the ancestors and other members of the family. In this way, she keeps her family's honour, gains respect and maintains peaceful relationships with her non-believing family members.*

*When a neighbour's child brings a piece of shelpek, it may be received with blessing 'May it touch the One true God, to the praise of Him. May God be with you!' One could even ask the neighbour what caused them to emit the fragrance, and offer special prayer for them in Isa's name, making the occasion to bless and plead on behalf of the neighbours' family, thus acting as spiritual intercessor before the One true God in her own neighbourhood.*

*O beloved brothers and sisters, therefore, let us approach God's throne of grace with full confidence through Isa the Messiah who*

*intercedes on our behalf and stands before God, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Let us thank God for His grace, infinite wisdom and patience throughout history, guiding and teaching His people from all cultures and backgrounds to come to the light and to the very source of living water, Isa Messiah our Lord. May the fragrance of the perfect sacrifice offered by our Lord Isa the Messiah fill every household in Central Asia and beyond, as daughters of the Most High, our sisters in Isa the Messiah, worship the One true God in Spirit and truth, touching heaven and interceding in His Holy name!*

*Aumin*

Lily:
One Hui Woman's Journey to New Life

Brooklyn Qiao

*Brook has a life-long calling to serve Christ where he is less known, and to bolster Asian Christians in missions. Brook has lived among the Chinese Hui people for ten years, spending most of that time as a missionary in northwest China.*

## Abstract:

Lily is a Hui Chinese Muslim who has come to love Jesus. She speaks of being Hui and Muslim somewhat interchangeably, and primarily as a social identity. Hui Muslim is her ethnicity, her family's tradition, the way she fits into the community, and the way her people distinguish themselves from her nations' ethnic majority – the Han people. Although she knows little about formal Islam, the rules and rituals of Muslim community life shape her. Daily shopping and food preparation must be *halal,* and annual festivals must be observed. Perhaps most importantly, rites of passage surrounding marriage, childbirth, and death must be completed to satisfy her family's expectations. Here we follow her through the customs and rites of passage surrounding the birth of her second child and hear her speak about her understanding of their forms and meanings. As she has journeyed toward greater faith in Christ in spiritual matters, her social identities as both a Muslim and a Chinese have been challenged but never abandoned. Lily shows how her ethnic minority uses religious rituals as cultural identifiers and simultaneously embraces certain traditional Chinese rituals. Throughout her journey, Lily finds ways to preserve Hui cultural forms while pursuing her new life in Christ. Her biggest challenge comes as she considers not what she might leave behind, but whether new life requires new rituals. This reflection on

Lily's story ends with a challenge – the challenge presented by the Christian rite of passage into the body of Christ – baptism.

It is an honor to share about my dear friend Lily. She is a precious daughter of God, loved by our savior, and I pray in faith that she will be with us in paradise. Lily's voice is one that has been heard by very few people in the world. Today, I hope that by reflecting some of her words I will shed a little light on the value and challenges of rituals for Lily's people group, the Hui Muslims of China.

## Hui people and rituals

People who have lived among the Hui do not typically speak of them as ritualistic people, but a closer look shows that their rituals provide their most distinctive cultural markers, along with bridges and barriers to the gospel. Important Hui rituals include rites of passage (such as weddings and funerals), annual festivals, and regular rituals (such as *halal* food preparation, prescribed hand washing, and prayer).

In many ways, Hui Chinese Muslims tend to blend in with their atheistic compatriots. They are physically and linguistically similar to the majority Han Chinese. Hui dress is modest but otherwise identical to Han dress. Head coverings are only popular among the elderly, food service workers, and in peasant villages. Unlike the nine other recognized Muslim minority people groups in China, the Hui have no distinct cultural traits to distinguish them except Islam. Other groups claim their own language, clothing, dance, food, facial features, and even territory, but not the Hui.[47] Even specialty "Hui food" bears an uncanny resemblance to the Han food of whichever region it is found, just substituting pork for another meat.

[47] The other nine recognized minority people groups or minzu who traditionally believe Islam, in descending order of population are: Uygur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bao'an, and Tatar. (Spellings of transliterated names here follow Stewart.)

I have asked many Hui what being Hui means to them, and the most common answer is, “We are not Han, and we don’t eat pork because we are Muslim.” Asking further questions has occasionally plunged me into fascinating conversations about how to pray, protection against evil spirits, the afterlife, earning merit or the difference between various Islamic sects and orders in China. But more often I find myself speaking with a Muslim, like my friend Lily, who knows little about Islam, rarely attends a mosque or prays, and struggles to say a simple greeting in Arabic. The distinguishing characteristics Hui report about themselves are the *halal* diet, celebration of Korban and Eid (two annual ritual feasts), avoidance of Spring Festival (a Han celebration of their Lunar New Year) ritual prayer (which most of my conversation partners neglect) and endogamy, that is, a commitment to marrying within the community. As we will see, all of these involve essential rituals, even endogamy. So in some sense, although I have never heard a Hui person say they value rituals very highly, it seems like their rituals are crucial to what makes them Hui.

Lily’s identity is firmly bound up in being Hui, but what that means can be difficult for outsiders to comprehend. *Hui* is an official ethnic classification, but Lily also uses it as a synonym for *Muslim*. Lily and I have talked at length about what she means by Hui and Muslim, and I believe that for her, the identity is more social than religious.

Being from a small town, Lily has a keen sense of being expected to behave as a Muslim and wants to avoid standing out. She is fiercely loyal to her family’s traditions,

the most obvious being *halal* food preparation, endogamy, and observing annual festivals. She fears the social penalty – exclusion, gossip, ridicule – far more than any possible spiritual consequence of breaking these traditions.

A strictly *halal* diet requires the ritualized slaughter of meats. Fear that dishonest vendors may pass off regular beef or lamb as *halal* prevents some Hui from leaving their hometowns. Lily is not so strict, but would certainly never knowingly eat pork or be seen in a shop that sells pork. For social reasons, the ritual of keeping *halal*, or at least her family's version of *halal*, is vital to Lily.

On the other hand, she and most other villagers studied alongside Han classmates at a Chinese government school. This Communist Party institution, she believes, was designed to eradicate religious "superstition" and instill secularism in line with the Chinese Communist Party's goal for a harmonious, homogenous society. Hui students who were not successfully converted to atheism learned to privatize their faith or become nominal devotees. So it is that Hui in Lily's society fit in by limiting their public religious expressions to "essentials" such as choice about food and marriage.

Hui insistence on only marrying other Hui may serve to preserve family lines and their Muslim faith. It may also be related to long-held prejudice between ethnocultural groups. Another major factor seems to be the kind of wedding Hui people, and especially their elders, expect, even though Hui weddings can closely resemble Han weddings in their form. Wedding rituals shared between Han and Hui include the presentation of a dowry, a banquet, and ceremonies to honor parents. Differences in small details like the eating of a particular fried bread called *youxiang,* hold great significance for Hui families. Most importantly, a Hui wedding must include the reading

of *nikah,* which cannot take place unless both the bride and groom say the *shahada* as evidence that they are Muslims.

Marriage for a Hui like Lily (as for a great many Chinese people) is shaped primarily by filial piety, obeying your parents, rather than satisfying one's own desires. The ceremony of marriage gives honor to the parents regardless of the long-term outcome. Divorce is common, and quite often, even suggested by the parents. By then, however, the dowry has been paid, the *nikah* has been read, and hopefully, a son has been born.

Lily would never have considered marrying a non-Hui, but this was not because of Islam, nor any prejudice against other groups. In her own words, her relationship with her husband is 'average' and her husband is anything but pious. She has often told me her best friend's husband makes her 'extremely angry' and that Hui men are 'not good.' Conversely, she praises Christian men for not smoking or gambling, and for being 'good to their wives' and 'willing to cook.' Why then, did Lily marry her Hui husband rather than a non-Hui schoolmate or friend? She explained that it was because of parental and social expectation of endogamy.

## Lily's faith journey

It took years of knowing Lily before she opened up to me about spiritual matters. The two other Christians who knew her had the same experience. One of these Christian women was the Han Chinese owner of a business where Lily did some short-term work. The other was a missionary like me. Lily had always complied when any of us wanted to study the bible together but in a subservient manner. Eventually, she took the initiative and joined my small women's fellowship group which included Han, Hui, and women from three other groups. By this time, she was in her mid-30s with a nine-year-old son

and her daughter was born soon afterward. Together we all grew in knowledge of scripture, prayerfulness, and love. Slowly, the word of God and the lives of Christians began to influence her, and by the grace of God, she gradually started to open up about her beliefs, her desire to follow Jesus, and what was holding her back.

All of the barriers to faith that Lily told us about arose in some way from her social situation. The few theological objections she had to Christian faith were quickly answered to her satisfaction. She had only good experiences of Christians, and no stories of Christian hypocrisy leaving a bad taste in her mouth. Instead, her objections were about what her family and friends would say and do to her. She did not express fear of physical violence or financial deprivation; it was more of a concern about causing offense, social exclusion and being met with disapproval.

Some of the biggest barriers came from how she perceived faith in Christ might change her participation in family rituals. The most notable examples of Lily's interaction with rituals after she professed faith in Christ surrounded rites of passage, rather than the regular, daily rituals. While for certain Hui friends of mine, the annual rituals hold deep significance, for many others including Lily and her family, Eid and Korban are primarily occasions to meet and eat good food, practically devoid of spiritual meaning. Likewise, wedding rituals are a non-issue for Lily because she is resigned to her place in an 'average' marriage. Food rituals have not been an obstacle for Lily either, due to the contextualized lifestyles of Christians who have shared their faith with her. Missionaries from other countries, as well as local church leaders, are

careful to avoid causing offense by what they eat.[48] When we eat at Lily's home, she sources the meat herself to ensure it has been slaughtered according to the prescribed rituals. When she eats out or in our homes, she is more relaxed, but would never knowingly eat food contaminated with pork.

The three rites of passage Lily and I have discussed as they relate to faith in Jesus are birth rites, baptism, and funeral rites. When Lily became pregnant with her second child, nothing about her lifestyle changed apart from increasing the amount of milk she drank. She continued to work, including lifting and other physical tasks. While her pregnant shape was not yet pronounced, she continued to ride her bicycle for transport even though local wisdom says cycling is unsafe while pregnant. Nothing changed until the month of Ramadan arrived. Then she donned a small headscarf for the month. Her mother-in-law had recommended it as a way of protecting the unborn baby. Lily, who like many Hui women, usually kept her hair uncovered, told me it was just a superstition she did not believe. She said the scarf could not do anything spiritually – either good or bad – but it was easy enough to comply, and it kept her mother-in-law from complaining. This was the first clear instance I observed of Lily accepting an Islamic *form* while dismissing its *meaning*. Over the next few months I learned much more about forms and meanings in Lily's faith journey.

Shortly after her daughter's birth, I was invited to visit at the hospital, and later at her home. Lily allowed our fellowship group to visit her so she would not need

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[48] Sadly, contextualized practices have not always been used in this part of China. In recent years, however, awareness of contextualization has improved, some missionaries have adopted Halal diets and the practice of forcing pork onto new converts to prove their Christianity has been largely abandoned.

to leave the house during her month of confinement. Confinement may be thought of as a ritual, but is not distinctively Hui or Islamic. Chinese Christians, Buddhists and atheists also follow regulations for one month after giving birth according to Traditional Chinese Medicine. Hui mothers follow the same customs as Han, which vary by region and usually include abstaining from certain foods, leaving the house, and bathing. The restrictions are often enforced by the baby's grandmother(s). I had previously questioned Lily about whether she believed confinement to be effective or necessary during my own pregnancy. She assumed the health benefits of confinement were probably real, but mentioned no relationship between confinement and spirituality. Her main emphasis was that if confinement was not observed, the baby's grandmother(s), other relatives and friends would criticize the mother, even going so far as to blame the mother if anything went wrong with the mother or baby's health. Confinement was a set of rules that would incur social penalty if broken.

A few weeks after giving birth, Lily was able to come out to meet us. One memorable conversation happened as we were discussing which day we would meet. Lily said to the group, "I can't come on that day because that is the day the *imam* is coming to our house to read scripture over the new baby. Don't worry, it's not a religious thing, it doesn't do anything, it's just a custom we have, and I had better be there. That's ok, isn't it?" In this statement, Lily showed that she believed in a difference between an effective ritual and a mere custom. She was separating the form of a ritual from its meaning. That is, like the headscarf, the scripture reading was meant to effect spiritual protection. Lily dismissed this *meaning* but saw no problem with going through the motions, maintaining the *form* of the ritual. She knew that as a follower of Christ, her faith must be in Christ alone. Any spiritual meaning or power she may have previously attributed to the ritual was gone. At the same time, she

wished to honor her family and her traditions by continuing to observe rituals that she deemed to be harmless.

## Does a new life require new rituals?

It would be simplistic to say that Lily's new faith in Christ freed her entirely from the power of Islam. Faith in Christ did not replace Islam, because Lily's Islam was primarily a community, not a religion or a spiritual faith. So, while it was relatively easy for her to strip away religious significance from an Islamic ritual, it was much more difficult to introduce appropriate biblical rituals while living in her community.

Although Lily developed a regular habit (or ritual) of reading the bible for herself whenever she visited Christians, even sitting alone for hours in the word, she struggled with regular bible reading at home, for fear of criticism. She did not want to be seen with either a standard bible or the Hui contextualized bible. A *manga* graphic novel rendering of the bible was of some help here, because she was more comfortable being seen with it at home.

To my surprise, our discussions about baptism (a rite of passage into life in Christ) and funerals happened together. It was around this time that, one by one, women in our little group decided they were ready to be baptized in the name of Jesus. One day in private, I challenged Lily about why she did not want to receive baptism like the other women in our fellowship group. Here is what she said.

> *"I love Jesus, and I love Christians. I love reading God's word and singing to him. I always want to come to our fellowship group. Meeting with you all for worship is the best time of my week. But I can't be baptized."*
>
> *"Why is that?" I asked.*

*"My family would be heartbroken if I were to be cremated."*

What? Had I just heard what I thought I heard? I paused to make sure I had understood correctly. I had. I quickly thanked God and asked for wisdom. Then I spoke.

*"Where did you get the idea that Christians must be cremated?"*

*She replied, "That's what the Han do."*

It was as I thought. Like so many other Hui, Lily was showing that despite the years of friendship with expat Christians, several meetings with Hui believers, and a little exposure to Muslims from other ethnic groups, in her mind she still divided the world into only two groups: Hui and Han. Hui were 'us,' and Han were 'them.' I reminded her that some of us are neither Hui nor Han, then directed her to think about burial rituals in the bible.

I asked her what was done with Jesus' body after he died. She knew he was embalmed and buried. I assured her this was not a once-off burial by showing her the stories of Lazarus (John 11:38-44) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Then I went on to inform her that in many traditionally Christian cultures, burial is the norm. I told her of the European tradition of placing graveyards beside churches to remember our forebears and the epitaphs that remind us of the bodily resurrection for which we confidently hope. As I spoke, a wave of realization and relief spread across Lily's face.

She still did not get baptized, though. Although she was reassured to know baptized believers can be buried, there were further barriers involved in the ritual of baptism itself. Lily thought long and hard about what exactly was so impossible about baptism, but she has not been able to express it in her own words.

Other Hui believers have given me some insights into their feelings about baptism as a rite of passage. They have not expressed any reservations about the form of baptism nor its symbolism. Use of water to symbolize cleansing from sin, presenting oneself clean before God, the imagery of dying and rising found in baptism by immersion, and the embodiment of union with Christ in baptism are all quite agreeable. As a rite of initiation into the body of Christ, baptism is desirable.

The problem with baptism seems to come from its association with apostasy from Islam. Like many believers from Muslim backgrounds elsewhere in the world, Hui who trust in Christ hesitate to publicly declare their allegiance to a religion their families oppose. They view the rite not only as an entry to a relationship with Christ but as an exit from their previous life. They see it as leaving their Islamic faith, but more importantly for people like Lily, leaving what their family holds dear, which is effectively the same as leaving their family. Since Lily seemed lost for words, I asked her if the main problem with baptism was that her family would think she was rejecting them. She replied, "I just know they wouldn't like it."

Many Hui have been baptized into Christ secretly, and in so doing have mitigated the shame and social penalty of being seen as 'leaving Islam.' I talked Lily through the process of our friends' baptisms, pointing out the locations, who was and was not present, who knew about it and who did not. She was unmoved. Her speech wandered around various emotional expressions, and I was left with the impression that in her view, even a secret baptism would be a betrayal. The barrier was not only social but personal. To this day, Lily has not been baptized into Christ, but she is still eager to learn from God's word and to meet with Christians. Does it matter? Rituals can move hearts to desire Christ, can strengthen community bonds, and can sometimes be hurdles too great overcome on the road to faith. Rituals do not save.

Only faith in Christ saves. I cannot judge for sure, but my hope is that Lily is my sister in Christ with whom I can worship him together for eternity.

# Veiling as a Rite of Passage

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## Abstract

Rites of passage are used to mark transitions from one life stage to another, signifying that an individual has changed their status or identity within a community. Some rites of passage leave lasting, visible symbols of this change. This article argues that the putting on of the *hijab* is a rite of passage that leaves an ongoing, visible symbol at key times of identity transition. At puberty, the donning of the *hijab* marks the start of a Muslim girl's womanhood, or it can be adopted by Muslim women who seek to be publically recognised as 'authentic' Muslims. Immigrant Muslim women grappling with their identity in foreign cultures may begin wearing it to show allegiance to, and find belonging in, a new Muslim community. This article details some examples of public ceremonies that accompany the first putting on of the *hijab*. Just as the putting on of the *hijab* can be seen as a rite of passage, so too can its removal—women who choose to no longer wear it are also making a visible statement about a change in their identity. Finally, the article explores what visible, ongoing symbols different Christian traditions have used to mark changes in their religious identity, and considers the implications for believers of Muslim background.

## Rites of Passage Defined

All human beings pass through life stages. Life stages are key points of transition which shape us as individuals within our families, communities, and broader societies. Some life stages are common to both males and females in all cultures, whereas others are specific to one gender or another, one culture or another. In many cultures rites of passage mark the transition from one stage of life to another. Classically, these rites are marked by stages of separation, transition (or 'liminality'), and reintegration.[49]

During the first stage of separation, an individual detaches themselves, often through symbolic actions or rituals, from their former identity or status. In the second stage of liminality, the individual has left their old identity and is moving through a period of limbo or undefined status—they are on the threshold[50] of a new identity/status. The reintegration stage, where the individual takes up their new identity/status in the community, is often marked by rituals or ceremonies which act as visible symbols of an otherwise often invisible change in status.[51]

The example of a traditional British wedding may help us visualise the three stages involved in rites of passage. Traditionally, a woman gets dressed and ready for the wedding ceremony at her family home. Only her close family and bridal attendants are allowed to see her—she is thus kept 'separate' from the rest of the community. A veil is worn as a further symbol of 'separation' from others. The bride's father walks

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[49] A.H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: making disciples across cultures*, Innovations in Mission (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1997): 92.
[50] Liminality comes from a Latin word meaning 'threshold.'
[51] For more on life stages and rites of passage, see Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony* and W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

her down the aisle and presents her to her husband-to-be, relinquishing his parental role and acknowledging her new status as a wife. The groom lifts the veil, ending the bride's separation. The focus of the ceremony is about the transition that the couple are making: moving from two individuals with a certain status and place in society, into a couple, a wife and husband with a new status and place in society. When the celebrant presents the couple to the assembled family and friends as "Mr and Mrs" and they walk back down the aisle together, they are starting the process of reintegration into their new identities and statuses.

As mentioned above, the rituals or ceremonies that accompany rites of passage are often the only symbol that a person has passed from one status to another, and there is no further, ongoing visual sign of that change. However, in some rites of passage, a more ongoing, lasting visible symbol is bestowed as part of the ritual. As part of a traditional wedding ceremony, for example, the bride and groom exchange rings, which act as lasting visible symbols which indicate to all that the wearer is married.

The act of wearing the *hijab*[52] for the first time can be considered, in some circumstances, to be a rite of passage.[53] While it does not follow the classic stages of separation, transition, and reintegration, the donning of the *hijab* for the first time

[52] It is beyond the scope of the article to discuss the many and varied forms of head coverings which Muslim women wear. The use of the word *hijab* indicates all forms of Islamic head covering which keep the face clear while covering the hair. I acknowledge that for many women, *hijab* is not simply a piece of cloth, but that it also encompasses an attitude, a way of life, and values that are consistent with an individual's understanding of Islamic teachings.

[53] While this article seeks to explore the wearing of the *hijab* as a rite of passage, it does not intend to detail the many and varied reasons women wear it, some of which could not be categorised as a rite of passage. The article is also not seeking to minimise the fact that for many girls and women the wearing of the *hijab* is imposed upon them by their families.

demonstrates an individual's transition from one life stage to another—from girlhood to womanhood at puberty, or to a new identity where one is committing, or recommitting, oneself to one's faith in a new way. Similarly, the act of unveiling, of choosing to no longer wear the *hijab*, can be a rite of passage that marks the individual's transition to a new identity which is different from their previous one. In both these instances, the *hijab* acts as a visible symbol of an internal change in status or orientation.

## Puberty and Coming-of-Age

A key time in the lives of Muslim girls is when they reach puberty and transition from being a girl to a woman. At puberty in many orthodox interpretations of Islam, girls become accountable to God for their sin, and from then on receive punishment and rewards from God for their actions. South Asian and Middle Eastern women who have spoken with participants in the When Women Speak... I-View courses[54] emphasise that at puberty girls must start acting like respectable women—not mixing with boys, not going out on their own, and being quieter and more "ladylike" to show their piety and demureness. In many Muslim cultures girls begin to wear the *hijab* at this time as an outward symbol which marks their transition and signifies their change in status. "A

[54] The When Women Speak... I-View Courses started in 2016. They are online courses for women working among Muslim communities who want to connect with others and share their learning about women's experiences of Islam. The courses consist of readings or videos around a topic, and some questions for women to then explore with those in their community. Those in the course then share their learning and questions in order to better understand the communities of Muslim women they are engaged with.

physical change impacts your spiritual status and your spiritual status impacts how you should now dress and behave in the community."[55]

Some girls welcome this transition, as they desire to be like their mothers.[56] Mothers in many Muslim societies play an important role in their children's religious upbringing. They are often the ones who are teaching their children how to pray and perform other religious observances, as well as how to act and behave appropriately in society. Just as young Western girls may enjoy dressing up in their mother's clothes, shoes and make-up, Muslim girls whose mothers wear the *hijab* may want to copy their mothers.

If wearing the *hijab* is a visible symbol that a girl has reached womanhood, girls may also want to show that they have "grown up."[57] Those who do not wear it may feel as though they have not reached adult status—either within themselves or in the eyes of others. Woldesemait reports that even girls in their late teens, who did not veil at puberty, did not feel like "adult women" until they began wearing the *hijab*: "When I started to wear the *hijab* I finally felt like a woman. It is exciting because you throw away your childish clothes, you get new clothes."[58]

In contrast, Rabha, an Arab Muslim, reports that although putting on the *hijab* was expected of her as soon as she turned eleven, she tried to delay it, fearing that it

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[55] I-View course participant, Middle East.
[56] Lindsey Moon, "Iowa Reporter Becomes First Woman in U.S. to Wear her Hijab On- Air," *Iowa Public Radio*, March 29, 2018, https://www.iowapublicradio.org/post/iowa-reporter-becomes-first-woman-us-wear-her-hijab-air#stream/0.
[57] Fida Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 74.
[58] Mihret Woldesemait, "Unfolding the Modern *Hijab*: From the Colonial Veil to Pious Fashion," (Undergraduate Honors thesis, Duke University, 2013), 92, https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/7554?show=full.

would end her childhood. She states that "My parents were anxious for me to grow up, being the oldest of five. They wanted a responsible adult among their children, and I was designated the 'responsible' one."[59] An I-View course participant spoke of a 12-year-old Middle Eastern girl who was very upset and agitated about the onset of puberty because she knew she would be expected to adopt *hijab* and behave in a certain way. Her older sister had already (voluntarily) begun wearing *hijab* by her age and was quieter and more "ladylike," and the older women all approved and admired her demureness and piety. The 12-year-old didn't want to wear the *hijab* and felt both sad and rebellious that she wasn't like her sister.

## Authentic Muslim Womanhood

Muslim women who choose to wear a *hijab* at a later life stage are often doing so to mark their identity as Muslims in a new way. In these contexts it is a rite of passage which marks the "exit from a secular life into being aware about leading a fully committed religious life."[60] Amina Wadud asserts that once she had made her declaration to become a Muslim, she began to wear the *hijab* "to identify this transitional moment."[61]

Schmidt sums up the decision of many young American Muslim university students to wear the *hijab* as being a "rite of passage into authentic Muslim womanhood." She argues that for these students, it often signified "the transition

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[59] Rabha, "An Expression of Faith," *Analysis and Expression* (Blog), November 2, 2011, https://analysisandexpression.wordpress.com/tag/rite-of-passage/.
[60] Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira, and Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, politics and policies*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 91.
[61] Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford, UK: OneWorld, 2006), 222.

from the safe, controlled family environment to the less controlled and even 'sexually disturbing' campus environment."[62] This was particularly noticeable when girls moved into dorms or began taking part in campus activities. A girl who chose to wear the *hijab* assumed an authority in the community, and a responsibility within that community as a representative of an "ideal" Muslim woman.[63]

In Southeast Asia, many Muslim women begin to wear the *hijab* later than at puberty, often stating that they wear it when they are "ready" to do so. This is the time when they are prepared to identify more fully with their faith, to show that they are "serious about religion," and to demonstrate that they are "good." Sari, a university student, started wearing a *hijab* to demonstrate that she had changed from being a "bad girl" who did "bad things" into someone who wants to be "good and to be perceived by others as good." Part of her desire to be "good" was to please her family who had invested money in her education. Singaporean girls are not permitted to wear the *hijab* in the state school system, and thus may wear it "part-time" outside of school hours. Making the choice to veil full-time in her 20s, one woman said she felt "Ready to commit myself fully to Islam and the Islamic way of life."[64]

As a visible symbol of this change in identity, the *hijab* conveys messages to those who see it. In part, it signals to other Muslims that the wearer is "chaste and modest … no need to spell it out for them, they can see. And they treat me accordingly. … men … don't expect me to shake their hands."[65] Even the style of *hijab* that is worn

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[62] Garbi Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 106.
[63] Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America*, 107.
[64] Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore*, 91.
[65] Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore*, 94.

can potentially signal the religious status of the wearer. Southeast Asian Muslim university students told me that they sometimes felt judged by other women for wearing fashionable clothes and *hijab*, as if they were only wearing *hijab* for fashion reasons, rather than to be authentically Muslim. A Southeast Asian house helper felt criticised by a neighbouring house helper for not wearing a *hijab* and visibly identifying as an authentic Muslim. In the end she decided not only to wear a *hijab* to and from work, but throughout the day as well—effectively 'outdoing' the neighbouring helper who, for practical reasons, did not wear her *hijab* while working.[66]

Times of transition, particularly those of potential crisis or when there is a fear of something going wrong, can also precipitate a new or renewed commitment to the faith. For example, women in Southeast Asia who are nearing the end of their pregnancy, or who are wishing to fall pregnant, have been observed to adopt more religious practices, including wearing a *hijab*.[67]

## Identity Marking

This desire to participate more fully in the community as an "authentic" Muslim is tied up with a girl's (or woman's) desire to find, or change, identity. A Southeast Asian woman who was divorced because her husband found another wife was observed to have "reformed her identity by becoming more 'religious'",[68] which included wearing the *hijab* for the first time.

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[66] This illustration was told to the author by an expatriate co-worker in Southeast Asia.
[67] I-View course participant.
[68] I-View course participant.

While the wearing of *hijab* as a visible identity marker is important for women in majority Muslim countries, it is even more poignant for women in immigrant communities. People define themselves and others by referring to markers such as their ethnicity or nationality, their gender, their roles in a family, their job, what groups they belong to, and their religion. How important each one of these markers is, and which a person might draw on to define who they are and where they belong changes depending on the context. For immigrants, many of those markers have to be redefined, leading to a sense of confusion and uncertainty about identity. A person may go from being an engineer to being a taxi driver, or from being a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law with defined roles in her extended family, to an outsider with only her nuclear family facing very different models of those roles around her.

Immigrant Muslim women may begin to veil as a way of identifying, visibly, with the *ummah*, the worldwide community of Muslims, where they find teachings and models that are familiar, and can enjoy the benefits of an extended 'family.' For some women—such as those interviewed by Inger Furseth in Los Angeles, most of whom started to wear the *hijab* once they were living in the United States—their religious identity may become more important even than their original ethnic identity. Instead, these women emphasised their common identity as American Muslims.[69] Veiling enables them to deal with "alienation, estrangement, and marginalization" in the

[69] Inger Furseth,"The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiation among Immigrant Muslim Women in the Los Angeles Area." Review of Religious Research 52, no. 4 (2011), 372, 376. https://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/23055567.

places where they now live—a way they can find their identity when other markers of it have been taken away.[70]

For many North African Muslims born in France where the wearing of the *hijab* is contested and the full-face veil banned, the veil has become a visible symbol that demonstrates the wearer's pride in her ethnic identity.[71] Many of these women have struggled with their identities, and have felt the need to "affirm their identity publicly as a way to stand up to the dominance of French culture."[72] Similarly, Palestinian-Australian Amal Awad was a frustrated university student when she decided to don the *hijab* for the second time—"the only thing that made sense was my heritage."[73] She wanted to be able to identify with a community and a group in order to feel as though she belonged somewhere. In choosing to identify as a Muslim by wearing the *hijab*, women receive acceptance into a community[74] and a distinct identity that can act as a buffer to the perceived threats of the outside world in which they now live.[75] When Awad adopted it, her more devout friends were "as giddy as bridesmaids at a wedding. I had arrived. I was one of them now."[76]

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[70] Roksana Bahramitash, "CHAPTER 23: Revealing Veiling and Unveiling," *Counterpoints* 220 (2004): 202, http://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/42978307.
[71] Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 4 (2003), 572, https://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu/stable/3594658.
[72] Killian, "The Other Side,"584.
[73] Amal Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés: the real lives of Arab women* (North Sydney: Vintage Books, 2017), 94.
[74] See, for example, Firdaus Arastu, "Returning Hijabi: A Passage to Identity," *Patheos*, May 6, 2015, https://www.patheos.com/topics/rites-of-passage/returning-hijabi-firdaus-arastu-05-06-2015, and Jen'Nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 3 (2000): 403, http://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/190135.
[75] Tabassum F. Ruby, "Listening to the Voices of Hijab," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006), 8, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.689.8087&rep=rep1&type=pdf.
[76] Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés*, 105.

Some Muslim women choose to wear the *hijab* in one culture, but not in another, in order to fit in. Ina, a Southeast Asian Muslim studying in a Western country, complained that some female Muslim students start living like Westerners when they arrive in their host country. In their efforts to blend in and belong they remove the most visible marker of their religious identity, their *hijab*. When they return to their home country, they replace their *hijab* and once again visibly identify as Muslim in order to belong back in their home community.[77] Canadian-Iranian Roksana Bahramitash explained her choice to veil in Cairo, where she was living, as not because she had become religious but because,

> *Wearing the veil enables me to blend into the local scene and gives me a sense of belonging. I do not particularly like standing out as a tourist. Veiling myself to look as non-Western as possible is one way of dealing with this unwanted feeling of being a stranger here.*[78]

Teenagers of Muslim immigrants in Western countries may seek to define who they are and express themselves by becoming more committed to their religious practices.[79] In the process of teenage rebellion they are undergoing a rite of passage, one in which they transition into the person they choose to be rather than the person their parents want them to be. Zarqa Nawaz states that she desperately wanted to be different from her immigrant Pakistani parents by being more Muslim than them.

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[77] Ina is a colleague of the author's.
[78] Bahramitash, "Revealing Veiling," 192.
[79] Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes*, 84.

Because she had found out about the *hijab* on her own, rather than through her parents, wearing it "was the answer."[80] Suraya Ali, the daughter of immigrant Indian Muslims, also shocked her parents by putting on the *hijab*. "It was my way of flipping the world off, saying, 'I can be what I want'."[81] Amal Awad first wore the veil as a teenager "with nowhere to put her energy and angst," against her mother's wishes—"negative reactions only strengthened my resolve."[82] Isma, an Algerian high school teacher in French schools noted that girls born in France to immigrant North African parents want to "affirm" themselves, show that they are "someone" and are "individuals," and they do this by the clothes they wear.[83] Besma, a 34-year-old Tunisian living in France commented that

> *It's almost a required rite of passage for them to sort out who they are. "Who am I? What culture do I belong to? Where do I come from? Where do I live? Where am I from? My culture is completely undervalued, and I get back an image of my culture, of the civilization of my parents, that is so negative and so everything, that somewhere I have a duty to myself, to prove that I exist."*[84]

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[80] Zarqa Nawaz, "Zarqa Nawaz: My Hijab Rebellion," *National Post*, June 25, 2014, https://nationalpost.com/opinion/zarqa-nawaz-my-hijab-rebellion.
[81] Andrea Useem, "Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf: what hijab's revolving door says about the religious mobility of American Muslims," *Slate*, May 12, 2008, https://slate.com/human-interest/2008/05/how-muslim-women-decide-to-put-on-and-take-off-hijab.html.
[82] Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés*, 91.
[83] Killian, "The Other Side," 579.
[84] Killian, "The Other Side," 580.

## Marking the Act

Just as other rites of passages are sometimes marked by ceremonies, in some contexts the first wearing of a *hijab* is also marked in this way. In Iran nine-year-old girls are initiated into society through a ceremony called *jashn-e taklif*. "They give you a chador, tell you what a big girl you are, teach you how to pray and what it means to be a Muslim." "It was something really exciting, better than a birthday party. I remember that my mom sewed me a white chador. … I remember feeling very happy and grown-up."[85] After the ceremony, girls are expected to follow all the religious obligations required of them, such as veiling, daily prayers, and fasting.[86]

At the al-Zahra mosque in Syria, a ceremony to mark girls' first wearing of a *hijab* is documented in the video *The Light in Her Eyes*.[87] The Syrian girls in the video are interviewed by Houda al-Habash, their Qur'an teacher, to ensure they understand the reasons behind their choice. If Houda considers a girl to be too young (a girl of eleven, for example), she is told she is not yet mature enough to wear the *hijab*. Houda also ensures their mothers agree with their decision. During the ceremony, the girls who are going to start wearing the *hijab* stand in front of the assembled girls and women. Houda makes a speech about the importance of wearing the *hijab* and the reasons behind it. Then, as Houda pins a white *hijab* around each girl's head, a song celebrating them, blessing them, and asking God to protect them from envy, is sung.

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[85] Marketa Hulpachova, "Hijab: A woman's rite of passage in Iran," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/dec/19/iran-hijab-islamic-veil.
[86] Malihe Maghazei, "Iran" in *Teen Life in the Middle East* ed. Ali Akbar Mahdi (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 28.
[87] Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix, dir., "Rules about Hijab," *The Light in Her Eyes* (New York: Cinema Guild, 2012), DVD.

In Turkey, a reader wrote to a local newspaper columnist about "headscarf-donning ceremonies being held in large wedding halls for young girls in rich, conservative neighbourhoods [in Istanbul]."[88] The columnist and staff at the newspaper office had never heard of such events prior to receiving the letter, and the reader herself was unaware of their existence until she was invited to a ceremony for her neighbour's daughter. The reader's letter described the ceremony:

> *It was like a wedding party. A full meal was served to the guests, with several sweets, etc. The Quran was chanted, followed by a lady speaking about the verses in the Quran about covering oneself. She also talked about the importance of hijab. After a chat with the guests on the importance of the headscarf, the young girl set to don the headscarf for the first time walked to the stage accompanied by religious songs. Then the ceremony started. The first headscarf was put on the girl by the lecturer with chants of "Allahu Akbar." ... Then the guests started giving gifts to the newly covered young girl.*[89]

The author of the English-language article that picked up the story described the ceremony as "the Muslim version of the Jewish coming of age ritual for girls, the Bat Mitzvah" and said that she liked the idea that the ceremony could provide the girls

[88] The reader's letter was written to Turkish columnist Fatma Barbarosoğlu at the Turkish-language daily newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, on October 24, 2014. The English-language *Hurriyet Daily News* picked up the story and added commentary: Belgin Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies for Muslim Girls in Istanbul," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 25, 2014, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/headscarf-ceremonies-for-muslim-girls-in-istanbul--73430.
[89] Reader's letter translated by Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies."

with some fun and recognition of their own coming-of-age, given that such lavish ceremonies are usually reserved for boys' circumcision.[90] It would be interesting to explore why these ceremonies appear to be gaining popularity among certain pious families in Istanbul. While the neighbour in the story gave the explanation that such ceremonies are essentially a replacement for birthdays ("we do not celebrate birthdays, because birthdays are Christian traditions."[91]), other reasons to publicly demonstrate a daughter's piousness might include bringing honour and status to the family within the community, and even potentially improving the marriage prospects of the daughter.

Even for adults, the act of first putting on a *hijab* can be celebrated communally. Garbi Schmidt describes one such celebration among university students in Chicago in 1996. Following a potluck dinner, congregational prayer and singing, organised by the Muslim Women's Association at the University of Illinois at Chicago, women who had started wearing the *hijab* (either because they had converted to Islam or because they were committing to wearing it) were presented to the audience. Each was given a gift and asked to make a speech about why they had decided to wear the *hijab*. After each presentation, the audience applauded and shouted praises to God. Schmidt comments that

> *What these young women experienced can easily be seen as a "rebirth," a remodelling, an experienced re-creation of the individual. The audience*

[90] Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies."
[91] Reader's letter translated by Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies."

*emphasized, validated, and authorized the power of the experience by allowing each young woman to present her experience from the stage, by giving her gifts, … and by elevating her in space, honor, and experience before the community.*[92]

## Identity Reversed

While putting on the *hijab* can be a rite of passage for Muslim women, so too can the decision to remove it. As a new believer in Jesus, a friend of mine struggled with doubts and questions for many years, wondering whether to return to Islam. After finding peace and assurance, through prayer, that Jesus was the way, she told me that she decided "this is how I want to live. This is who I want to follow." Following that decision, she removed her *hijab* because "it was no longer part of my identity."

Reem Abdel-Razek, an Egyptian blogger living in New York, came to the realisation that she felt like a "thing" to be protected by the *hijab* rather than a human. "…the only way I could take my life back was by unveiling, not only my hair, but also my true nature. I would have to obliterate the persona that I was so carefully molded into in order to discover who I really was."[93] Slma Shelbayah states that "I removed it to understand myself for who I truly am beneath the scarf … I removed it to find myself."[94] Andrea Useem recounts the story of a woman who moved across America in order to leave "the tight-knit Muslim community she felt was suffocating her and the

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[92] Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America*, 107–108.
[93] Valerie Tarico, "Unveiled: Three Former Muslim Women Look Back on the Hijab," *HuffPost*, March 24, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/unveiled-three-former-mus_b_5010742.
[94] Slma Shelbayah, "Removing hijab, finding myself," *CNN*, November 11, 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/06/opinions/shelbayah-removing-hijab/index.html.

scarf that pledged her allegiance to it."[95] Useem also quotes Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, author of *Living Islam Out Loud*, as saying "Taking it [the *hijab*] off expanded my identity—it was exciting, like a new haircut."[96]

As discussed above, many immigrant Muslim women decide to wear the veil in order to identify with the *ummah* and the local Muslim community in their new locations. Others, however, choose to unveil in order to blend in, to not look like strangers, and to avoid the harassment that can come with visibly identifying as a follower of Islam.[97] Some feel that integration into their new society, by not visibly defining as a Muslim, is important. Of the North African Muslim women in France who Killian interviewed, the women who were most likely to adopt this attitude were those of an older, less well-educated generation who had followed their husbands to France to find work. They felt that religious identity should be found in the internal attitude of the heart and outward behaviour, rather than in the visible symbol of the *hijab*.[98]

## Equivalent Christian Rites of Passage?

The question was posed to an I-View course participant: "When Christians become accountable to God, is there a visible symbol of that transition?" For Protestant Christians, the answer is usually no. While baptism is certainly a significant rite of passage, after the ceremony there is often no remaining visible sign of an individual's identification with their faith and Christian community, other than the fact that a

[95] Useem, "Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf."
[96] Useem, "Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf."
[97] Bahramitash, "Revealing Veiling," 202.
[98] Killian, "The Other Side," 584–585.

person's actions or attitude may be evidently altered as a result of the Holy Spirit's work within them. For some, it could be the wearing of a cross, though it is usually not as visible as the *hijab*. Furthermore, many people wear a cross for more decorative purposes, rather than it carrying the same weight of meaning as the *hijab*.

In other Christian traditions, however, there are some visible, lasting symbols that signify a change in identity. Arnold van Gennep describes the rite of passage that Catholic women go through when they become novices in some orders of nuns. This involves the bishop blessing the veils (along with rings) which they will wear from that time forward. The veils symbolize the novices' rejection of and separation from the world, and their new identity as a spouse of Christ.[99] Similarly, nuns in Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions take on the veil, indicating that they are setting aside their old selves and putting on a new identity in a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

With regard to identity among immigrant populations, Katherine Kelaidis describes shifts in practice among Greek Orthodox women. She states that her grandmother, who grew up in America, wore headscarves as a young girl and into her married life: "They were the outward visible witness of her inner self, signaling to the world, not just that she was a Christian, but that she was a lady, modest and chaste."[100] Later, however, along with others of her generation and of the generation afterwards, she abandoned the practice outside of church, preferring to assimilate,

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[99] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge Library Editions—Anthropology and Ethnography (1960. Reprint, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 99.
[100] Katherine Kelaidis, "Headscarves, Modesty, and Modern Orthodoxy," *Public Orthodoxy*, May 17, 2018, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2018/05/17/headscarves-modesty-orthodoxy/#more-4398.

avoid the pressures of xenophobia, and not call attention to oneself. Kelaidis bemoans the practice of many non-Greek American converts who, in the 1990s, began to then re-veil, not just in church, but all the time, in an effort to demonstrate their "zeal." In response to this piece, Orthodox Father Lawrence Farley argues that such converts are veiling in an effort to "*avoid* assimilation," and that it is one component of them trying to "build a healthy counter-culture in which to live and raise their children."[101] Both Kelaidis' grandmother, and the American converts to Greek Orthodoxy, sought to change their identity in some way, and to mark that change with either the donning of, or removing of, the visible, lasting symbol of a head covering.

Women in various Anabaptist traditions also wear head coverings as visual signs that they are separate from the rest of the world, and to outwardly identify as belonging to a particular community. However, the practice of head covering varies among different communities,[102] and there is no clear standard practice which indicates that the adoption of a head covering signifies a change in status or identity—it is therefore not a symbol which accompanies a rite of passage. Having said this, one Mennonite woman does state that she began wearing a head covering when she was

[101] Fr. Lawrence Farley, "Headscarves, Modesty, and Scolding Modern Orthodox Women," *No Other Foundation*, July 25, 2018, https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/nootherfoundation/headscarves-modesty-and-scolding-modern-orthodox-women/.
[102] For example, the age at which a girl begins to wear a head covering varies among different Amish communities. Amish Wisdom Admin, "When do girls start wearing head coverings?" *Amish Wisdom*, August 30, 2016, http://amishwisdom.com/girls-wearing-head-coverings/.

baptised,[103] while another says that little girls in a Mennonite community in Oregon begin to wear it at puberty.[104]

Returning to Protestant Christians, even if we are unable to answer the question about whether or not we have an equivalent visible symbol of our commitment to Jesus, it is worth thinking about what Christian values we do affirm and what we could say about those values to women we know as they either put on, or take off, the *hijab*. This is particularly relevant for women who become followers of Jesus—do they need to remove their *hijab* in order to identify as Christians? If, or when, they remove it has to be resolved by the individual believer. Some may choose to continue to wearing it as a sign of modesty and ongoing allegiance to their social community and family. Others may wear it for a time, and, like Indah mentioned above, decide to remove it when they reach a new point of identity. Still others, like a Southeast Asian student who chaffed against the strictures of her parents and what she was told were the rules of Islam, may remove it immediately. At all times we need to be listening to the women in front of us, not making assumptions or imposing our ways of being on them, but walking alongside them.

## Conclusion

As a rite of passage, the wearing of the *hijab* demonstrates a girl's or a woman's transition from one life stage to another. It may be marked, as many rites of passage

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[103] Shirley Showalter, "Mennonite Bonnets and Covering Stories: Part One," *Shirley Hershey Showalter* (blog), February 19, 2014, https://www.shirleyshowalter.com/mennonite-bonnet-and-covering-stories-part-one/.
[104] Comment Four, "Religious Head Coverings," *Headcovers® Unlimited*, September 22, 2018. https://www.headcovers.com/resources/hats-scarves/religious-head-coverings/.

are, by public ceremony, or it may be an internal choice which is not celebrated in a ritual way. As she puts on the *hijab*, a girl becomes a woman, taking on all the expectations of that new-found status within her family and community. As she puts on the *hijab*, a woman commits herself to a new stage of submission to God and female modesty. As she puts on the *hijab*, a woman forges a new identity, and is accepted into a larger, worldwide community. And as she removes her *hijab*, a woman marks her transition to another new life-stage and identity. As Christians wishing to connect with Muslim women, we should be sensitive to the significance of veiling as a rite of passage and an ongoing visible statement of identity. Throughout the Old Testament, God is powerfully present in communal and individual moments of liminality, sometimes revealing himself in unexpected ways. We can pray for God to be at work through our words and interactions as we explore with women its meaning in their lives.

When Women Speak...