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## An Ethnographic Account of the Birth, Marriage, and Death Rituals among the Muslims of Kashmir

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### Abstract

Islam has governed the operation of Muslim society in Kashmir, regardless of the geopolitical situation in the region. Muslims regard birth and death as transitions between two distinct lives, and marriage as a way of preserving humanity until the day of judgement. Nonetheless, the Kashmir valley's diversity of identities and traditions demonstrates the spread of cultural components within and across distinct ethnic groupings. One example is the rites of passage practiced by Muslims in this Himalayan region, who, in defiance of Islam's precepts, have included a variety of components into their birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, rendering them highly fascinating and unusual. Thus, this essay provides an in-depth examination of these facets of Kashmiri Muslims via an anthropological lens to comprehend both continuity and change from an Islamic perspective.

Keywords: Ethnography, Himalayas, Islam, Kashmiri Muslims, Rites of Passage

### Introduction

Kashmir is admired for its topographic exquisiteness and cultural legacy with diversified and captivating cultural complexes. The Kashmir valley's culture blends various subcultures with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. When combined with different religious institutions, these unique Kashmiri cultural entities form an exceptional endemic cultural whole called *Kashmiriyat*.

Surrounded by Pir Panjal and Himalayan ranges from the southwest and northeastern directions respectively, the boat-shaped valley of Kashmir forms the northernmost region of India. Originally settled during the Neolithic period (Bandey 2009), the land has witnessed different ethnicities and religions because of its geography. Being a hub of Hinduism and Buddhism, it was not until the 14th century when Shah Mir became the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir (Asimov and Bosworth 1999) and incorporated elements of Islamic culture in the region. For the next four centuries, the valley was ruled by different Muslim rulers, including Mughals and Afghans, and ultimately fell to the Sikhs in 1819 under the leadership of Ranjit Singh (The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Karachi to Kotayam 1908). After winning the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1846, the British sold the land to Raja Gulab Singh, thus becoming the first ruler of the newly established state of Jammu and Kashmir. The valley was ruled by *Dogras* for the next century until Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir at the time, signed the instrument of accession and joined the dominion of India in 1947 (Stein 1998). Since then, Kashmir has been a center of a dispute between India, Pakistan, and China, and continues to be in a state of war. According to the 1941 census, the Kashmir valley had approximately a 5 percent Hindu population, which ultimately decreased to 1.84 percent, followed by a 0.8 percent Sikh population and a 0.11 percent Buddhist population, according to the 2011 census, due to the armed conflict that broke out in the valley in 1989.

The presence of multiple ethnicities in the region has led to the diffusion of cultural traits among different religious groups. Before the 1990s, Hindus and Muslims lived in a synchronous cultural system (Khanday 2019) that was different than in mainland India and in the Muslim-dominated country of Pakistan. Muslims adopted various traits from Hindu brethren which are still persistent in the region. More specifically, in the rituals of birth, marriage, and death among Muslims, one finds the cultural elements of Pundits (local name for Kashmiri Hindus).

Kashmiris are exceptionally sociable. They often adhere to traditional beliefs, which means one can bet on traditional clothing, customs, dishes, and folklore, among other things, that are integral to the day. However, what occurs at less-publicized celebrations? Moments of residential significance that occur in conjunction with the ceremonial threshold crossing. Is there a stipulation? What specific rites of passage do birth, marriage, and death entail?

### **Academic Research into Islam**

Today, Muslims residing in Asia account for over 60% of the world's total Muslim population (Hefner 2003). Moreover, India has the second highest Muslim population of any Asian country, with around 178 million Muslims counted in the 2011 census. This covers around 68.31% of the Muslim population in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Muslims in northern India hail from a variety of national origins; the territory's first Muslim settlers came from Central and East Asian countries, the region's original non-Muslim inhabitants converted to Islam, and the Muslims who moved to the region later from neighboring nations. This mingling of ideas and beliefs has resulted in belief systems that stand in stark contrast to those ruled by Islam. This Muslim population, regardless of ethnicity, is the subject of this investigation.

Since the 1950s, the academic study of religion as a social phenomenon has been accomplished throughout South Asia, notably India. Islam was only absorbed into India's

established legacy of ceremonial and theological studies following the country's independence from the British (Ahmad 1972; Madan 1995). The widespread neglect of anthropological research on Islamic theology in India was largely due to their concern with the caste system and other facets of Indian culture during this period. Apart from a few monographs, such as Leela Dube (1969), there was little academic work on Muslims in India. Not until Imtiyaz Ahmad's works did the situation somewhat improve. In the 1970s and 1980s, he compiled papers on rites of passage, rituals, beliefs, and social structures, which finally led to the conviction that Islam is not a religion based on textual reflections. Furthermore, the concept of the "textual" is fluid, as Roy (2005) notes that historians investigating Islam in India have uncovered a plethora of evidence demonstrating that Muslims in India engaged in a range of behaviors.

There have been a few studies on Islamic lifecycle rites, or some components of them, as they are practiced in northern India, particularly the Kashmir region (Kochak 2016; Khanday 2019). Despite these and other pertinent publications, we lack a thorough examination of Islamic lifecycle rites as they are practiced in this Himalayan valley. As such, we want to contribute to such research through this article. Unlike previous research in the region, which has concentrated on a single ritual, we seek to provide an anthropological description of all the significant rites linked with a person born and raised in the Kashmiri Muslim community.

### **Methodologies**

This study takes a qualitative approach. The researchers gathered data through observation and in-depth interviews. The observations of these activities were made before, during, and following the rites described. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with individuals drawn from purposive samples. The samples were drawn from a variety of geographical locations around the Kashmir valley to provide a comprehensive perspective on rites of passage. The data was examined using suitable qualitative data analysis techniques, including data reduction, data visualization, and conclusion drafting.

### **Rituals of Birth**

Islamic law confers rights on the mother and her unborn child prior to conception. It begins with the notion of legitimate union and proper upbringing of the child. When a woman becomes pregnant, she is elevated in rank according to Islamic theology as the Quran declares, "Respect the womb that carried you" (4:1). With such a jubilant state comes the awareness of the perils of evil to the mother's soul and the fetus in the womb. Islam teaches several recitations for warding off evil, yet we see a plethora of cultural constructs for the same practice across the world. Wearing an iron bangle or carrying an iron knife is a crucial practice for pregnant women in the Kashmir valley because it is thought to protect the mother and her child from superstitious evil. Additionally, pregnant women are not permitted to leave their rooms during eclipses, during the night, or while someone of questionable character is around. These features are also common among the valley's other religious communities and have a major cultural significance. While many methods of integrating a baby into society are common across countries and religious identities, Kashmiri Muslims have developed their own traditional components blended with Islamic ceremonies for welcoming the newly born as a community member.

It is advised to whisper the *Adhan* into the baby's right ear and the *Takebeer* into the left ear immediately after delivery (the *Adhan* is the Muslim call to prayer, and *Takebeer* is the Islamic name for the formal proclamation clause "Allahu Akbar"). The words chanted contain Allah's name and the name of the prophet Muhammad. These proclamations serve as the axis around which a Muslim's life revolves, which explains their symbolic significance at birth. Generally, this should be done by the baby's father, but in the Kashmiri valley, it is customary to wait for someone of recognized excellent character to offer the *Adhan*, since it is believed that the baby inherits the characteristics of the one who gives it. However, according to Islamic beliefs, it is via *Tebneek* that the excellent qualities of the one who does this are passed to the child. *Tebneek* is performed in accordance with the *Adhan*, in which a person of good character eats a date or another sweet item and rubs the softened date over the newborn's lips and upper palate. During our fieldwork, we discovered that there is a cultural component to this religious procedure, which entails inviting the person who performs the *Adhan* and *Tebneek* to a feast, whether that individual is related to or known to the parents. Since this study was conducted through participant observation, one of the authors (U. Dar) performed this ceremony and afterwards was invited to a feast by the family.

If the woman gives birth in a hospital, she and the infant generally return to the mother's original home for at least two to three months. This practice is widespread in the valley, and in most cases, the woman also to her family home approximately two months prior to the delivery. This is believed to give both beings much-needed rest. Furthermore, during the period of discharge of fluids, a woman is not permitted to pray, fast, or touch the Quran. She may, however, easily blend in with regular home activities, as there are no limitations on such things. Just as the mother carries iron objects, such as a dagger, to fend off evil, newborns in the valley are typically adorned with an iron bangle, regardless of sex, to protect them from evil. Additionally, many Kashmiris place an amulet called *Taweez* around the baby's neck, which contains Quranic verses and occasionally additional prayers. Even though Islam categorically bans such acts, their prevalence on the subcontinent across all major faiths has opened the path for them to spread among Kashmir's Muslims as well.

Circumcision is another procedure that is regarded as an Islamic requirement by Muslims worldwide. Male children are circumcised in the valley, in accordance with Islamic beliefs, and it is now regarded more of a cultural occurrence in the region. Since there is not a defined age for this practice, Muslims in Kashmir typically circumcise their children before the age of five. In this study, the youngest age for circumcision was three days and the oldest age was four years. Locally, it is referred to as *Khutna*, and on such occasions, womenfolk perform traditional songs, while some households also host a modest feast. On such occasions, presents are also exchanged. Following this rite comes the vital task of naming a child. In this regard, Muhammad said, "On the day of resurrection, you will be called by your own name and that of your father, so select wisely" (Abu Dawood). The infant may be named on the day of birth, on the third day, or on or after the seventh day. Naming is a contentious issue in Kashmir, as everyone has a say. Numerous factors are considered while naming a child, including the name's influence on the child's upbringing, its simplicity of pronunciation, and the compatibility with the surname. Children are named in a variety of ways, the most common of which are as follows: first name, followed by father's name, and then last name, or a title of name such as Muhammad, Abdul, Ghulam, etc., followed by the first name, and finally the

last name in the case of a baby male. When a female child is born, she is typically given a name followed by either her father's name or suffixes such as Bano, Akhter, Bi, Begum, or her surname.

The woman gets visited by all her relatives and friends throughout her stay in the biological home. Additionally, there is a practice called *Pyaav beth gasun*, in which the in-laws and their relatives send sweets and presents for the mother and infant following the delivery. To express gratitude to the almighty, the family must sacrifice two sheep in the event of a male and one sheep in the case of a girl to fulfil the obligation of *Aqiqah*. When an animal is slaughtered, it is either distributed to close relatives or the relatives are invited to a feast where everyone eats and blesses the mother and her child. *Aqiqah* is typically performed in the Kashmir valley concurrently with the child's hair being shaved. This is regarded as a tradition from Muhammad and is followed by Muslims worldwide. Traditionally, the newborn's scalp hair that has developed throughout pregnancy is shaved during the first seven days of life. Locally referred to as *Zar Kaasin*, this job is performed by numerous families who bring their children and a barber to one of the sacred places. On such occasions, folk songs are sung, and in certain cases, the child's hair is weighed, and a corresponding quantity of silver is presented to charity.

As a result of the preceding discussion, newly born Muslim infants are endowed with a variety of Islamic rights. These rights must be upheld via the duties placed on the parents and the community to which the newborn belongs. Along with religious components, the Muslims of Kashmir have adopted a variety of birth rituals from other cultures. This variability results in the emergence of distinct traditional components that require anthropological documentation.

## Rituals of Marriage

### *Events Leading to Marriage*

From a cultural perspective, the institution of marriage is one of the most diverse social institutions among Muslims. For Muslims, marriage is an obligation. Muhammad says, "The best people of my nation are those who get married and have chosen their wives, and the worst people of my nation are those who have kept away from marriage and are passing their lives as bachelors" (Nuri 1987). Islamic marriage is meant to take place according to Islamic (*Shari'ah*) rules, with the least interference from conventional customs. However, most Kashmiri Muslim marriages contain customs and rituals in addition to those mandated by Islam and are practiced religiously by both families. This combination of Islamic law with Kashmiri cultural components results in a highly polished affair and the greatest illustration of cultural synchronization.

In the Kashmiri language, marriage is referred to as *Khander*. The actual marriage ceremony is preceded by a series of activities, beginning with the identification of a good match for the prospective bride (locally referred to as *Maharein*, meaning "queen") and groom (called *Maharaz*, meaning "king"). Close relatives are preferred for a good match since both prospective mates are well-known to the families, increasing the likelihood of a healthy marriage. If no potential bride or groom is discovered within the family, the families use the services of a *Manzimyor* (meaning, "middleman"), who, with a greater awareness of indigenous

cultures, years of experience, and a broader network of friends, assists in locating a good match.

Before arriving at a final decision, both families inquire about each other through local contacts and, when satisfied, a meeting (locally known as *Vichni Gasun*) is arranged either at a public place, like a restaurant, or at the girl's house where the prospective partners can see and talk to each other. If satisfied, the boy's family, along with some elder relatives, visit the prospective bride's house with gifts of gold, clothes, cash, and sweets. With the ritual of *Khuda Rasool* (local for the oath taken on the name of Allah and Prophet Muhammad), the boy's family can claim the girl as their own now. Tea is presented to the guests and the boy's mother puts cash or gold in the empty cup as a gift to the girl. This is called *pyalas travun* (filling of the cup). Since it is not permissible for the boy to be part of this ceremony, the girl's family sends a vessel full of cooked chicken (*koker daeg*) with a specially prepared bread for their future son-in-law as a token of love. The chicken and bread are distributed by the boy's family among their relatives, and sweets are sent to the girl's family in reciprocation. This whole ceremony of validation of the bond is known as *Nishani* or *Pachil*—colloquially known as the engagement. After a few days or weeks, the girl's family is also invited for a feast, which is known as *Saatnaam*. There are some post-engagement rituals in which both the families send gifts to each other on some special occasions, such as Eid (*Eid Bogh*), or during the month of Ramadhan (*Roz Kushada*). After this, the betrothal is complete.

When one examines Islamic teaching on pre-marriage rites, it becomes clear that Kashmiri Muslim marriage has several cultural innovations. According to Islamic law, a man may propose to a girl through anybody, and if both parties agree, they should go immediately to the marriage ceremony. Thus, these rites are unique to the Kashmiri setting and are mistakenly considered to be part of Islamic law when they are not.

#### *Ceremony of Marriage*

After the first step is completed, a small gathering is held at the girl's house in the presence of a few elders from both families to determine an auspicious day for the marriage ceremony. Dates are determined based on a variety of variables. Due to local beliefs, the Islamic months of Ramadhan and Muharram are avoided, although there are no such prohibitions in Islamic texts. November to February, when many weddings take place in other areas of India, is avoided in Kashmir due to the severe winters. Additionally, planting and harvesting seasons are avoided, as the valley's majority of people is reliant on agriculture and horticulture. Thus, the time between late July and late October is when most marriages take place in Kashmir. After a date is chosen for the wedding, preparations begin immediately. Both families begin purchasing jewelry and clothes (*wardan*), as well as other necessary items. As the wedding day approaches, relatives and friends are invited via invitation cards. Verbal invites are discouraged, as it is regarded as an insult not to send a card. Locally, this procedure of inviting close and dear is referred to as *Dapni* or *Prichni gasun*.

The ceremony begins with the *Malmaenz* rite, during which the bride's hair is let down (*Mas Travun*) and greased by old women. After oiling the bride's hair, it is braided into small braids (*waankh*), with each braid wrapped in a different color ribbon. Additionally, the bride is dressed in artificial jewelry made of inexpensive materials. The bride's elder brother applies a tiny quantity of ghee on her hair. This ceremony is performed to the accompaniment of

popular Kashmiri wedding songs and concludes with the braids being untied (*Mas Muchrawun*). Following the untying of her hair, the ribbons and jewels are distributed to the women present.

This ritual is also known as *Haldi* or *Mayun* in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. The next night, the night before the Nikah ceremony, there is a ritual in which henna is applied to the bride's hands and feet, while a small quantity is put to the groom's little finger on his right hand. *Maenzraat* is the name given to this night in Kashmir (*Maenz* meaning "henna" and *raat* meaning "night"). It is referred to as *Mehandiraat* in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. This evening, young girls from the groom's family visit the girl's residence and provide the henna for the bride to apply. After applying henna to the groom's little finger, his relatives and friends wrap it in cash notes of various denominations. Historically, paper was used in place of monetary notes. Throughout the night, women perform traditional folk and wedding songs (*wammun*) at both households and are presented with little packets of henna and candy at the conclusion. Nowadays, young adults play Bollywood music throughout the *mehandiraat's* late hours, and young people dance throughout the event. In recent years, a new tradition has developed in which a cake of varying size and quality is cut in both households and given among the relatives present. For some time now, a new tradition has developed in which the groom delivers the bride's cake together with the henna on *Mehandiraat* itself. Meanwhile, specialist Kashmiri cooks (called locally as *Waaqza*) are hard at work preparing a range of dishes for the next day.

On the morning of the wedding ceremony, the bride is required to take a bath (*aab sberun*) and pray to the Almighty for a better post-marriage life. Additionally, the groom gets his hair trimmed. The morning is spent preparing for the afternoon feast that will be served to the locals and relatives. As part of the *Yini Wol* tradition, both families host a feast (locally referred to as *Waaqwan*) based on their economic standing. The chefs offer a variety of meals to the visitors, who dine on a special copper plate in groups of four. Each house may host between 50 and 600 guests for lunch, and occasionally more. Mutton and chicken, as well as a variety of vegetables, are favored for this feast, which has a high cultural importance. It is a unique event at which everyone gathers to bless the couple with prayers, gold and cash presents, and a variety of other things. Each family member is allocated a specific function and is required to participate throughout the ceremony. One of the duties assigned to an individual with a good educational background is to keep record of presents. It is critical for a family to know who the gifts come from so that they can return the present in a similar manner when their turn comes. It is thought that financially blessing the bride/groom can assist the family in covering the costs of the marriage, indicating the communal aspects. After lunch, the groom's family prepares to see the bride's family. Previously, about 200 or more people from the groom's end would accompany him, but this tendency has shifted recently, with only the closest three or seven accompanying him. The bride is prepared for her departure at this time.

Usually at night, the groom departs with his companions to accept his wife. He is bid farewell with traditional melodies and is greeted with great reverence upon his arrival at his future in-laws' house. Normally, his future mother-in-law greets him with milk and presents him with a golden ring as a sign of affection. Other relatives of the girl also present the *Maharaz* with gold and cash. The groom may wear either a western-style suit with a traditional turban (*dastar*) or a traditional sherwani (similar to the *pathani* outfit) with the turban. Then, in the presence of a Muslim cleric, the Nikah ceremony takes place, in which a marriage contract is

formed between the prospective spouses, either in the presence of the bride (*asaaltan*) or in the presence of the *wali* (on behalf of the bride) and other witnesses (*wakaltan*). Bride money (*Mehr*) is a contractual obligation between the groom and the bride, and he promises to pay the agreed-upon amount. This money is provided exclusively to the bride, and she may spend it anyway she wishes. After all requirements are satisfied, the *Al-Ijab Wal-Qabool* (offer and acceptance) ceremony occurs, during which the *wali* or cleric gives the bride to the groom, who subsequently accepts. As part of *Al-Ijab*, the *wali* or cleric may address the groom with the following: “I give you my daughter/the girl in marriage in line with Islamic Shari’ah in the presence of the witnesses present with the *mehr* agreed upon. And Allah is the most reliable witness.” “I accept,” the soon-to-be spouse responds. This is repeated three times. The bride is also needed to consent. The bond (*Nikah*) is complete with this mutual consent.

The hosts treat the groom and his guests to a sumptuous and magnificent feast. Locally, this feast is referred to as *Maharaz Saal* (Feast for the King). After the meal, the bride’s parents offer her an emotional farewell (locally known as *Rukhsati*), and she joins her husband at his new house (*Waeriv*), where she either lives permanently with her spouse or the pair can move after a period of time to a new place of their own. The bride is clothed in either traditional Kashmiri attire (*pheran*) or a contemporary dress code, often a *lehnga*, as she departs for her new home. The veil is then placed over her, to be raised by her mother-in-law in front of other local women and relatives. This is locally referred to as *Mubar Tullun* (lifting of the veil). The bride presents some gifts to her mother-in-law, which the mother-in-law graciously returns. Typically, a close friend of the bride or her foster mother would accompany her for a few days until the new family member became familiar with her new relatives. Certain households adhere to the Islamic tradition of giving *Walima* (feast). In this scenario, the groom’s family does not serve lunch on the day of the wedding; instead, they gather their relatives and neighbors, as well as the bride’s relatives, and prepare a large feast for everybody. This habit is based on the teachings of Muhammad and is spreading throughout the Kashmir valley. This tradition concludes the marriage process among Kashmir’s Muslims and is followed by a few ceremonies.

When viewed through a religious lens, the Kashmiri marriage stands in stark contrast to the one provided by Islam. *Al-Ijab Wal-Qabool* is the first step of Islamic marriage, followed by *Mehr*, and lastly *Walima*. Indeed, Islam forbids extravagant wedding celebrations and gender mingling. However, given the valley’s traditional structure, we find a great deal of innovation and spread of other cultural components in Kashmiri Muslims’ rites. This is also demonstrated by the fact that Islam makes no mention of post-marriage ceremonies, but in the next part, we will examine the components that prepared the way for the region’s marriage pattern.

#### *Post-Marriage Rituals*

A few days after the bride leaves her parental home, her family pay her a visit to check on her well-being. This practice is referred known locally as *Khabar Heth*. Additionally, she and her in-laws get gifts in the form of cash, sweets, and fruits. The bride’s parents invite their in-laws and the newlyweds to a special feast called *Phiri Saal*, which is also attended by the groom’s closest relatives. Guests are greeted with elegance and the highest level of hospitality. Afterwards, the groom’s family members depart, leaving the pair alone for around seven days. Following this time, the pair, together with the bride’s family members, return to their home



with presents and dowry (if demanded by the groom's family and accepted by the bride's). The new daughter-in-law is expected to give her in-laws presents. The mother-in-law receives jewelry or clothing, locally referred to as *Hash Mond* (Hash here translates as mother-in-law), while her sister-in-law receives presents referred to as *Zom Dej*. Additionally, sweets and bread are included in the presents that are subsequently divided among the family. Now that the bride, who was previously forbidden from working or performing household duties, is permitted to participate in the everyday lives of her new family, she may restart her life with a new identity in a new social environment.

### Death Rituals

Rituals pertaining to death differ across cultures and are usually associated with religion (Chachkes and Jennings 1994). There are set guidelines for the rituals from birth to death in Islam, but the historical background and the process of acculturation play an important role in deviation from pre-set rules. Kashmir, with a fairly heterogeneous culture, has paved way for rituals that are associated with different religious groups, thereby giving rise to rituals that are different from the Muslims in other regions. Although social practices associated with the death of a member have been dealt, there is a lack of an ethnographic account of the same. So, the purpose of this section is to describe in detail every phase of this ritual.

When a person is on their death bed, s/he is laid in the direction towards Mecca i.e., *qibla* and to ease the suffering of the dying person, fellow Muslims are encouraged to support by offering him or her some water to drink or by reciting the *shahada* (an Islamic oath, one of the five pillars of Islam) and part of the Adhan; it reads: "I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God") and Quranic chapters and prayers. It is considered as *sunnah* of the prophet to encourage the dying person to imitate the *shahada* to reassure that these become her or his last words.

When a person dies among the Kashmiri Muslims, his/her eyes are closed and a white cloth is fastened around the head to tie up the jaw. Later, the body is undressed and wrapped in a clean white cloth and the limbs are straightened along with the body. Then, the family members and friends are allowed to take one last look at the deceased's face, and in a short span of time, the body is prepared for ritual ablution (*Ghusl*), shrouding (*Kafan*), and burial (*Dafan*). Announcements of the death are made over the mosque loudspeakers and people far away are informed via mass media to take part in the *Salat-al-Janaza* (Funeral Prayer) and condolences. *Ghusl*, *Kafan*, *Salat-al-Janaza*, and *Dafan* are considered as *Fard-eKkijaya* (collective obligation) of the Muslims and, if these obligations are fulfilled by many, then others can be excused from the duties. In the proceeding sections of this paper, we will take an elaborate look at all the three obligations of the Muslim community on the dead person.

#### Death and Burial Preparations

Time spent between death and burial should be kept to a minimum; once a person has died, his or her body should be placed in the ground as quickly as possible. Immediately after the death, the corpse is washed, the shroud is used, the funeral prayer is spoken, and the burial is carried out.

#### Ritual Purification (*Ghusl*)

Once the body is ready for *Ghusl*, it is laid on a platform made of wood or aluminum, set for this specific purpose, and is shared by all the community members. The platform is fumigated with scent to provide pleasant aromas, which is considered a tradition from Muhammad. Private parts of the deceased are then covered with a cloth and ritual purification begins from cleaning the private parts. Ritual cleansing, in practice, consists of washing the anus and genitals; the *Istinja*, the *Wudu*, and the washing of the whole corpse; the *Ghusl*. Private parts are washed three times followed by *Wudu*, that is performed by wiping of the mouth and nose with clean cloth or cotton swabs or fingers; washing of the face and arms to the elbow thrice; wiping the head; and finally washing of the feet. The *Ghusl* is done with water and soap, every time progressing from the ventral side to the back and from the head to the toes. This is done an odd number of times, usually thrice. Finally, scented water is poured all over the body and it is dried with a clean towel for shrouding.

While washing the body, it is placed in a way that the dead person is facing *Ka'abah*. Usually, the close kin of the deceased perform the last washing, and if nobody is available, then there are some members in the community who undertake the task. The number of washers range from 3–4 and they must be of the same sex as the deceased. Even a husband or a wife is not allowed to wash his/her partner's body. Furthermore, arrangements of the materials necessary for the *Ghusl* is provided by Mosque organizations. One aspect specific to the Kashmir valley is an aluminum pot used for warming water on dried grass because the dead body is not washed with cold water.

#### Shrouding (*Kafan*)

Shrouding the deceased is another communal responsibility of the Muslim community. Prior to being placed in the grave, the entire corpse, including the head, should be covered with a shroud (*Kafan*). In Kashmir, it is considered good if the deceased that s/he purchases the *Kafan* for herself/himself when alive, and duty is accorded to the children to use the same shroud. *Kafan* is mostly a simple white cloth and varies from men to women. For a man, a burial shroud comprises of a shirt-like covering for the body, a winding that encircles the body from head to toe, and an outer winding. A woman needs an additional cloth to wind around her head, as well as one to wind around her chest, meaning that two additional fabrics are added. The shrouds are arranged in order of size, with the largest one on the bottom so that they can be wrapped over the deceased body to accommodate its size. After wrapping the right side of the body, the left side is wrapped in the tiniest layer of fabric following the same technique. Once the *Kafan* is securely tied with a few strips of fabric, the body is ready to be taken for the funeral prayers.

#### Salat al-Janaza

After ritual purification and shrouding of the body, it is put inside the coffin (*Taboot*). Coffins used to be made from pine wood, but gradually wooden coffins have been replaced with aluminum ones. Coffins are shared by the community, and they are the property of local mosques. Since the dead body is thought to be alive in the next world, it is gently put inside the *Taboot* gently. This stage is considered to be extremely painful. A large cloth, with Quranic verses sewn on it, is wrapped on the upper side of the coffin and it is carried by the closest kith and kin of the deceased to a place set specific for funeral prayer. In Kashmir valley, the funeral place varies, as some prefer to pray *Salat-al-Janaza* at the premises of the deceased

person, while the majority prefer the prayer to be said either at the graveyard or somewhere near to the graveyard. In the case of our respondents, funeral prayers were held at the graveyard compound.

#### Institution of Funeral Funds

During our fieldwork, we observed that immediately following the death, a few community members chosen by the local mosque collect funds from each household, ranging between 100 and 500 rupees. This money is given either to the nearest kin of the deceased to assist with necessary arrangements during the period of mourning, or to a community kitchen that is established at the deceased's residence to provide food for the guests for three to four days. Additionally, if the family is impoverished, these funds are used to purchase necessary burial items, such as a shroud. If the deceased owed any money, that debt is also settled through these funeral funds. After the funeral obligation is fulfilled at the community level, we move on to the next obligation, which is burial.

#### Burial

The burial practices of Muslims in the Kashmir valley and those observed in other Islamic nations bear remarkable resemblance. These include the practice of walking the corpse to the burial location, the way in which the corpse is placed in the grave, and the habit of remaining at the cemetery for a period of time following the interment.

#### Place of Burial

A deceased individual is often buried at the graveyard that many of these families own. In the instance of our respondents, they had acquired the plot of land in the local graveyard around 50 years ago and had been exclusively burying their deceased there. Each town has a single communal graveyard where only unidentified or foreign dead corpses are interred. Additionally, it is preferred that each individual arranges for his or her own death by acquiring property for a cemetery building. Locally referred to as *Maqbar*, the graveyard is jointly maintained by all families without the intervention of mosque committees or other village/community groups. In metropolitan areas, such as Srinagar, one may observe the beginnings of a growing professionalization of the funeral rite. This has resulted in the hiring of professional washers and those who build graves for a fee.

#### Grave Construction and Interment

Islamic law requires that a burial take place as soon as possible after death, but no later than the next day. Keeping this in mind, all deceased subjects in this research were buried within 5–8 hours of death. In Kashmir, it is customary to bury only one deceased person in a rectangular grave of six feet in length, three feet in breadth, and around six feet in depth. The body is placed in the grave towards Qibla on its right side. A kind of cavity is prevalent in the grave where the shrouded corpse is placed. The cavity is commonly referred to as *Lahd* and is excavated on the pit's qibla side. To prevent the soil from falling over the person, the niche is sealed, preferably with *Potri Kani* sandstone. Prior to filling the grave, present individuals toss handfuls of soil into it, either directly upon the body or against the slats that prevent the body from being completely covered in earth. Following that, a group of men fill the grave, with everyone chanting Quranic verses for the deceased. A small mound is piled on the location to

denote the burial, and two stones are placed in the direction of the head and feet. Later, a stone slab with the deceased's information is built near the head. However, this is not a widespread practice throughout the valley.

#### Attendance of Women at Interment

Generally, men wash a deceased man's body, while women wash a dead woman's body. Regardless of the deceased's sex, however, putting the corpse in the grave is considered a man's responsibility. According to most people questioned for this ethnographic account, women are not permitted to join in the funeral procession and their presence at the burial is undesirable. They explained their position by stating that Islam forbids women from visiting graveyards. However, there were times when women visited the graves of their dear ones, which was always disapproved by community members.

#### Waiting at the Graveside and the *Talqin*

Numerous Islamic traditions refer to the presence of two angels, *Munkar* and *Nakir*, to the deceased after he or she is buried, who interrogate the departed about their religion. Islamic scholars disagree on whether, in light of the angels' interrogation, the *Talqin*, the teaching of the Islamic faith's fundamental doctrines at the cemetery, should take place immediately following the interment. According to the local imam (head of the mosque), reading sura Fatiha (1), suras beginning with Qul (112–114), and sura YaSin (36) on this day assists the departed in preparing for the angels' inquiry. Thus, the imam, together with the deceased's family and friends, remain until the grave is entirely filled and then pray collectively and individually for the departed soul before proceeding to the deceased's home for condolences.

#### Condolences and Mourning

According to Islamic law, one should express condolences to the bereaved (*Ta'ziyah*) just once, at the time of the funeral or, if unable to attend the funeral, at the earliest possible opportunity. Mourning entails abstaining from ostentatious clothing, eyeliner, perfume, jewelry, and similar adornments for four months and ten days in the case of the deceased's widow, and three days in the case of other relatives. The grieving time for a widow is as long as the *Idda*, the legally mandated period during which a widow or divorcee is not permitted to remarry. In the Kashmir valley, when the local Muslim community learns of a death, they congregate at the deceased's home to give their condolences. The time of grieving and the way the bereaved copes with their loss differed from person to person. Some people opt to stay at home for a few days, while others abstain from celebrations for a whole year. Typically, families and community people pay a three- or four-day visit to the bereaved. During this time, the bereaved family abstains from cooking and home chores. Everything is taken care of by the established committees, and on the fourth day, depending on the school of thought, the bereaved family either holds a special function called *Chabarum* in which food is distributed to all relatives and community members, or the bereaved family resumes their normal activities, thereby concluding the mourning period. In the case of those who follow *Chabarum*, they also observe similar feasts on the 15th and 40th days after death, during which they recite the Quran and other prayers in the presence of the mosque's imam, known as *Esale Sawab* and *Khatam Sharif*. Additionally, relatives visit the deceased's home on major events, such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha, as well as his or her cemetery on Fridays, Eids, and other significant

days. Rites of separation are the most prominent in funeral rites as the deceased is separated physically from the other members of the society.

### Conclusions

With this study, we sought to depict the rites connected to birth, marriage, and death among the Kashmiri Muslims. Focusing on activities around these rites of passage among the participants has led to the conclusion that the Muslims in Kashmir choose their relationship with the rituals of initiation and separation in line with the cultural background and the Islamic law. In this specific setting, they remain a community with a very strong religious identity and sense of belonging to the Islamic law, but the incorporation of cultural and ethnic components in these major ceremonies is fairly evident. Also, we infer that the rituals of birth, marriage, and death have altered in various ways because of influx and outflow of cultural components in the valley of Kashmir. Thus, the life-cycle rituals observed by the inhabitants of Kashmir incorporate Islamic as well as cultural elements. Pregnant mothers are instructed during the prenatal rite to defend their child from all forms of evil. Similarly, the people of Kashmir collaborate on the marriage ritual. Meanwhile, the principles of solidarity and collaboration are evident in the funeral rites, which are founded on the indigenous people's conviction that these activities are required of the entire Muslim community. As a result, the rites constitute a distinct heritage that must be preserved.

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