

Cultural and Religious Rituals of Gestation and Child Birth of Muslims of Malabar: a Textual and Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Rites and rituals related to major events of human life like birth, marriage and death are prevalent from the infancy of the human race in the world. The celebration of suchlike events varies as well as conforms in relation to the region, religion, language, class, caste and gender. In all communities around the world the birth of a child is considered a blessing and ceremonies are held to celebrate this event. It seems like a moment of joy and happiness in the life of spouses and family members and they share it with their relatives and colleagues. However, the celebrations regarding the birth of a child are conducted in multiple ways according to time and space. During Post and pre-delivery periods of pregnancy, a woman is also going through certain rites and rituals in various societies and religions. Here I try to scrutinize the major celebrations, rites and rituals of the pre and post-delivery period of a woman and childbirth in a middle-class Muslim family of Malabar through the textual narrations and sociological interpretations.

Keywords: rituals, childbirth, Malabar, Muslims

Pre-delivery period

After the marriage woman usually goes to the husband's house and conducts the rest of her life with the family of the husband as a member of that family and visits her natal family only at the time of certain festivals and banquets. After getting pregnant she will be in the extreme care of both families and the news of gestation spreads among the family members predominantly among the females. At the outset of gestation, some women omit whatever they eat and some feel tired and unhealthy for a short period of time. In Malabar by the fourth month of pregnancy, she will be carried into her natal family to stay there for one or two months which mainly intended to sup ghee and some other herbals. This ritual is known as *neyyu kudikkan konduvaral*. There is a persuasion that whatever she likes has to be fed for the duration of pregnancy otherwise the child will be greedy; So that the family members will be keen to hear from her the volition for some food items which are rarely available. After spending one month she goes back to her husband's house and will stay there for two months. At this time husband's family with some relatives visits her along with some bakery products. This visit intends to gaze at her belly and is formally known as *palla kanan pokk*.

In the fifth and sixth month, she is provided a kind of Islamic medicine which is only prevalent among *sunnis* of Malabar. The contour of the medicine is that the *musliyar*¹ writes some *Quranic* verses on a plate with a special ink and pen every day and she removes that ink with the water mixed with raisin and drinks it. This is known as *pinchanam ezhuthi kudikkal*. In the end of the seventh month the father of pregnant woman seeks the *musliyar* on which day and what time she has to be brought for the delivery from her husband's family. Then after looking at Islamic calendar he fixes a specific date and time, then the husband's father and maternal uncle of the woman with the *musliyar* goes to the husband's home to bring her for the delivery purposes which is known as *prasavathinu kootikkondu viral*. For this occasion the husband's family will prepare food for them and the *musliyar* perform the prayer and brings her into her natal home in a car. At that time she will be very shy and wears white dress whether it is sari or *pardah* or anything else. No body is ready to oppose this like activities due to the fear of adventurous situation of delivery process. At the time of pregnancy most of the women will be very pious and virtuous and they will recite holy Quran every night and offer some other prayers also. In the ninth month the woman's mother will prepare all the things needed for hospitalizing her daughter for the delivery and when the pain of delivery starts the pregnant women informs her mother the situation. Then the mother along with grand mother and father go to hospital with the pregnant women and inform the husband's family also. The husband's father, mother and husband go to hospital and serve her for performing delivery.

¹ Religiously educated man who becomes the priest of mosque

Birth and related rites

In Islam, there is a concept that as soon as a child is born, *satan* attacks him/her, because human beings are his enemies so he never leaves them without harm. That is why the children are crying at the time of birth. The rationale behind this is a narration from the Prophet: "When any human being is born, Satan pinches the body with his two fingers, except 'Isa, the son of *Maryam*, whom Satan tried to pinch but failed, for he touched the placenta instead". (*Sahihul Bukhari* 4:506). To protect the newborn child from these quandaries they are following some major principles that the prophet did and ordered to do at the birth of a new child. Predominantly there are five tenets to be done after the birth of a child as mentioned by the prophet. They are (1) reciting *azaan*² and *iqama*³ in the ears of newborn (2) *thahneek*⁴ (3) *thasmiya*⁵ (4) shaving the head (5) *aqeeqah*⁶ and (6) *khitan*⁷. Here is a brief description of all these practices.

Reciting *azaan*

If a child is born in a family the most pious and virtuous person will recite the *azaan* and *iqama* in his/her right and left ears respectively. This is done immediately after the baby has taken bathed with lukewarm water. It is convinced that this practice ensures safety to the child from epilepsy. Hafiz ibn Qiyyim pointed out; the significance of reciting the *azaan* and the *iqamah* in the ears of the child is that the first words he hears have to be the greatness and majesty of Allah. The words of testimony are those which a man recites on embracing Islam. In other words, this is a pronouncement of the creed of Islam. Besides, these it is believed that at the sound of *Azaan* and *iqamah*, Satan distances himself from the child. It is intended that at this early age, the child is thus invited to Allah, to Islam and to the worship of Allah. This call forestalls temptation by Satan and ensures an unblemished faith. Moreover, it is a forearming against Satan and temptation.

The rationale behind this practice is a report from Abu Raf'I that, "I saw the Prophet saying the *azaan* of *salah*⁸ in the ear of his grandson, Hasan, when the child was born to his daughter Fatima". It is obvious that among the Muslims of Malabar this function is mostly done by the grandfathers (if they are alive) or father or any religiously educated person of the family. It also turns our attention to realize the fact that how much society is keen to pursue the religious rites at the time of birth, marriage and demise.

² *Azaan* is call for prayer announced five times from the mosques which starts with "Allahu akbar Allahu akbar" (Allah is the great, Allah is the great)

³ *Iqama* is a short form of *azaan*

⁴ *Thahneek* is a arabic word which means giving palatable thing

⁵ Naming the child

⁶ It is the practice of sacrificing an animal in the name of the child

⁷ Circumcision

⁸ *Salah* is the Arabic word of namaz (a kind of prayer)

Tahneek

Tahneek is the practice of chewing date and applying a part of the chewed portion to the palate of the child so that it goes down the child's mouth easily. If the date is unavailable, one may apply anything sweet, like sugar candy, honey or juice, to the child's palate. Thereby, the *sunnah*⁹ is fulfilled.

Mostly the dates are given after chewing to the child by the hands of the most virtuous man and then women of that family. It is common among the mothers of pregnant women in Malabar to seek the dates which are brought from Mecca at the time of pilgrimage and collect them to give her grandchild at the moment of delivery. There is a report that when a child was born to one of the families of the *Sahaba*¹⁰ they would take him/her to the Prophet so that he would bless it, and apply the pulp of a date, chewed by him, to its palate. The wife of Prophet Aisha narrates that "the people used to bring their newborn children to the Prophet and he would bless them and perform the *tahneek*" (*Sahih Muslim* 1:560).

Thasmiya

People name their children to distinguish them from others and to call them by their names. In Islam also it is an obligation upon the parents that their child be given a good name. Some *hadeeth*¹¹ indicates that the child is to be named on the seventh day along with *Aqeeqah*. However, the Prophet also named children on the day of their birth, as proven by other narrations. There is no harm if the child is named before the seventh day, but if the naming has not been done, then the child should be named on the seventh day. Among Muslims of Malabar Arabic names are most preferred than local names. Now a day it also enlarges into Persian and Urdu languages. In the earlier periods most of the names had a nexus with the local and traditional language. When ever the family is naming the child they ask the meaning of Arabic names the priest of the mosque of the *Mahallu*¹² who is called *Musliyar*. Somebody also asks him to suggest good names for their child. If a priest is unable to tell the meaning of Arabic names he is considered as ignorant of the Arabic language. Now a day there is a trend of naming the child by composing the names of father and mother. Some families give the name of grandparents to their grandsons as a reminiscence of their forefathers and foremothers. Often the naming of the child happens according to the will of the father's family where mother's family has no role in that ritual.

Naming the child with a beautiful and lovely and meaningful name is very important. The Prophet always chose names with good and beautiful meanings, even telling people to change their names if they had unpleasant meanings. Ibn Umar reported that Allah's Messenger said that "the names dearest to Allah are Abdullah and Abdur-Rahman" (*Sahih Muslim*, 3:5315). Ibn Umar reported again that Allah's Messenger changed the name of Aasiyah (disobedient) and said "you are Jameelah (good and beautiful)" (*Sahih Muslim*,

⁹ Pursuance of prophet

¹⁰The companions of prophet

¹¹ Hadeeth is the technical term to the saying, acts and nods of prophet

¹² A regional form for the muslims, like parish for christians

3:5332&4747). It is believed that on the day of resurrection, a person will be called by his name and the names of his parents. Therefore, a good name must be selected. That is why people are seeking the nod of Muslaiyar at the time of naming.

Shaving the head

The hair on the head of the new-born has to be shaved on the seventh/fourteenth/twenty-first day of the birth. It is desirable to give gold or silver as charity to the poor and needy equal to the weight of his/her hair. Shaving the hair of the head provides the child with strength and opens up the pores of the skin. It is also beneficial to the eye-sight, the hearing and the sense of smell. It is reported that the Prophet, asked Fatimah to have his son's head shaved off and offer silver equal in weight to the hair as *sadaqah*¹³. The hair weighed a *dirham*¹⁴ or a little lesser than a *dirham*. The entire head must be shaved. To shave some hair and to leave some on the head is called *qaz* and is disallowed.

In Malabar this is celebrated in the mother's house with a great joy and happiness by inviting the relatives from both sides of father and mother. It is known as *mudikalachil*. Mostly it is conducted on the fourteenth day of the birth. A team of family members from father's side including a barber and a *musliyar* goes to mother's house in the morning to perform this practice. The grandmother of child from father's side will present a plate with some rice, coconut, areca nut, tobacco, betel leaf and his wage to the barber and he starts to shave the head of the child; while the child will be in the lap of the grand mother. The barbers from Muslims are known as *ossan* and only they are invited for this practice not the non Muslims. After this ritual barber *ossan* and *musliyar* will return but the family relatives stay there till the end of feast provided at the lunch time. A group of neighbours and relatives from father's side goes in five or six vehicles to the mother's house to participate in the feast prepared there.

aqeeqah

Etymologically the Arabic word *aq* means 'to cut'. In the terminology of Shari'ah it is the sacrifice of a goat for the child on the seventh day after the birth. According to a *hadith*, every child is pledged to his *aqeeqah* that may be sacrificed for him on the seventh day; the same day he must be named and his head shaved. The sacrifice on behalf of a boy is two goats and for the girl one goat or their equivalent. The Prophet did the *aqeeqah* of Hasan and Husain on the seventh day after their birth. It may be done on the fourteenth or twenty first day. It is desirable not to break the bones of the sacrificial animal. This is a sign of good omen of health and strength of the child. The poor and the neighbors get large pieces, too. However, there is no harm if someone does break the bones of the animal.

¹³ Sadaqah means charity

¹⁴ A unit of weight in Arabian countries in earlier periods

The animal that is valid for sacrifice in the day of *Eidul Azha*¹⁵ is valid too in the offering of *aqeeqah*. The animal must be one year old, fully. However, a six-month old ram may be offered in sacrifice and *aqeeqah* if it is sufficiently fat and healthy and looks like a year old. The goat must be a year old. The animal must be free from defect. It must not be blind, squint-eyed or so much thin that there is no marrow in its bones. It must not be so lame which cannot walk by itself to the place of sacrifice. That animal, also, is invalid for sacrifice whose tail or ear is cut off more than two-thirds, or most of its teeth have fallen off, or it has no ears since birth or is so much mad that it does not eat or drink. The sacrifice of an animal is valid if its ear is torn or a horn is split. Also, if an animal is lame but it can walk on its three legs. If some of its teeth are broken but most are intact, the animal is not very mad or the ear, tail or hip is only one-third cut off, then, in all such cases, the sacrifice of this animal is valid. The sacrifice of a cow or a buffalo is not valid before it is two years old. The camel must have completed five years of age. It is legitimate to share in *aqeeqah* and sacrifice. On the birth of the child, the animal offered in *aqeeqah* is to obtain proximity to Allah.

In Malabar the practice of *aqeeqah* is quite interesting because of its numerous implications of social status of a family. In higher class families the number of animals sacrificed will increase from three to four, in middle class families it is one to two, while in poor families this practice sometimes do not practice or reduce it into a goat. Mostly buffalos are brought for the sacrifice because of its availability and less expense in comparison with goats. The animal will be conveyed to the mother's house a day before the ceremony and will be nurtured from there for the rest of the time. The father's family goes to the mother's house on the date occasion with close relatives in the morning along with the barber, *musliyar* and butchers of their village. The *musliyar* is carried out to chop the neck of the animal. It is believed that the *musliyars* know how to chop it clearly. Before the slaughtering, animal is given little water to sip as its last drink, then butchers prepare it for slaughtering and *musliyar* begins to chop by uttering three *thakbeers*. The format of *thakbeer* is *allahu akbar allahu akbar allahu akbar, lailaha illallahu allahu akbar, allahu akbar valillahil hamdu*. Then the duty of preparing it for eating goes to the butchers. They will make it in different covers to distribute among the family members and the inhabitants in the vicinity of father and mother of the child. Here mother's family gets preference to select how much they need; and only the rest is allowed to the father's family. It is believed that this meat cannot be given to a non Muslim. Now we turn into the rites related to the mother after delivery and what are the major peculiarities of those events.

Khitan

Etymologically, *khitan* means to cut the skin that is at the tip of the reproductive organ. In Shari'ah it is the round part on the edge above the conical vascular body of the penis. Narrated Abu Hurayrah, I heard the Prophet saying "five practices are characteristic of the Fitrah¹⁶: circumcision, shaving the pubic hair, cutting the mustache short, clipping the nails and depleting the hair of the armpits". (*Sahih Bukhari* 7:779). According to a *hadith*, circumcision is *sunnah* for men and virtuous for women.

¹⁵ Also known as Bakried

¹⁶ Primitiveness

Basically the practice of circumcision emerged in following the practices of the earlier prophet Ibrahim as Allah says in the Qur'an "Then we have inspired you (Oh Muhammad) follow the religion of Ibrahim, the true in faith and he was not from polytheists" (*Surah An-Nahl* 16:123). In this verse, the Prophet and his adherents are commanded to follow the religion of Ibrahim; therefore it is known that circumcision is from the religion of Ibrahim. Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslims have related that Abu Hurayrah said that Allah's Messenger said, "Ibrahim did his circumcision with an adze (hand tool with a steel cutting blade) at the age of eighty". (*Sahih Bukhari* 4:575. *Sahih Muslim* 4:5844). Circumcision of the boy is recommended before he attains maturity. It is advisable to do it with *aqeeqah*. At that age, he does not suffer much pain. The question of his being shy does not arise, too. The prophet had the *aqeeqah* and circumcision of his two grandsons Hasan and Husain performed on the seventh day after their birth.

In Malabar circumcision is known as (*markam kalyanam* or *sunnath kalyanam*) and is celebrated by inviting relatives and friends and preparing feasts for them. Mostly it is held in the house of the father during the 3rd or 4th year of the child. The boy after wearing dhoti is led to the doctor who does the circumcision with some close relatives from both sides of father and mother. Family relatives will present a variety of food items like egg, horlicks, and banana; and some other gifts to the circumcised boy. In some rich families, the practice of presenting golden ornaments like rings and bangles is also prevalent. The mother's family is supposed to present the golden ornaments. He will be treated with intensive care at every time before curing the wounds of circumcision. Only the boys whose circumcision is over can go to the mosque and offer the prayer.

Post delivery period

Close relatives of the mother and father come to the hospital to appreciate and participate in the joy of the family with some fruits or any other gifts for the baby. They talk with the mother and take the child in their hands and try to make it laugh. After completing the medical checkups from the hospital she will be carried into her natal home in most cases; and she will be under intensive care by a trained home nurse for forty days. The father's family will book and arrange the nurse even during the first or second month of pregnancy. Everybody in the family watches the home nurse's activities whether she is doing her duty punctually or not; and how she behaves with the family members and helps in their deeds. It is her duty to look after the child and mother with intensive care; whenever child cries she has to take him/her and make quiet even if it is at midnight. Washing the dresses of the child and mother, preparing special food for the mother and making her and child bathe with herbal oil are major responsibilities of the home nurse.

The family relatives from both sides of mother and father will visit the delivered woman with presentations which include eggs, bananas, horlicks, boost, fruits, baby soaps, powders, Ayurvedic medicines and dresses for the child. The visitors also provide some money to the home nurse which is known as the price for seeing the child. The variations in the offerings express the status of a visiting family in the society and how much close they are to the

delivered women. She is provided many things to eat in this period especially dug of goat and some home-made medicines which are prepared by mixing dates, fenugreek and shallot.

The delivered women are forbidden from offering prayers and reciting Quran until ceasing her afterbirth blood. Its minimum is one second and usual time is forty days and the maximum time is sixty days. In the usual condition on the fortieth day of delivery, there is a celebration known as *nalppath*. On that day the closest relatives of the mother and father will go to the mother's home with some golden ornaments like a ring, bangle, necklace, waistband and earring; and garnish it on the child. The father's mother begins the garnishing and follows by those who brought the ornaments. Here also the fiscal capacity of a family comes into consideration in society. It is an obligation of the blood relatives to offer golden ornaments to the newborn child and the same magnitude of gold or a little bit more will be given back when suchlike occasions happen in their homes. On that day the delivered woman will take bath from her afterbirth blood and come out of the bathroom along with her younger brother with an umbrella by looking at the most fruitful coconut tree. The logic behind looking at a fruitful coconut tree is the reproduction of more children throughout her life. The mother's family will prepare a feast for the guests at the lunch time. By this day the service of the home nurse will come to end and she will be paid approximately RS 20000 along with some dresses and sent to the home. If any women's bleeding didn't stop by forty days the celebration of *nalppathu* is postponed until the sixtieth day and is called *arupath*. In the usual case, the woman resides with her family for ninety days after delivery while she recovers from all her health problems and will be capable to do domestic work; by then she will go back to her husband's family.

Cultural and social relevance of rituals

A ritual is a set of actions performed mainly for their symbolic value. It may be prescribed by the traditions of a community, including by a religious community. The term usually refers to actions which are stylized and usually exclude actions that are arbitrarily chosen by the performers. The purposes of rituals are varied. Rituals can fulfill religious obligations or ideals, satisfy the spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthen social bonds, provide social and moral education, demonstrate respect or submission, allow one to state one's affiliation, obtain social acceptance or approval for some event - or rituals are sometimes performed just for the pleasure of the ritual itself. From this standpoint of view, the aforementioned rites and rituals among Muslims of Malabar can be read through various aspects.

Rituals of various kinds are a feature of almost all known human societies, past or present. They include not only the various worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults; but also the rites of passage of certain societies, atonement and purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriages, funerals, club meetings, sports events, veteran's parades and many other social practices. In religion, a ritual can comprise the prescribed outward forms of observation within a religion or religious denomination. Although ritual is often used in conjunction with worship performed in a religious tabernacle. The actual nexus between any religion's doctrine and its rituals can vary considerably from organized religion to non-institutionalized

spirituality. Rituals can help create a firm sense of group identity. Humans have used to create bonds and even to nourish interpersonal relationships through rituals and rites. The practices of aqeeqah, khitan are the best examples of improving interpersonal relationships and making harmony and coexistence in society.

What roles might the concept of ritual play in the study of contemporary society and culture is the major question that arrives at scrutinizing the cultural rituals of the society. Ritual is arguably a universal feature of human social existence: just as one cannot envision a society without language or exchange, one would be equally hard-pressed to imagine a society without ritual. And while the word 'ritual' commonly brings to mind the exotic images of primitive others diligently engaged in mystical activities, one can find rituals, both sacred and secular throughout 'modern' society. Ritual is in fact an inevitable component of culture, extending from the largest-scale social and political processes to the most intimate aspects of our self-experience. Yet within this universality, the inherent multiplicity of ritual practices, both between and within cultures also reflects the full diversity of the human experience. It was then neither pure coincidence nor primitive exoticism that placed ritual at the centre of the development of anthropological thought: it was instead ritual's rich potential insights as an object of socio-cultural analysis.

The major questions that arise in scrutinizing ritual are what in fact is ritual? Where does ritual originate? What forms does ritual take, and how do these various forms constitute 'ritual'? What are its effects and how are they achieved? How does ritual frame our social experiences and how does the actor's input in turn re-frame ritual? What are the relationships between ritual symbols across social fields (religious, political, sexual)? Who exercises control in rituals; or do rituals exercise control upon their actors? And how in the end does the study of ritual processes contribute to an understanding of contemporary socio-cultural processes?

Rational-choice accounts argue that rituals are ubiquitous features of social life because they provide the common focal points and common cultural knowledge that provide actors with information about how others will act. This makes mutual assurance possible and helps actors solve the coordination problems that usually bedevil and obstruct effective collective action. Armed with common knowledge, actors can more credibly make commitments to one another and mutually orient their actions to one another, often without the need for organization. Cultural practices such as rituals facilitate coordination develop and persist because they are, ultimately, efficient and enhance the productivity of social action. Not surprisingly, rituals are foundational to voluntary collective action, as is especially evident in religious groups. Durkheim's theory of rituals provides a powerful social mechanism that reinforces group coherence and produces social solidarity, but he does not explain how social groups originate or how they change, dissolve, fracture and so on. Innovations in social life including the formation of new solidarity groups seem to occur only because of exogenous events, since in Durkheim's sense rituals are merely forces for reproduction. From a functionalist perspective social and cultural innovations, however rare are quickly normalized and institutionalized through ritual practices.

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