

| Rites and Rituals |

Rationale:

Rites and rituals have existed at all times and in all cultures throughout human history. They are defined as rituals, or ceremonies, that surround milestone events in a person's life such as birth, maturity, reproduction and death. Other rites of passage can celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, marking changes in social position, occupation or affiliation. Whether they take place in a secular or religious context, such rites perform a similar function. They symbolically mark--often actually enable--an individual's passage from one phase of life, or social status, to another.

Rites of passage can be considered universal in human experience, in that all societies find ways to mark transition between one phase of life to another. The Muslim rites and customs explored in this activity may be different from a person's own experience but nonetheless participants may be able to identify points of commonality between their own social, culture or religious identity and the rites explored in this activity.

This activity is designed to help participants identify and explore the range of rituals and practices that may be part of a Muslim person's, or families', experience of life cycle events and rituals. It is also worth pointing out that some of the rituals described may be considered as a duty within Islam.

Learning Outcomes

- To gain knowledge of some of the rites and rituals that are part of a Muslim person's life cycle.
- To gain an understanding of ritual as a way to mark the passage from one stage of a person's life to another.
- To appreciate the universality of rites and rituals across times and cultures.
- To learn from each other's knowledge and experiences.

Requirements:

Materials: Sets of two envelopes, containing 12 photos of Muslim rites and rituals and 12 slips of paper with descriptive texts that explain the photos (number of sets of envelopes depends upon the numbers of participants and small groups)

Copies of worksheet

Copies of handout "On Rites of Passage"

Time: 90 minutes

CULTURAL AWARENESS

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Directions:

1. After introducing the concept of rites of passage and explaining the rationale for the activity, divide participants into small groups of 3 – 5 people.
2. Give each small group an envelope containing the photos, explaining that they will have approximately 15 minutes to look at the photos and discuss what's going on in the picture, using their own knowledge, experiences and perceptions of the rites and rituals displayed.
3. After the participants have examined the photos, distribute the second envelopes with the descriptions of the rites and rituals. Give an additional 15 minutes for the task of matching the photos to the descriptions provided. . Invite the small groups to discuss their own familiarity with the ceremonies described in more detail.
4. After asking the small groups to return to the large group, pose the following questions
 - a. **Are there some rituals which are more or less familiar? Why?** This question may raise a couple of points:
 - i. Traditions that are close to their own personal experiences
 - ii. Traditions lived in the local environment, or of whom they have had more personal contact
 - b. **Are there some traditions which seem strange or bizarre? Why?**
5. Re-iterate the universality of rites and rituals throughout the world and the fact that it may or may not have religious meaning. Invite participants to think about their own experiences of rites and rituals using the questions for personal reflection provided on the worksheet. Give approximately 10 minutes for individual reflection.
6. Ask the participants to find a partner with whom they can share their own experiences based on the individual reflection. They may need another 15-20 minutes for paired sharing.
7. When the pairs have finished their sharing, lead a discussion in the large group using the discussion questions below.

Notes for facilitators:

- As this workshop focuses on Muslims, you may decide to forego the questions for personal reflection, however it would still be relevant to close the large group discussion with a recognition of the universality of rites and rituals across all cultures.



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Discussion Questions:

- Was anything new or surprising to you about Muslim rites and rituals?
- Are Muslim rites and rituals somehow comparable with other traditions?
- Taking this (and more) knowledge of Muslim rites and rituals into account, what would be important to consider for the creation of inclusive environments?



HANDOUT

| Rites of Passage | Questions for Personal Reflection

Rites of passage may mark religious, cultural or social milestones, and may be celebrated with religious or secular ceremonies. Instead of a specific rite of passage, you may decide to focus your reflection here on a ritual of particular importance to you.

Think about a significant milestone in your life that was celebrated with a ceremony or ritual.

- A. Who participated in this rite of passage with you?
 - B. What were your feelings when experiencing this rite of passage?
 - C. How may have this rite of passage contributed to shaping who you are today?
 - D. What were the elements of this celebration that made it ceremonial?
 - E. What meanings are given to this rite of passage?
 - > In your family?
 - > In your community?
 - > By those outside of your community?
 - F. Was your rite of passage defined closely to the mainstream tradition, or was it in some way unorthodox, unusual or unique?
 - G. Are there differences in the ways of celebrating this particular rite of passage within your community?
 - H. How does this rite of passage position you within an identity group?
 - I. Is it one that is celebrated within the wider dominant society, or is it part of a minority tradition? How might this position you within a multicultural society?
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| On Rites of Passage |

Rites of Passage have existed at all times and in all cultures throughout human history. Whether they take place in a secular or religious context, such rites perform the same function. They symbolically mark - often actually enable - an individual's passage from one phase of life, or social status, to another. Many of the most important rites are connected with biological functions - birth, maturity, reproduction, and death. Other rites celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, marking changes in social position, occupation or affiliation.

A Rite of Passage is transformative in nature, i.e., the individual's perception of self - along with the community's perception of that individual - is permanently altered by the experience. Thus, the ceremonial activities and teachings connected with a Rite of Passage are intended not simply to mark a change in status, but to actually effect it.

In his ground-breaking work, *Rites of Passage*, the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) identified three stages in the experience. We can call these stages separation, transition, and reincorporation. During the separation phase, the subject begins the process of detaching from his/her former status and prepares for the change that is to come. This is followed by the transition phase where ceremonies, which are usually presided over by a legitimised authority figure, inscribe the subject with a new sense of self, a new identity, along with the powers and responsibilities that accompany it. Thus altered, celebrations of reincorporation occur, whereby the community that has initiated the subject and witnessed his/her passage, celebrates the return, enabling him or her to reenter society on a new basis.

Applying this schema to contemporary Western customs attached to marriage, we see a variety of ways in which these three phases might be manifested:

Separation:

- The period of engagement
- Parties celebrating the end of being single
- Religious pre-marriage instruction
- Customs related to the bridal dress, the bridal party, the dressing of the bride and her sequestering from the groom until the ceremony

Transition:

- The actual ceremony enacted in a formalised space with ritualized movements, gestures and expressions which can include: a procession, traditional music, proscribed words, the speaking of vows, the exchange of rings that will permanently symbolize the couple's union, the signing and witnessing of the marriage contract, the "first" kiss
- The presence of family, community and delegated Witnesses, all of whom in some way signify their affirmation of the union during the ceremony
- An authorized ceremonial Leader who formally legalizes the marriage

| On Rites of Passage |

Reincorporation:

- The “greeting line” where the couple and members of the community first meet to acknowledge the couple as husband and wife
- The community’s affirmation of the couple by throwing rice, flowers or confetti as they leave the ceremonial space
- Photographing of the couple, the wedding party, and newly merged families
- The wedding reception with celebratory customs attached to it
- The “honeymoon” which allows the couple a period of time to adjust to their new status

A Rite of Passage, then, is both a personal and a communal event, providing meaning and purpose for what might otherwise be random biological happenings, or an haphazard sequence of occurrences. Rites of Passage exist for the same reason that all rituals exist - because they must. From the mating dance of hummingbirds to the warrior dances of the Yanamamo, from a procession of worker ants to a parade of Olympic athletes, all living creatures engage in certain repetitive, symbolic behaviours that link individual members of the species with the collective enterprise of well-being and survival.

Ultimately, no community exists without its rituals, those repeatable rites wherein by song, dance, story, symbol, and symbolic action they express their most fundamental beliefs about who they are, how they came to be, and why they stay together. In the same way that community is intrinsic to the human condition, ritual is intrinsic to the life of a community. Throughout history these rituals have taken many forms: sometimes religious, sometimes not. Although we have come to regard ritual as essentially a religious event, this is not the case. Rituals are as evident in our personal and public lives as they are in our religious experiences. Ritual expresses and affirms our personal and communal identity. It maintains and strengthens the bonds of affiliation among community members. It supports individuals, or the community as a whole, through times of celebration, crisis or transition. It marks the passing of the seasons, gives meaning to the years. The performance of rites - be they secular or religious - that connect humans with one another and link the past with the present and future, ultimately affirms the rightness of the human condition, and the relationship of what is human with all of Nature.

As van Gennep has written with regard to rites of passage, the celebration of human transitions “has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life, and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe.”

| Elements of a Ritual |

- > **Purpose**
rooted in the needs of the individual participants and the vision, mission, and culture of the community
- > **Plan**
for before, during, and after the ritual
- > **Time of Preparation**
for ritual as action
for ritual as presence (i.e. interior readiness to participate)
- > **Structure**
a beginning, middle, end
- > **Defined Space & Time**
appropriate to purpose of the ritual
- > **Symbolic Focus**
physical object that expresses the ritual's intention
- > **Unifying Symbolic Actions & Expressions**
- > **Forms of Expression**
words, music, songs, dance, movement, gesture, "sacred text," visuals, smells, tastes, physical elements appealing to all the senses and the person as a whole
- > **Opportunities for Spontaneous Expression**
- > **People**
Witnesses – invited to moments of formalised and/or spontaneous participation
Participants – have actively prepared for their part in the ritual
Leader(s) – authorized by the community and/or participants to preside over the ritual
- > **Ritual Presence**
an altered state of being appropriate to the ritual action
- > **Repetition and Tradition**

| Elements & Structure of a Ritual |

1. A place, an environment that sets the atmosphere and the mood. It can be as simple as a lighted candle before a picture in one's room, or as elaborate as a special building, a temple or a church.
2. An opening, a gathering and focusing of attention and energies. For a group this can often be achieved by a song.
3. A theme, set forth in a story, a poem or other text expressing a central thought.
4. A response to the theme by the assembled community. The litany is a useful form for a communal response. For a ritual to remain alive, there needs to be room for spontaneity, for the community members to share their concerns.
5. A symbol and a symbolic action — the group must do something, i.e. plant a seed, break bread, pass the cup
6. A closing — having aroused the psychic/spiritual energies of the group, we must ground them and bring closure, perhaps with an exit song or a final word and gesture.



| On Ritual in Community |

“A ritual is an act that is performed primarily for its symbolic and imagistic import and for its effect on the soul. I grab a quick sandwich one day, but another day I go to a special restaurant to celebrate an anniversary. The meal at the restaurant probably will have more of a ritual quality than the sandwich, although even that could be a simple ritual.”

-- Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*

“Ritual ushers us into a welcome and comforting rhythm of thoughts and activities. It unclutters our minds by providing structure and boundaries during times of change. The order imposed by meaningful ritual allows us to reflect our values and convey messages to self and the community about who we are and what we are experiencing.”

-- Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“Ritual enacted by the community is experienced as participation of humans in cosmic energies...the sacred is experienced not as something coming down from above but rather as energy welling up from within the community whose daily life is already holy. The community lifts up a certain moment--the sharing of a meal, the healing of a conflict, the birth, maturing or death of a member--and highlights its significance in a making and sharing of the meaning of life.”

-- Diane Neu, *from Notes On Ritual*

“Purpose is the driving force that contributes to the effectiveness of ritual.”

--Malidoma Patrice Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*

“Although...rituals of the past may seem magical and full of life and colour, they may not work if they are not consonant with today’s belief system. Rituals that work best for you will be those that you believe in.

--Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“When rites are at their best, people’s emotions and sense of beauty are both fully expressed.”

--Hsun Tzu, *Confucian*

HANDOUT

| On Ritual in Community |

“Whatever happens in a ritual space, some kind of power is released if given a freedom in which to live. This is the only way those who participate in the ritual can continue to benefit from the power.”

--Malidoma Patrice Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*

“Because rituals both come from and create dreams, they encourage the deeper wisdom coming from these visionary levels.”

--Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“The harmony and well-being of the community, its coordination with the harmony and ultimate nature of the cosmos of which it is a part, and the integration of the individual, in his (sic) thought, feeling, and personal desires, with the sense and essential force of this universal circumstance, can be said...to be the fundamental aim and nature of the ceremonial...It is possible that the failure of mythology and ritual to function effectively in our civilisation may account for the high incidence among us of the malaise that has led to the characterization of our times as the “Age of Anxiety.”

--Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

| Muslim Rites & Rituals |



Photo: www.freedigitalphotos.net

1. Birth

The new baby is welcomed into the world as the father whispers a call to prayer—*adhann*—into his or her right ear and a call to worship—*iqama*—in the left. This is so the first words the child hears are God's words. Afterwards, the parents rub something sweet—usually a date or honey—onto the baby's tongue or lips *al-tahneek*, following the tradition of the prophet Muhammad.

After seven days, there is a feast and naming ceremony *al-tasmiya* for the baby. First the baby's head is shaved *al-Halq* to symbolize lifelong service to God. The hair is weighed and the weight in silver is donated to the poor. An animal sacrifice *Aqeeqah* is offered by the family with one third of the meat going to the poor, one third to relatives, and the rest to the family gathered at the feast. Parents have a responsibility to give their children a good name as this will become part of the child's identity and personality. The names are chosen which have a good meaning usually originating from Islamic personalities or from the *Qur'an*. One of the most common names is Muhammad.



Photo: www.freedigitalphotos.net

2. Circumcision

For males, circumcision will usually follow the naming ceremony although it can be done later, up until the boy reaches puberty. Muslims are the largest single religious group to circumcise boys. In Islam circumcision is also known as *tahara*, meaning purification.

The main reason given for the ritual is that it follows the tradition of Muhammad and of previous monotheist prophets, especially Abraham. Some Muslims see circumcision as a preventive measure against infection and diseases.

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Photo: Makkah Massjid Mosque, UK

3. Religious Education

Bismillah is the celebration around the child's fourth birthday when he or she begins formal religious education. At this point, the child should have memorized the first chapter of the *Qur'an* and will be invited to recite it in front of a senior relative or the imam. If the child is successful, he or she will begin his or her religious education at the mosque, which includes learning the proper way to pray and memorizing the entirety of the *Qur'an*.



Photo: Muslim project, Islamic Foundation, UK

4. *Shahada*

The word *shahada* literally means "to bear witness" or "to testify." This simple yet profound statement expresses a Muslim's complete acceptance and commitment to Islam and must be correctly read aloud with full conviction and understanding of its validity. Its recitation is the only requirement for those who wish to join the Muslim community. The *shahada* is included in the daily prayer ritual *Salat* and is therefore often recited several times a day.



Photo: Agência Brasil News Agency

5. *Salat*

Salat, or "prayer" is the second pillar of Islam and comes from the Muslim belief that individuals have a direct relationship with God. This act of worship is required five times a day (at dawn, noon, during the mid-afternoon, just after the sun has set, and in the evening), as well as during funerals and eclipses. The *salat* is a highly formalized ritual. At the time of worship after going through a purification process to ensure cleanliness, Muslims face the direction of Mecca and the sacred Ka'ba and complete their prayer obligation. Although the *salat* can be performed alone and in any environment, it is recommended that Muslims perform *salat* in a mosque, usually with another person or a group.

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

6. Marriage

In traditional families marriages are usually arranged between families rather than two individuals. Although arranged, the couple has the right to choose between partners rather than being forced into a relationship. Before a marriage takes place, the families negotiate the *mahr*, which is a present from the bridegroom to the bride. The marriage ceremony is traditionally simple: the bride and groom exchange vows and passages from the *Qur'an* are recited by an imam. Afterwards, a contract between the two is signed, laying out the roles and duties within the marriage. After the ceremony, a feast takes place for the friends and relatives of the couple



Photo: HALO, UK

7. Zakat

Zakat, "obligatory charity", is the third pillar of Islam. It is comprised of at least 2.5% of one's savings after all personal and family expenses, taxes, etc. have been paid. The *Zakat* is an act of worship and spiritual investment and purifies the property of the contributor and frees the recipient from jealousy and hatred, while fostering goodwill. It also helps rid society from welfare, distrust and corruption. Common recipients of the *Zakat* are: the poor, new Muslim converts, Muslim prisoners of war (to liberate them), Muslims in debt, employees appointed to collect the *Zakat*, Muslims in service of research or study or propagation of Islam, and wayfarers who are foreigners in need of help.

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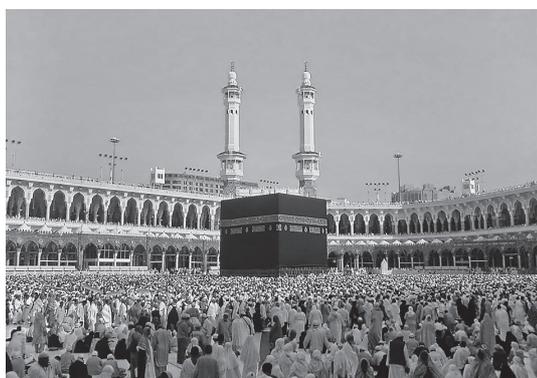


Photo: Mahdi Karim; edited by Jjron

8. The Hajj

The *Hajj*, or “pilgrimage” takes place during the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and lasts about six days. Although only required to participate once in a lifetime, the Hajj has more than 2 million people who attend annually.

The rituals of the *Hajj* focus on the *Ka’ba*, a cubic structure in the centre of the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Pilgrims circle seven times around the *Ka’ba* that is believed to have been initially built by Abraham and his firstborn son Ishmael.

Those who participate in the *Hajj* wear plain clothes and are not allowed to have adornments that would signal wealth or ethnicity. Those who have completed the *Hajj* are referred to with the honorific *Hajji*.



Photo: Cheeky Bandari

9. Id al-Adha

Id al-Adha, also sometimes referred to as “The Feast of the Sacrifice” or “The Great Feast,” is one of the most important holidays in the Islamic world. It commemorates Abraham’s devotion to God, and reminds Muslim’s of God’s mercy and provision for his people. According to the *Qur’an*, Abraham’s deep faith was tested when God asked him to sacrifice his son. Although Abraham was set to obey, God provided an alternative sacrifice and replaced Ishmael with a ram, thus sparing Ishmael’s life.

Id al-Adha begins on the 10th day of the *Dhu’l-Hijja*, the last month of the Islamic calendar. It lasts for three days and occurs at the conclusion of the period of the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca. During the festivities, a lamb, or other animal if one cannot afford a lamb, is sacrificed and given to relatives, friends and the poor. The sacrifice is symbolic of obedience to God, as well as charity and generosity.

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Photo: Syefri Zulkefli

10. Ramadan

Ramadan is a month long religious affair during which Muslims fast during the day. It marks the month that Muhammad received the *Qur'an* from God. No food or water must be ingested, and not even gum may be chewed. A Muslim child first starts fasting for Ramadan when he or she is twelve years old. It marks the point where the carefree childhood is over and he must now accept religious responsibility and become an adult. The fast starts at dawn and is broken after sunset.

There is also a ritual called *Itiqaf* where some Muslims spend the last 10 days of Ramadan in complete seclusion in order to pray and reflect. They do not speak to anyone, and their food is brought to them. These 10 days are viewed as a time to detach yourself from your busy life in order to connect with the creator.

At the end of Ramadan, a three day holiday known as *Id-al-Fitr* is celebrated with feasts and exchanging of gifts.

11. Death, Funerals, and Mourning

When a Muslim is near death, he or she is surrounded by people who recite the *Qur'an* and give reminders of God's mercy and forgiveness. When possible, the dying person is encouraged to recite the Shahada declaration of faith: "*I bear witness that there is no god but Allah.*"

Traditionally, Muslims are buried 24 hours after death. Relatives of the deceased wash their body with clean scented water and wrap in sheets of clean, white cloth called the *Kafan*. The deceased is taken to *salat-l-janazah*, the funeral site of the funeral prayers. The community gathers while the imam (prayer leader) recites the funeral prayer. The funeral is simple, and a modest gravestone suffices. The face of the body is turned to the holy site of Mecca. As the body is lowered into the grave, the words "*In the name of God we commit you to the earth, according to the way of the Prophet of God*" are recited. Afterwards the *Qur'an* is read by the imam. The family mourns for three days while friends and relatives visit with food and well-wishes. The mourning process should not be excessive, and the grief period should not continue for too long as it signals a lack of faith in God.

Photo: <http://yojichan.multiply.com>