

ARABIC RELIGION

Devin J Stewart, Ph.D.

Popular Religion and Other Ceremonies

Life Cycle Events. Popular ceremonies form a large part of Arab culture that is often omitted in accounts that remain on an official level. Life cycle events such as circumcisions, engagement parties and weddings, and funerals show a great deal of variety across the region. In Moroccan tradition, the bride is dressed in seven different costumes in the course of the wedding. In many Arab societies, the bride is feted with a special celebration the day before the wedding called the night of henna, at which the bride and the women guests have their hands and feet decorated with henna, either covering the whole palm or in floral or geometric designs on the back of the hands. In some conservative areas, weddings are celebrated with gender segregation, the women in one area of the house or building and the men in another. Circumcision is done often at a relatively late age—4, 5, 6, or older—rather than immediately or a week after birth. In many regions boys are dressed up as Arab shaykhs and treated as heroes for a few days. In some regions such as Egypt and Sudan, corresponding ceremonies are performed for the “circumcision” of girls. The parade in which the bride is taken from her house to that of her husband, the *zaffa*, is a traditional, distinctive part of the wedding and is associated with particular songs and chants. Many Arab societies have a practice that involves the official naming of the newborn a week after his or her birth. Islamic law terms this *`aqiqah*, prescribing a sacrifice—usually of a sheep—and shaving of the child’s head. In Egypt, this is called *subu`*. For the occasion a child is given a special clay pitcher, shaped differently for boys and girls. The child is shaken on a large sieve, a mortar and pestle are pounded nearby and statements such as “Obey your mother! Don’t obey your father!” are yelled at the child.

Islam’s Main Holidays. While Islam in general has two main holidays, many other Islamic festivals in the calendar in various regions of the Arab world. The big holiday, the equivalent of Eastern in Christianity and Passover in Judaism, is the Feast of Sacrifice, which coincides with the high point of the annual pilgrimage on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the twelfth month of the year. On this holiday, families who can afford to do so sacrifice an animal—this was preferably a camel in early Islamic times, but the most common animal in modern times is a sheep—and give away some of the meat to the poor. The second major holiday is the Breaking of the Fast at the end of Ramadan. The month of Ramadan has created a bewildering variety of customs and rituals. Special foods are associated with Ramadan, such as dates, nuts, pastries, and so on. In Morocco, *hrira*, a type of hearty soup made with lentils and chickpeas, is *de riguer* during Ramadan. Special drummers roam the streets around 3 am in order to wake up people for *suhur*, the late night meal consumed before the early morning hour when one must refrain from eating or drinking for the next day of fasting. Arab Christians and Jews also have their particular ways of celebrating Easter and Passover.

Extra Holy Days. Chief among the additional festivals is the Prophet’s Birthday (*al-Mawlid*), which apparently originated in Fatimid Egypt in imitation of the Christians’ celebration of Christmas, which in Egypt at that time involved fanfare and parades in the streets. It has become popular in many other regions but has been rejected as an innovation by the Saudis. Another smaller holiday is the celebration of the New Year according to the Islamic (*hijri*) calendar. Among Shiites, the calendar includes many events associated with the lives of the Imams, including their birthdays and the dates of their deaths. During Ramadan fall the dates on which Ali was stabbed by the Khariji Abu

Muljam—the 19th of the month—and on which he died, three days later—the 22nd—which are marked by Shiites as a time of mourning. The most important Shiite holy day is of course Ashura, the day of mourning for the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn in the Battle of Karbala', which takes place on the 10th day of Muharram, the first month in the *hijri* calendar. Many rituals are associated with this holiday, including choreographed marching and chanting on the part of groups of young men, often accompanied by self-flagellation with chains or bloodletting with swords tapped against the forehead. Theatrical reenactments of the events leading up to the Battle of Karbala, culminating in the killing of Husayn, are performed over several days. Less violent but just as dramatic are readings of the story of Husayn's martyrdom that cause the audience, often gender-segregated, to sob profusely. Related to 'Ashura is *al-Arba`in*, the 40th day after Husayn's martyrdom (the 40th day after death is a traditional day of mourning), on which the main annual pilgrimage to Husayn's tomb in Karbala is performed. The second major Shiite holy day is 'Id *al-Ghadir*, the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah, which commemorates the day when the Prophet gave a speech that Shiites claim explicitly designated 'Ali b. Abi Talib as his successor. Other Shiite holy days include the birthday of the Twelfth Imam, who remains the current Imam of the Twelvers but is in hiding.

Popular Rituals and Saints. A major set of rituals in popular religion has to do with saints. The tombs and shrines of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim saints are visited and revered all over the Arab world, and the practices associated with these shrines cut across confessional lines, so that, for example, Muslims may pray at the shrines of Jewish saints in Morocco, and Christians in Egypt may pray at the tombs of Muslim saints. Devotees make prayers and supplications, light candles, leave written requests, provide food for the poor, make vows, seek cures for physical ailments and mental disorders, ask for a husband or wife, or seek a remedy for infertility, or solutions to problems with family or relatives. There are many annual pilgrimages to saints' shrines; perhaps the largest of these is that to the tomb of al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Mursi in Tanta in Northern Egypt. The celebration of the birthday or death dates of saints are also marked in many cases by festivals or fairs, at which there are markets, carnival rides for children, folk performances of various kinds, including the performance of devotional music. Sufi orders in many regions play a major role in community religious life and are intertwined with the saints' shrines and saint worship in general. The topic is vast—anthropologists and scholars of religion and society have only begun to document the tremendous variety of such practices.

Questions:

1. Interview a native of the Arab world about the celebration of weddings or other life events in his or her native region.
2. Interview a native of the Arab world about the celebration of Ramadan, Christmas, or other holidays.
3. What are the similarities among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim saints in the Arab world and the practices associated with devotion to saints? How do they compare with the practices associated with devotion to Catholic saints?
4. What is the social function of rituals, religious or otherwise? What purposes do they serve?
5. Do rituals remain the same over time or can they change? How and why might rituals change?
6. How can religious rituals cross over religious boundaries? How can they affect rituals in other religious traditions? Can you find examples in which Christianity has affected Islamic rituals, or vice-versa, in the Arab world?
7. What are the commonalities in Islamic practice across different regions in the Arab world? What are some of the differences?

Reading

Gilsenan, Michael. *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*, revised ed. London: I. B. Tauris, 2000.

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore*, pp. 166-200.

Hammond, *Popular Culture*, Chapter 3: Popular Religion: Where 1,001 Islams Converge, 79-106.

Further Reading

Campo, Juan. *The Other Sides of Paradise: Explorations into the Religious Meanings of Domestic Space in Islam*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981.

Crapanzano, Vincent. *The Hamadsha : A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Combes-Schilling, M.E. *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality and Sacrifice*. New York: Columbia University, 1989.

Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi`i Lebanon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Gaffney, Patrick. *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Gilsenan, Michael. *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay on the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.

Mahmoud, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Films:

Fedwa El-Guindi. *El-Sebou` : Egyptian Birth Ritual*. Available on line.