

Patterns of Muslim Rituals: Between Doctrine, Devotion, and Everyday Life

Faisal. K. P¹

Abstract

Unlike other religious communities, the history of Muslims has been marked by persistent internal debates over what constitutes religious versus irreligious practices within the framework of Islamic rituals. Beyond the rituals practiced universally across Muslim societies, many are shaped by the dynamic interaction between textual tradition and lived practice, as well as the tension between local customs and universal religious principles. Rather than treating “folk” and “elite” Islam as fixed categories, this paper proposes a three-fold typology—expressive, ecstatic, and instrumental rituals—grounded in Clifford Geertz’s notion of *moods and motivations*. Drawing on secondary ethnographies from South Asia and the Middle East, the study demonstrates how Muslim rituals range from textually anchored acts of devotion (prayer, fasting, voluntary piety), to emotionally charged celebrations and saint-centred festivals (mawlid, ziyārah), to pragmatic practices seeking protection or healing (amulets, exorcisms). This framework highlights the interplay of theology, emotion, and cultural adaptation that animates everyday Muslim religiosity, revealing how intention (*niyyah*), affect, and social context shape ritual meaning. By foregrounding affective and motivational dimensions, the typology moves beyond obligation-based classifications or textual versus non-textual schemes and offers a comparative lens for analysing Muslim ritual life across diverse settings.

Keywords: sociology of rituals, religion of folks and elites, moods and motives, sacred and profane, performance, symbolism

Introduction

Understanding and classifying Muslim rituals is a task fraught with conceptual and methodological challenges. Unlike ritual systems in many other religious traditions, Islamic ritual practice resists neat categorization, demanding instead a more nuanced approach that accounts for its theological, symbolic, personal, and communal dimensions. A central difficulty arises from the absence of a single term in Islamic texts that directly corresponds to the English word “ritual.” Instead, distinct practices such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and almsgiving, are each referred to by their own names, while broader terms like *‘ibādah* (worship), *‘amal* (action or deed), *nusuk* (acts of worship, devotion, or religious rites) convey layered understandings of religious service, action, and devotion.

These terms highlight that Islamic ritual is neither a static reflection of belief or social order nor merely a system of symbolic gestures but a lived, purposeful mode of obedience to God. Etymologically linked to servanthood (*abd*) and action (*amal*),

¹ Assistant Professor (Sociology), Aligarh Muslim University Centre, Malappuram, Kerala
Email: faisalkp.mpm@amu.ac.in

the Islamic conception of ritual denoted by a comprehensive term of *'ibādah* emphasizes devotion and intentionality. Acts become religiously meaningful not by virtue of their external form alone but through the *niyyah* (intention) with which they are performed². As Goldziher (1981)³ and later scholars have observed, in Islam, the moral and spiritual worth of any act is conditioned by the actor's sincerity (*ikhlas*) and inner piety (*taqwa*). This centrality of intention challenges classical sociological dichotomies of the sacred and profane, suggesting instead that the boundary between them is often fluid, allowing even mundane acts to become sacred through the right disposition.

This perspective finds resonance in Edmund Leach's critique of the sacred-profane binary. Rather than neatly separating technical acts from sacred rituals, Leach (1964)⁴ argues that many social actions fall on a spectrum—simultaneously functional and symbolic, practical and performative. This fluidity is especially relevant in Islamic contexts, where daily life and ritual practice are deeply intertwined, and where rituals function as both expressions of devotion and tools for shaping ethical selfhood and communal order.

Despite these complexities, some scholars, such as William A. Graham (2006)⁵, have noted a comparative sparseness in Islamic ritual symbolism. Even in highly structured rituals like *hajj*, symbolism is often underplayed in favor of conformity to tradition and moral purification. The Ka'ba, devoid of iconography, the unadorned sites of *Arafat* and *Muzdalifah*, and the absence of paraphernalia in most rituals illustrate this aspect. Rituals are often seen less as carriers of elaborate symbolic meaning and more as disciplined performances of obedience, piety, and self-purification.

Yet, to dismiss Muslim rituals as devoid of symbolism would be reductive. As Akbar S. Ahmad (1984)⁶ and others have argued, Islamic practices carry a subtle and recurrent symbolic logic rooted in prophetic precedent, bodily discipline, and cosmological orientation. Symbols such as right and left, directions of prayer, and bodily postures encode moral hierarchies and religious meanings—even if these are not elaborated into theological systems of representation.

² Paul R. Powers, "Interiors, Intentions, and the 'Spirituality' of Islamic Ritual Practice," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 425–59.

³ Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁴ Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1964).

⁵ William A. Graham, "Islam in the Mirror of Ritual," in *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, ed. Gerald Hawting (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 349–69.

⁶ Akbar S. Ahmed, "Introduction," in *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and David M. Hart (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 1–15.

To better understand this symbolic structure and its variations, this paper draws on Clifford Geertz's⁷ definition of religion as a cultural system—a system of symbols that generates “moods and motivations” in the practitioner. Geertz's framework helps move beyond the limits of structural-functional or overly symbolic readings of ritual. Rituals, in his view, are not simply expressions of belief, but mechanisms for shaping dispositions—emotional, moral, and cognitive—that lend coherence to religious life.

Applying Geertz's lens to Islamic rituals reveals how Muslim practice is anchored in distinct moods—such as humility, awe, devotion, and longing—and motivations derived from core Islamic doctrines including **dutifulness and gratitude** (*haqq* and *shukr*), **the pursuit of salvation** (*falāḥ*), **purification and atonement** (*kaffārah*), **seeking divine acceptance and proximity** (*qabūliyya*, *thaqarrub*). These motives are not merely doctrinal—they are lived, internalized, and expressed through ritual acts. They are embedded in the larger Islamic cosmology, where human beings are seen as moral agents entrusted with the ability to know and fulfill God's will. Every act of worship—*ibādah*—thus becomes a site for expressing servitude, cultivating moral character, and reinforcing social bonds.

Significantly, these motives also vary across communities. In “textual” communities—those shaped by scholarly engagement and formal religious learning—rituals are often performed with rational piety, driven by a scripturally-informed consciousness. In contrast, “pre-textual” communities, which have limited access to the texts or direct engagements with the texts, may approach ritual with emotional spontaneity, guided by embodied tradition rather than theological systematization. This does not mark a dichotomy of correct versus incorrect religion, but rather reveals different configurations of mood and motive—one more emotive and ecstatic, the other more structured and disciplined.

Taken together, these insights invite a rethinking of Muslim rituals—not as static, law-bound routines, nor as wholly lacking in symbolic depth, but as dynamic, affectively charged, and theologically grounded practices. They express a deeply relational vision of human life oriented toward God, community, and ethical self-cultivation. It is with this interpretive lens—focused on the interplay of mood, motive, and meaning—that this paper proceeds to propose a typology of Muslim rituals that reflects their diversity, depth, and embeddedness in both folk and elite religious life.

Methodological note

This paper adopts a comparative, text-informed, and secondary-ethnographic approach rather than reporting new fieldwork. It synthesizes classical Islamic texts,

⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 61–83.

anthropological theory, and existing ethnographies of Muslim societies in South Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia to develop a typology of ritual practice. Primary sources such as Qur'ān and ḥadīth inform the discussion of theological categories (ʿibādah, niyyah), while published ethnographic studies provide illustrative examples of lived practice—including saint festivals, amulet use, and voluntary devotions. By drawing together textual analysis and cross-regional case studies, the paper seeks to reveal patterns of *moods and motivations* that transcend any single locality, while remaining attentive to the cultural specificities that give Muslim rituals their distinctive affective and symbolic texture

Toward a typology of Muslim ritual practice

Having established that Muslim rituals are shaped not merely by formal obligations but by a spectrum of *moods and motivations* rooted in theology, social context, and personal devotion, we now turn to the task of typological classification. Previous scholarly attempts to classify Islamic rituals have varied in emphasis, reflecting disciplinary and interpretive divides. Scholars such as Rippin (1990)⁸, Denny (1985)⁹, and Muhaimin (1995)¹⁰ have advanced different models, categorizing rituals according to degrees of obligation, textual referability, or communal function.

Anthropologists have typically drawn a distinction between "folk" and "elite" rituals, whereas Islamicists often differentiate between *fundamental* (obligatory) and *derivatives* (non-obligatory) practices. Rippin identifies rituals such as *mawlid* (Prophet's birthday), informal supplications, and *ziyarah* (tomb visitation) as supplementary expressions of Muslim identity. Denny, meanwhile, expands the fundamental category to include derivative acts such as *Eid* prayers or eclipse salats, though he labels these as rituals of a "lesser degree." Muhaimin distinguishes between *ibadah* and *adat*, characterizing the latter—based on *ʿurf* (custom)—as habitual, pragmatic, and socially embedded practices lacking in explicit theological grounding.

While each of these models provides useful insights, they often obscure the complex internal logics that animate ritual life in Muslim societies. Rituals that fall outside the five pillars, for example, may not always aim at identity formation (contra Rippin), may not be subordinate variations of obligatory acts (contra Denny), and may indeed possess theological legitimacy even if culturally inflected (contra Muhaimin). These limitations underscore the need for a more flexible and inclusive classificatory model—one that integrates Geertz's concept of *moods and motivations* with a critical appreciation of theological, phenomenological, and sociological dimensions of ritual.

⁸ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 1, *The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁹ Frederick M. Denny, "Islamic Ritual: Perspectives and Theories," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 109–41.

¹⁰ A. G. Muhaimin, *The Islamic Tradition of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat among Javanese Muslims* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 1995).

To this end, I propose a three-fold typology:

1. **Expressive Rituals** – ritual acts motivated by religious commitment, theological meaning, or moral aspiration.
2. **Ecstatic Rituals** – practices defined by heightened emotional expressivity and performative spontaneity. These practices are typically marked by a mood of reverential intensity and are motivated by deep affective attachment to sacred figures
3. **Instrumental (Therapeutic) Rituals** – practices primarily driven by utilitarian aims such as healing, protection, or worldly success, and not necessarily grounded in scriptural obligations.

Each category contains internal variations shaped by the interplay of textual authority, individual piety, communal norms, and performative context.

1. Expressive rituals

Expressive rituals refer to those practices perceived by practitioners as expressions of religiosity and spiritual commitment. These rituals derive their legitimacy from Islamic texts, moral doctrines, or long-standing theological traditions, and are typically motivated by feelings of *haqq* (obligation), *shukr* (gratitude), *falah* (salvific success), *kaffarat* (atonement), and *thaqarrub* (divine proximity). They may be subdivided into essential and non-essential expressions of piety.

1.1. Ritual Universal

The idea of Ritual Universals draws inspiration from George Peter Murdock's concept of Cultural Universals¹¹, which refers to those elements and practices that are found across all human societies. Similarly, Ritual Universals within Islam denote those ritual practices that are essential, textually grounded, and commonly shared across Muslim societies, regardless of regional or cultural variation. These foundational practices — *Ṣalāh*, *Zakāh*, *Ṣawm*, and *Ḥajj* — are universally regarded as obligatory for all sane, adult Muslims who meet the minimum prerequisites. They constitute the core framework of Islamic ritual life and are recognized, in varying linguistic and cultural forms, throughout the Muslim world. For instance, *Namaskāram* and *Nombu* are used for *Ṣalāh* and *Ṣawm* respectively in Kerala, while they are referred to as *Namāz* and *Roza* in Urdu-speaking regions. Despite these linguistic differences, their theological grounding in Qur'ānic injunctions and Prophetic traditions¹² renders them relatively standardized in form and intent.

¹¹ Murdock, George Peter. "The Common Denominator of Cultures." In *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, edited by Ralph Linton, pp. 123–136. New York: Columbia University Press, 1945

¹² al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Book of Faith (Kitāb al-Īmān), hadith no. 8. (Also collected in Muslim.)

Each of these practices marks a critical aspect of religious life: In the five-time prayer called *Ṣalāh*, one structures daily existence around spiritual attention, through the performance of *Zakāh*, **he intends to** purify his wealth by giving a defined portion of his earnings to the deserving people. The fasting ritual observed in Ramadan, the ninth month of Hijrī Calander, a believer cultivates restraint and spiritual empathy. Finally, the *Hajj*, which is the ritual of pilgrimage to Mecca once in a whole life, provided he is able to afford such a travel financially and physically, re-enacts sacred history and symbolizes moral renewal. Since these rituals are explicitly prescribed in Islamic textual sources, their modes of performance exhibit relatively minimal variation. As a result, there exists a near-universal consistency not only in their formal structure but also in the underlying motivations across diverse Muslim communities. However, the extent to which these rituals are visibly practiced—or neglected—varies according to the sociocultural and political contexts in which individuals and communities are situated (Asad, 1993)¹³. Their observance is shaped by the degree to which individuals are internally compelled by a sense of religious duty (*ḥaqq*), gratitude (*shukr*), or the aspiration for salvation in the hereafter (*falāh*).

1.2. Ritual Derivatives

These include a broad array of practices that, while perceived as not obligatory, are highly valued. They can be further categorized into subtypes based on the performer's intent and the sociocultural context as extensional rituals, rituals of etiquette, supplicatory

1.2.1 Extensional Rituals

Each of the five fundamental ritual practices in Islam gives rise to a spectrum of non-obligatory (*sunnah* or *nafl*) forms, reflecting the internal dynamism and adaptive potential of ritual life in Muslim communities. These extended practices, while not legally required, are often undertaken as expressions of heightened devotion, personal piety, or the desire to cultivate deeper intimacy with the Divine. They represent what might be termed “extensional rituals,” shaped by variations in time, context, and individual spiritual disposition.

In the case of *ṣalāt*, for instance, Muslims frequently supplement the obligatory five daily prayers with additional voluntary prayers that mirror the same bodily and verbal forms but are infused with distinct moods and intentions. These include *rawātib* (performed immediately before or after the required prayers), *tahajjud* (late-night prayers signifying spiritual yearning and introspection), *Tarāwīḥ* (collective night prayers in Ramadan characterized by festive solemnity), and *Ḍuḥā* (mid-morning prayers often associated with gratitude). There are also occasion-

¹³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

specific prayers such as *ṣalāt al-safar* (for travel), *ṣalāt al-istisqā'* (for rain), and *ṣalāt al-istikhārah* (for divine guidance), all of which express the performer's hope for divine intervention or clarity.

A similar pattern is evident in the practice of *ṣawm* (fasting). While the obligatory fasts of Ramadan serve as a central axis of Muslim ritual life, many believers choose to fast on Mondays and Fridays, on the six days of Shawwāl following 'Īd al-Fiṭr, on the 15th of Sha'bān, or during the first ten days of Muḥarram—especially the 9th and 10th, commemorating the Day of 'Āshūrā'. These voluntary fasts reflect motivations ranging from repentance and emulation of the Prophet to a desire for spiritual purification or divine reward. The same logic of ritual extension applies to almsgiving. Beyond the prescribed *zakāt*, many Muslims engage in voluntary charity (*Ṣadaqah*) as an act of compassion, gratitude, or ethical responsibility. Likewise, although *hajj* is obligatory only once in a lifetime for those who are able, many undertake the lesser pilgrimage (*'umrah*)—which can be performed throughout the year—as an expression of continued devotion and yearning for proximity to the God.

These extensional rituals, while rooted in the structure of the fundamental rituals, reveal the lived diversity of Muslim piety. They are animated by a range of motivations—devotional, ethical, or aspirational—and enacted in moods that vary from solemn introspection to communal celebration. Together, they illustrate how ritual life extends beyond legal obligation, forming a rich landscape of voluntary acts through which Muslims continuously engage, interpret, and embody their faith.

1.2.2 Rituals of Etiquette

Among the most pervasive yet often overlooked dimensions of Muslim ritual practice are the *rituals of etiquette*—everyday embodied behaviours through which religious consciousness is woven into the fabric of mundane life. These acts function as mechanisms for sacralizing the ordinary, thereby continually negotiating the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Rather than existing as isolated formal obligations, these rituals infuse routine activities with intentionality and spiritual resonance, illustrating how Islamic ritual extends into the domain of habitual conduct. The scope of these practices is vast, encompassing virtually every sphere of daily interaction—from personal grooming to interpersonal exchange, from bodily comportment to domestic hospitality. While a comprehensive account of this wide-ranging category lies beyond the scope of this study, certain domains—particularly those related to food and dress—emerge as especially salient in public discourse and serve as visible identity markers.

Dress, for instance, is governed by the principle of *ḥayā'* (modesty), which regulates not only the extent of bodily coverage but also the manner and context of

presentation¹⁴. Islamic norms differentiate expectations based on gender, relational context, and spatial setting. Men are generally required to cover the area between the navel and knees in all public circumstances, while women, when in the presence of non-maḥram (marriageable) men, are expected to cover the entire body except the face and hands. These prescriptions are more than sartorial codes; they are ritualised expressions of ethical comportment and religious devotion.

Similarly, eating and drinking are enveloped in ritual formulas that transform physiological need into acts of remembrance (*dhikr*). Meals typically begin with the invocation *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* (“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”) and conclude with *Al-ḥamdu lillāh alladhī aṭ‘amanī hādhā al-ṭa‘ām wa razaqanīhi min ghayri ḥawlin minnī wa lā quwwah* (“All praise is due to Allah who fed me this food and provided it without any strength or ability on my part”). These recitations encode not only theological meaning but cultivate a mood of mindful dependence upon divine provision.

Dietary regulations themselves are governed by the concepts of *ḥalāl* (permissible) and *ḥarām* (forbidden), with food serving as a critical site for enacting obedience to divine command. Forbidden items include carrion, pork, intoxicants, and any animal sacrificed in the name of other than Allah. In contrast, lawful meat must be slaughtered according to *sharī‘ah*-mandated rites: the act must be performed by a Muslim, accompanied by the invocation of God's name, and executed swiftly with a sharp blade to sever the jugular vein, carotid artery, windpipe, and esophagus—minimising suffering and ensuring ritual propriety. These etiquettes are not merely peripheral or habitual—they are ritualised enactments of the ethical and cosmological vision of Islam. Through them, everyday life becomes a field of spiritual practice, where gestures, words, and actions align with the deeper moods of reverence, humility, and gratitude. In this sense, rituals of etiquette exemplify how religious commitment is not confined to the formal domain of worship but is lived continuously in the most ordinary of acts, transforming them into meaningful engagements with the Divine.

1.2.3 Supplicatory Rituals

Supplicatory rituals form a core dimension of Muslim devotional life, allowing believers to express dependency on God, seek divine assistance, and reaffirm spiritual commitment. Unlike obligatory rituals, these practices are more flexible in form but deeply meaningful in content, animated by motives such as seeking divine mercy

¹⁴ Susan L. Douglass, “The Fabric of Muslim Daily Life,” in *Voices of Islam*, ed. Vincent J. Cornell, vol. 3 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 1–35.

(*rahmah*), forgiveness (*maghfirah*), nearness (*taqarrub*), and success in the hereafter (*falāh*).

The most central forms include **du‘ā’** (personal supplication), **dhikr** (remembrance of God), **ṣalawāt** (blessings upon the Prophet), **istighfār** (seeking forgiveness), and **tawbah** (repentance). A central theological premise underpinning supplicatory rituals is the belief in God as *musabbib al-asbāb* (the ultimate cause of all causes). This conviction engenders a mood of dependency, humility, and hope, and gives rise to the constant invocation of divine aid in matters both sacred and mundane. A well-known prophetic tradition affirms: “*Nothing can alter destiny except supplication.*” Consequently, even worldly requests—health, success, protection—are sanctified through *du‘ā’*, which itself is considered a form of *‘ibādah* (worship).

Although *du‘ā’* is not ritually fixed, it often follows a recommended etiquette—performed in a state of ablution, facing the *qibla*, with hands raised. It typically begins with praise of God and blessings upon the Prophet. Similarly, **dhikr** punctuates daily life, with specific invocations for waking, sleeping, eating, travelling, or facing hardship. These reinforce a mood of mindfulness, gratitude, and moral attentiveness.

Ṣalāh—invocations for the Prophet—serve both as spiritual expressions of love and as means of seeking divine favour. Istighfār and **tawbah** articulate remorse and the desire for moral renewal, often performed in solitude but also in communal settings, especially in Ṣūfī contexts. Collective recitations, or “weeping rituals,” enhance their affective intensity and communal resonance.

These rituals, though less formalized than obligatory acts, structure the emotional and moral life of believers. They blur the line between personal and communal, spontaneous and structured. More importantly, they illustrate how the *mood* of supplication (hope, humility, remorse, love) and the *motivation* (divine nearness, forgiveness, guidance) converge to form a deeply affective mode of ritual engagement. These practices, though often spontaneous or minimally structured, serve as key sites through which Muslims internalize their faith, articulate their existential dependence on God, and inhabit a moral and theological vision of the world.

1.2.4 Life Cycle Rituals

Life cycle rituals in Muslim societies mark key biological and social transitions in the human journey—from birth to reproduction to death—and serve as powerful sites where religious meanings are enacted, social roles redefined, and the sacred is brought into intimate relation with the rhythms of life. These rites of passage facilitate not only individual transformation but also reaffirm communal bonds and cosmological order. Their performance is often structured around a core set of Islamic theological

and legal prescriptions, but the symbolic forms they assume are deeply shaped by local cultural idioms.

Framed within the typology of *moods* and *motivations*, life cycle rituals are characterized by distinctive affective dispositions—joy, anxiety, reverence, mourning—and by motivations that range from fulfilling divine commandments to seeking blessings, purity, continuity, and spiritual closure. These rituals, while sometimes codified in Islamic legal discourse, often blend seamlessly with regional customs and ancestral traditions, revealing the adaptive capacities of Islamic ritual life. As Eickelman (1987)¹⁵ observes, while there are striking continuities in life cycle rituals across Muslim societies, local diversities are equally significant. For instance, in Egyptian villages along the Nile, women cross rivers and visit shrines to invoke fertility—rituals that symbolically and spatially mark a woman's transition to a new social role. In Morocco, similar practices echo this symbolic logic, while in Atjeh (Indonesia), elaborate visitations between families surrounding childbirth are accompanied by ritualized food exchanges and restrictions. In Java, life cycle rituals are timed according to a culturally specific calendar and are infused with a syncretic layering of Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and indigenous spirit traditions.

These examples illustrate how Muslim rites of passage integrate the universal structures of Islamic belief—such as the emphasis on purity (*tahārah*), divine will (*qadar*), and ethical accountability—with regionally distinct expressions of symbolism, space, and sequence. Whether in naming ceremonies (*'aqīqah*), marriage contracts (*nikāh*), circumcision (*khatn*), or funeral rites (*janāzah*), such rituals are not merely ceremonial; they encode theological worldviews, social obligations, and emotional intensities into performative structures. From a sociological perspective, life cycle rituals function as liminal spaces—thresholds where the individual is temporarily removed from ordinary social roles and reintegrated into society with a transformed identity. In these liminal moments, the moods induced—be it maternal hope, paternal pride, communal solidarity, or grief—become central to the ritual's symbolic efficacy. At the same time, the motivations behind these performances—ranging from divine obedience to social legitimacy—illustrate the multifaceted meanings attributed to such rites. In other words, life cycle rituals exemplify how the Islamic tradition, while offering a theological scaffolding, is continually reinterpreted through cultural practice. They reflect the interplay between the universal and the particular, the textual and the customary, and the personal and the communal.

2. Ecstatic rituals

Ecstatic rituals constitute a distinct genre of Muslim ritual life, defined by heightened emotional expressivity and performative spontaneity. These practices are typically

¹⁵ Dale F. Eickelman, "Rites of Passage: Muslim Rites," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 398–403.

marked by a mood of reverential intensity and are motivated by deep affective attachment to sacred figures—most notably, the Prophet Muhammad and revered saints (*awliyāʾ*). Performed not out of legal obligation but out of devotional fervour, ecstatic rituals offer insight into the phenomenological and symbolic dimensions of popular Islamic piety.

Among the most prominent of such rituals is the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid al-Nabī*), observed annually on the 12th of Rabiʿ al-Awwal in many Muslim societies. Known commonly as *Milād al-Nabī*, this commemorative event encompasses a wide range of activities: public processions, recitations of *mawlid* texts and *sīrah* (biographies), Qurʾanic passages, devotional poetry, charitable giving, *Ṣūfī dhikr* ceremonies, communal meals, and festive performances including singing and, in some contexts, dancing (Schussman, 1998)¹⁶. These acts, though varied in form, are united by a mood of celebratory veneration and collective affirmation of prophetic centrality.

The prominence of ecstatic rituals is particularly pronounced in communities where *submissive piety* forms the dominant religious ethos. Such communities often maintain deep devotional ties to local saints, viewing them not merely as historical figures but as spiritually potent intercessors whose presence endures at their tombs. Consequently, practices surrounding saint veneration—*ziyārah* (tomb visitation), *ḥaḍrah* (ritual chanting), and *ʿurs* (annual commemoration of a saint's death)—feature prominently across the Muslim world. Nadia Abu Zahra's ethnographic study of Sidi Ameer, a Tunisian village, offers a representative account of this ritual repertoire. She documents three primary modes of ecstatic ritual engagement: (1) *ziyārah*, a regular pilgrimage to the tomb of the saint; (2) *ḥaḍrah*, involving communal recitation of litanies and mystical hymns accompanied by rhythmic drumming; and (3) *ʿurs*, an annual festival marking the saint's spiritual union with the Divine, often referred to symbolically as his "wedding" (Abu Zahra, 1985). Such events typically feature devotional chanting, collective feasting, almsgiving, trade fairs, and ritual offerings. Similar ritual patterns are observed in other regions, such as *maqām* culture in the Arab world and *jaram* or *dargāh* culture in South Asia, including *nercha* festivals in Kerala.

Despite local variations, a recognizable ritual structure persists across these practices: visitation to the tomb, presentation of votive offerings or *niyāz* (gifts), invocation of the saint's intercession, and participation in communal rituals that blend spiritual and social functions. The offerings themselves—ranging from flowers to sacrificial animals—signify acts of devotion intended to draw divine favour through the saint's proximity to God. Underlying these rituals is a theological anthropology that views the *walī* as both spiritually elevated and cosmically active. As Munir D.

¹⁶ Aviva Schussman, "The Legitimacy and Nature of Mawlid al-Nabī: Analysis of a Fatwā," *Islamic Law and Society* 5, no. 2 (1998): 214–34.

Ahmed (1982)¹⁷ notes, believers often attribute to individual saints distinct spiritual capacities, shaping ritual expectations and modes of address at different *mazārs* or *dargāhs*. This belief not only reinforces attachment to specific sites but also sustains a symbolic economy in which human needs—healing, fertility, success, protection—are ritually negotiated through saintly mediation.

Studies by Hovannisian and Sabagh (1993)¹⁸, Mahmoud Ayoub (1993)¹⁹, Harold Barclay (1982)²⁰, and Carlo Caldarola (1982)²¹ confirm the persistence of these ecstatic ritual forms across geographic and cultural contexts. Despite theological contestation from reformist movements, such practices remain deeply rooted in the emotional and moral landscapes of many Muslim societies, illustrating how ritual performance often transcends normative textual frameworks to embody lived experiences of faith.

The category of ecstatic rituals are best understood not merely as peripheral or folkloric accretions but as dynamic expressions of *moods*—such as joy, awe, longing, and devotion—and *motivations* tied to divine proximity, saintly intercession, and communal solidarity. They exemplify the affective dimensions of Muslim ritual life and reveal how sacred authority is not only interpreted but also emotionally and bodily enacted across time and space.

3. Instrumental rituals

The third broad category of Muslim ritual practices comprises what may be termed **instrumental** or **therapeutic rituals**—rituals not necessarily performed to express religiosity in a normative sense, but rather to achieve specific, pragmatic outcomes. These include practices aimed at healing, protection, fertility, success, or averting harm, and are often described in anthropological literature as forms of “pragmatic religion,” “magic,” or “ritual technology.” Unlike the expressive rituals that are motivated by theological or ethical commitments and are often textually grounded, instrumental rituals are performed in response to existential vulnerabilities and uncertainties, frequently without direct reference to scriptural obligations or canonical forms.

Such rituals do not always operate within the doctrinal boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy. The motivations behind these practices are typically this-worldly and

¹⁷ Munir D. Ahmed, “Pakistan: The Dream of an Islamic State,” in *Religion and Societies in Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Carlo Caldarola (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 321–47.

¹⁸ Georges Sabagh and Richard G. Hovannisian, eds., *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, “Cult and Culture: Common Saints and Shrines in Middle Eastern Popular Piety,” in *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam*, ed. Georges Sabagh and Richard G. Hovannisian (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 103–15.

²⁰ Harold Barclay, *Islam in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

²¹ Carlo Caldarola, ed. *Religion and Societies in Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Carlo Caldarola (Berlin: Mouton, 1982)

immediate: curing illness, protecting against malevolent forces such as jinn or the evil eye, and ensuring favorable outcomes in marriage, livelihood, childbirth, or travel. As Imtiaz Ahmad²² (1984) notes, these rituals are often performed in secrecy and without the mediation of formal religious authorities—reflecting both a sense of marginality and a tension with normative religious values. Historically, this domain of ritual practice has been subject to critical scrutiny by classical scholars. Ibn Khaldūn²³, in his sociological analysis of Muslim society, distinguished between two types of magical operations: those involving active human manipulation of supernatural forces (e.g., conjuring jinn or invoking planetary powers), and those in which outcomes are believed to result from divine intervention or the soul's innate predisposition (*fiṭrah*). For Ibn Khaldūn, the former category constituted a form of *devotion other than to God*, and was thus antithetical to Islamic monotheism (Asatrian, 2003)²⁴. Nevertheless, his classification also reflects a keen awareness of the affective and functional motivations—*fear, need, hope, vulnerability*—that underlie these practices.

Among the most widespread examples of instrumental ritual are **amulets and talismans**, known variously as *ta'wīdh*, *ḥirz*, *tamīmah*, *hijāb*, or *naḥḥa*. These objects, often inscribed with Qur'anic verses or symbolic diagrams, are worn on the body or placed in homes and vehicles to ward off harm, illness, and misfortune²⁵. In South Asia, for instance, the *ta'wīdh*—a sealed cord or pouch containing a sacred inscription—is widely used among Muslims across class and education lines. While sometimes associated with *shirk* (idolatrous deviation) by reformist discourse, for many believers, the amulet represents a protective extension of divine power, mediated through symbolic material form. Closely related are **rituals of exorcism and spirit management**, performed in response to cases of possession or affliction believed to be caused by *jinn*, *shayāṭīn* (devils), or other occult forces. These rituals may involve the use of recitations, smoke, water, flower rituals, or physical actions such as shaking or beating, intended to expel the invading spirit. The persistence of such practices, particularly in rural or marginalized communities, reflects enduring cosmological beliefs in the permeability of the human body to supernatural forces.

The concept of the **evil eye** (*'ayn*) is another source of ritual anxiety, believed to transmit harm through envy and unintentional malice. The evil eye is seen as both ubiquitous and unpredictable—it may emanate from even close kin or strangers without conscious intent. Protective measures include the use of symbolic charms, ritual gestures, and talismans. Edward Westermarck's²⁶ (1933) ethnography of

²² Imtiaz Ahmad, *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1984).

²³ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 572–73.

²⁴ Mushegh Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult," *Iran and the Caucasus* 7 (2003): 73–123.

²⁵ David M. Hart, "Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery in Morocco: The Sociology of Evans Pritchard and the Problem of Professionalization," *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (1987): 183–93.

²⁶ Edward Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilization* (London: Macmillan, 1933).

Moroccan Muslims identifies the widespread use of amulets bearing the number five—such as five beans sewn into cloth—as a symbolic barrier against unseen harm. Harold Barclay²⁷ (1982) similarly notes the prevalence of these beliefs among Muslim communities in Egypt and Sudan, where rituals associated with children, livestock, and beauty are especially prone to such protective measures.

While such practices may diverge from textual norms, they reveal a ritual logic shaped by immediate affective needs. The *moods* that accompany them—fear, desperation, hope, anxiety—stand in contrast to the meditative or dutiful moods of expressive rituals. Yet they are no less structured by belief, nor are they devoid of symbolic meaning. These acts often operate within a semi-legitimate symbolic economy that draws selectively upon Qur’anic verses, prophetic traditions, and inherited cosmologies—though without necessarily appealing to formal religious sanction.

From a typological perspective, instrumental rituals occupy a liminal position between religion and custom, belief and utility, orthodoxy and cultural adaptation. They challenge simplistic binaries between “folk” and “official” Islam and invite a more textured understanding of ritual practice as a continuum of engagements with the sacred—ranging from the morally aspirational to the functionally expedient. In other words, instrumental or therapeutic rituals represent a significant, if often marginalized, component of Muslim ritual life. They are best understood not as distortions of “true” Islam, but as culturally embedded responses to existential conditions—ritualized efforts to assert control, seek protection, and restore balance in a world controlled by the God and inhabited by unpredictable forces. As such, they deepen our understanding of how rituals operate not only as expressions of belief but also as strategies for survival within a cosmologically charged universe.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a typological framework for understanding Muslim rituals that moves beyond the conventional binaries of “folk” versus “elite” Islam or “orthodox” versus “popular” practice. Drawing on Clifford Geertz’s concept of moods and motivations, the study demonstrated that Muslim rituals are not reducible to static legal categories or social classifications, but instead represent a dynamic interplay of theological intent, emotional disposition, cultural context, and existential need.

The threefold typology—expressive, ecstatic, and instrumental rituals—captures the spectrum of ritual practices across Muslim societies. Expressive rituals, both obligatory and non-obligatory, reflect direct acts of devotion rooted in Islamic scripture and theology. Ecstatic rituals reflect heightened emotional engagements,

²⁷ Harold Barclay, *Islam in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

often centered around saint veneration and collective performance. Instrumental rituals address the uncertainties of life through practices aimed at protection, healing, or material wellbeing. Each category is animated by distinct moods and motivations, but remains interconnected through a broader Islamic cosmology and ethical sensibility.

Despite the diversity of forms and functions, what unites these ritual practices is their orientation toward an Islamic worldview—a frame that sacralizes human life, moral intention, and cosmological order. Many of the rituals that have been dismissed in scholarship as "folk traditions" or cultural accretions are, in fact, deeply rooted in and symbolically resonant with the formal textual tradition. This typology thus challenges reductive readings of Muslim ritual life and reclaims the full breadth of Islamic religious expression as meaningful, structured, and deeply embedded in both doctrine and lived experience.

Bibliography

Abu Zahra, Nadia. *Sidi Ameer: A Tunisian Village*. St Antony's Middle East Monographs 15. London: Ithaca Press, 1982.

Ahmad, Imtiaz. *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1984.

Ahmed, Akbar S. "Introduction." In *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*, edited by Akbar S. Ahmed and David M. Hart, 1–15. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

Ahmed, Munir D. "Pakistan: The Dream of an Islamic State." In *Religion and Societies in Asia and the Middle East*, edited by Carlo Caldarola, 321–47. Berlin: Mouton, 1982.

Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Asatrian, Mushegh. "Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult." *Iran and the Caucasus* 7 (2003): 73–123.

Ayoub, Mahmoud M. "Cult and Culture: Common Saints and Shrines in Middle Eastern Popular Piety." In *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam*, edited by Georges Sabagh and Richard G. Hovannisian, 103–15. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

Barclay, Harold. *Islam in Africa*. New York: Praeger, 1982.

Denny, Frederick M. "Islamic Ritual: Perspectives and Theories." In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, edited by Richard C. Martin, 109–41. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985.

Douglass, Susan L. "The Fabric of Muslim Daily Life." In *Voices of Islam*, edited by Vincent J. Cornell, vol. 3, 1–35. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007.

Eickelman, Dale F. "Rites of Passage: Muslim Rites." In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, vol. 12, 398–403. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

el Zein, Abdul Hamid. "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 227–54.

Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Michael Lambek, 61–83. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.

Goldziher, Ignaz. *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*. Translated by Andras and Ruth Hamori. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Graham, William A. "Islam in the Mirror of Ritual." In *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, edited by Gerald Hawting, 349–69. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

Hart, David M. "Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery in Morocco: The Sociology of Evans Pritchard and the Problem of Professionalization." *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (1987): 183–93.

Ibn Khaldūn. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Leach, Edmund R. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: Athlone Press, 1964.

McLoughlin, Sean. "Ritual." In *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, edited by Robert A. Segal, 317–33. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Messick, Brinkley. "Indexing the Self: Intent and Expression in Islamic Legal Acts." *Islamic Law and Society* 8, no. 2 (2001): 151–78.

Muhaimin, A. G. *The Islamic Tradition of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat among Javanese Muslims*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 1995.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Life and Thought*. Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

Powers, Paul R. "Interiors, Intentions, and the 'Spirituality' of Islamic Ritual Practice." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 425–59.

Rippin, Andrew. *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Vol. 1. The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices. London: Routledge, 1990.

Sabagh, Georges, and Richard G. Hovannisian, eds. *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

Schieffelin, Edward L. "Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality." *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 4 (1985): 707–24.

Schussman, Aviva. "The Legitimacy and Nature of Mawlid al-Nabī: Analysis of a Fatwā." *Islamic Law and Society* 5, no. 2 (1998): 214–34.