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Childbirth Rituals among Muslims in Poonch District of Jammu and Kashmir: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

There are unique customs and traditions of each culture. The arrival of the new baby is celebrated in a variety of ways by various cultures worldwide. Rituals are of special significance, for events that take place during a life cycle, as they both represent and are responsible for transformations. There are many religious and cultural practices put in place by religious and cultural communities, commemorate the transition from childhood to adulthood. This study focus on the practice of birth rituals among Muslims in the Poonch district. In this study we explores the inception, attributes, evolution, symbols, and significance of numerous rituals, such as the Azaan, Naiz/Niyaz, Tahneek, Sadqa, Aqiqa, Gana, Taweez, circumcision, first haircut ceremony, and the naming of infants. The ritual of Naiz/Niyaz, Sadqa, Aqiqa, varies across families depending on their socioeconomic status. All the rituals referred to in this paper are not only historical but are often performed by the Muslims of Poonch. This study shows that the rituals still serve as a symbolic gesture of welcoming and incorporating the baby into society. The work is presented based on empirical materials, secondary research documents, experiences and observations in everyday life.

Keywords: Birth, Ritual, Muslims, Poonch, Islam, Culture

Introduction:

Born to die is the journey of human life, a cycle of changes between birth and death—the two most significant moments of one's life. Birth signals the beginning of a new life and is a remarkable event that plays out in a social-cultural context (Nwadiokwu et al. 2016; Wojtkowiak 2020). Childbirth transcends a purely biological incidence, also a social-cultural phenomenon with symbols and rituals that reflect the social identities, values, and culture of a certain community (Van Beek 2002).

Birth rites are integrated with many social-cultural practices, experiences of families and relationship of fathers, mothers, and babies. Childbirth is in many communities “a life cycle and a communal event associated with rites of passage" (Siwila 2015). To express blessings, respect and sorrow in important moments that mark both joy and sorrow, each country or ethnic group is endowed with sadness in its lives a range of ceremonial practices. From early in time, people have created traditions, ceremonies and spells to keep young babies safe from

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misfortunes, and injuries they have a good amount of knowledge about how to use them in some situations in everyday life. Oral traditions, including benedictions and melodies, have an important role in family traditions, civic observances and celebrations. It aims to elucidate the intent of these ceremonies and to reflect the moral standards, principles and esthetic values of the nation (Chuluun et al. 2025). Childbirth is regarded as a sacred event in all cultures. Numerous societies celebrate this important event in unique ways, customs, ceremonies, and rituals (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021).

The birth is considered a sacred, mysterious event which cannot be easily explained elucidation. The perspective that sides with research on faith and maternal health is that spirituality gives meaning to life, pregnancy and birth (Callister & Khalaf, 2010; Mann et al., 2008). Birth traditions, rituals, and ceremonies represent a critical social transition in human existence, indicating a shift in an individual's social responsibilities and position within the community (Iltis, 2012).

According to Davis-Floyd and Laughlin (2022), ritual is “a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of cultural [or individual] beliefs and values”. Ritual as an assemblage of belief practices that entail a designated sequence of activities that are important to the performer and their sense of belonging within a community. Women create a spiritual link with the divine through their religious beliefs and accompanying practices and rituals, like chanting, prayers, and amulets, which grant them strength in the face of labor (Hall and Taylor 2004).

Although numerous methods of integrating a baby into society are universal across countries and religious identities, Muslims have created their own traditional components that are combined with Islamic ceremonies to welcome the newly born as a community member (Habib et al. 2022).

Understanding Rituals:

Ritualistic traditions are transmitted from one generation to another. This is why rituals are regarded as the most traditional and repetitive form of performance, as they celebrate and ritualize all aspects of life (Ehimuan 2021). Rituals are classified into two distinct types: (1) rites linked to the human life cycle, encompassing the commencement of life (birth), matrimony, and significant human challenges (such as illness and death); and (2) rites connected to specific events, which might be annual or historical (Kyalo 2013). Laura Grillo (2012) described ritual as “a means to negotiate a responsible relationship in the human community, with the ancestors, spirits, divinities, and cosmos.”

Area of the Study:

The area of the study is Poonch district, focused on the birth rituals among Muslims in the Poonch District of Jammu and Kashmir. Poonch is situated in the northwestern region of the Jammu Division. The total area of the district is 1674 square kilometers, as per the 2011 census. The district encompasses a total population of 4,76,835 individuals, of which 2,51,899 are male and 2,24,936 are female. Muslims constitute 90.45% of the district, Hindus 6.84%, Sikhs 2.35%, Christians 0.20%, and Buddhists 0.02%.

Methodology:

This study is based on qualitative research adopts an ethnographic research design. Ethnography, which includes a variety of fieldwork methods (including in-depth interviews and participant observation), can assist in the observation, description, and documentation of ethnographic evidence in its natural environment. A total of 53 families were selected for this study through purposive sampling. In-depth interview and observation was conducted with parents, elderly members, and relatives from these families to collect relevant data. The investigation was implemented in compliance with ethical standards. Participation was wholly voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Each participant provided informed consent. Respect for local customs, religious practices, and community norms was maintained throughout the entire fieldwork process.

Birth Rituals practice Among Muslims in Poonch

Azan/Adhan:

The Azan consists of Arabic phrases that confirm belief in the singular God (Islamic monotheism), the prophethood of Muhammad, and the command to venerate the singular God. After birth, the child is welcomed through azan ceremony and this is only performed by a male member. This person can be an Imam, a father, an uncle or a grandfather of the individual. The ritual, which is carried out shortly after birth, was discussed by all the participants. Once the infant has been bathed, the initial utterances regarding the core Islamic belief in the singular God and the Prophet Muhammad are conveyed to them. The azan is an Islamic birth ceremony that is mandatory for both male, female newborns, regardless of gender. The symbolic representation of a child's Muslim identity, when born into a Muslim family, is realized by the proclamation of the declaration of faith in the infant's ears. The ceremony signifies the official societal custom of designating the child's religion affiliation, together with the "inherent" transmission of this religious identity from the biological progenitors (Qamar, 2017; Dar & Das, 2024).

Niaz/Niyaz:

After the birth of child families visit dargah (shrine) and offer sweets, cooked food among people in the name of a Wali Auliya (sufi saint). Some families offer money or a goat, depending on their class. According to the respondent, prayers are offered to Allah with the blessing of sufi saint for the child health, well-being, safety, and long life. However, offering of niaz ritual varies across families depending to their economic condition.

Tahnik/Tahneek:

Tahnik is the act of chewing a date and subsequently applying it to the mouth of a newborn infant. This is accomplished by placing a small amount of the chewed date on a fingertip and inserting it into the baby's mouth. It is then gently moved to the right and left until the entire mouth is rubbed with the chewed date. Nevertheless, if dates are unavailable, a sweetener such as honey may be used as a substitute. Tahnik, according to certain scholars, is a method of fortifying the muscles of the mouth of a newborn by moving the tongue and mouth in

order to prepare the infant for the process of sucking milk from the mother's breast (Yahaya, 2024).

Male Circumcision (Khatna):

Muslims worldwide perceive circumcision as an Islamic obligation. In the Poonch district, male infants are circumcised in accordance with Islamic beliefs, and it is now considered a cultural occurrence in the region. In Muslim societies, circumcision is compulsory for male children (Silverman, 2004). This custom is also referred to as sunnat, which is the manner of the Prophet that Muslims are expected to emulate. The age at which circumcision is performed is not specified; however, it is typically performed after few days of birth, Some parents delay the circumcision for an additional two to three weeks. Circumcision was traditionally performed without anesthesia using a traditional knife or blade (ustra) by barber. A sheep or goat is sacrificed in the name of Allah, and a feast is hosted for relatives, neighbors and friends. They all offer prayers to Allah for the child's health and longevity (Dar & Das, 2024).

According to respondents earlier male children undergo circumcision by a barber in their own house, now a day the majority of individuals opt to have their sons circumcised at a clinic. In the past, there was a significant ceremony following circumcision to which relatives were invited; however, this practice has declined. The sole purpose of male circumcision in Islam is to maintain hygiene.

Gana Ritual:

After circumcision on the same day a boy tie a blessed thread on the wrist of child. According to the respondents beliefs blessed thread represent a strong bond between the child and who tied it, on the Day of Judgment they will meet again. This ritual is called Gana in Pahari and Gojri language. During this ritual women sing traditional songs and distribute sweets among neighbors, friends and relatives.

Sadaqa/Sadaqah:

Sadaqa is given to the poor people of community. In islam sadaqa is optional while Zakat is mandatory. Sadaqa in Islam refers to the practice of allocating monetary resources, nourishment, apparel, and all vital necessities in tangible forms. In non-material form, sadaqa is the act of expressing kindness through kind words and actions that bring comfort to others, such as a smile (Al-Bukhari, 1994). Consequently, sadaqa serves as a social welfare approach that, from an Islamic viewpoint, diminishes the allure of material wealth, facilitates the circulation of resources for communal benefit, integrates amiability and compassion through both verbal and nonverbal gestures, and cultivates altruistic behaviors within the community. (According to The Noble Quran) Sadaqa is established as a mechanism that can safeguard the blessings of God and to pursue his forgiveness, grace and protection to fulfilll these aims. In its conventional manifestation, it is defined by spiritual integrity and a "monetary" supplication, where philanthropy is viewed as a method of placating the divine and securing his favor.

The Imam highlighted the importance of sadaqa as a valued Islamic tradition and a pathway to attaining welfare. He asserted that the messenger of God instructed us that by offering sadaqa to the needy and underprivileged, we shall be granted joy and abundance. Individuals who provide sadaqa are not exposed to considerable harm or detriment. This explains why community members donate sadaqa in any amount they are able to, to protect themselves and obtain medical care when unwell. They contribute in the name of their children. The sadaqa is either touched by the children or delivered by a juvenile to a beggar or other impoverished individuals. The sadaqa may contain food or money (Qamar & Azher, 2024).

First Hair Cutting:

The incurrence of the first hair cutting ritual is one of the common customs in the community of Muslims in Poonch. Traditionally, the hair that has grown during pregnancy is extracted from the newborn within the first seven days of life. The child's hair is weighed and then a silver donation is made to a charity in some instances. The initial haircut of the infant should occur within a week after birth, followed by the giving of sadaqa. This belief is based on religious tradition. The sum they contributed as sadaqa corresponded to the weight of the infant's hair and the value of silver, gold, or money (Qamar, 2017).

Aqiqah/Aqeeqah:

Aqiqah, is derived from the Arabic word "aqiqa," is reputed to be in accordance with the example of Prophet Muhammad, who presented two sheep to each of his grandsons, Hasan and Hussain. Aqiqah is typically performed within 40 days of the birth; however, the precise date is contingent upon economic rather than ritual factors, particularly the availability of funds to purchase a goat. This ritual is meant to strengthen the bond between mother, father and baby.

Numerous people have reported that the Aqiqah (slaughter) of a newborn is recommended on the 7th day after their birth, either a goat or a sheep. But there are some conflicting views among scholars. Some regard the act as Sunnah and recommended, while others view it as obligatory. In order to fulfilll the obligation of Aqiqah, the family must sacrifice two sheep or goat in the case of a male and one sheep or goat in the case of a female. This is done to express gratitude to the almighty. Certain individuals performed the Aqiqah as a festive repast, wherein the slaughtered sheep or goat was cooked and offered to neighbors, family, and acquaintances. The slaughtered sheep was partitioned and allocated to relatives and neighbors, similar to previous instances.

The sacrificed animal is believed to provide a future material benefit on the Day of Judgment, according to local beliefs. The infant named as the beneficiary will ride on the sacrificed animal on that day as a vehicle to the judgement place. It will be accompanied by a certificate with the parents' names on it and they will meet there. For some, it is a for the baby's well-being in the afterlife, others believe that it benefits the impoverished (Saddiah et al., 2024).

Naming the Child:

The Islamic ruling on naming children can be grounded in three principles. There are three principles that can be used to support Islamic ruling on the naming of children. Primarily, the

theological doctrine must not be in conflict with designation (e.g., the Oneness of God, Monotheism). Secondly, the designation should possess favorable implications. Third, the designation ought to avoid resemblance to individuals infamous for their malevolent deeds, like hubris, brutality, or inequity (Abdul-Rahman 2007). Child's name ought to reflect their Muslim identity (Qamar, 2017). The respondents said that they designated names for their offspring shortly after birth. The name should begin with the prefix Abdul, Muhammad, or Ahmed.

Taboos:

Traditional customs and practices are transmitted through generations through a variety of methods, including the prohibition of certain locations during specific times or the donning of specific items during pregnancy. Additionally, women are prohibited from praying, fasting, or touching the Quran during the period of fluid discharge.

Tawiz/Taweez:

In addition, a significant number of Muslims affix an amulet known as Taweez to the baby's neck. A tawiz refers to a written sheet containing Quranic verses, crafted by religious instructors or spiritual authorities. It is thereafter swathed in material and fastened with a string for wearing. The practice of donning a Quranic amulet for the purpose of protection is quite prevalent in Poonch.

Discussion and Conclusion:

According to respondents two type of rituals performed for birth ceremony optional and mandatory. Azan, Tehnik, Aqiqah, first hair cutting, and naming of child are mandatory for both boys, girls, and circumcision of only male child. Niaz, Sadqa, Gana, Taweez these rituals are optional. The customs and rituals related to birth ceremony vary from family to family according to their class. The manner in which rituals and ceremonies are celebrated in this district has undergone some modifications over time as a result of urbanization and industrialization. These events continue to demonstrate the importance of religion, kinship, and economic interdependencies in the local context of preserving social relationships. It can be inferred that, despite the fact that numerous traditional practices are still observed in India, there are new beliefs and behaviors that have emerged as a result of the intersection between technology and culture. The cultural rituals are indicative of their commitment to the emotional and physical well-being of their young children, as well as their profound spiritual and symbolic connection to the natural and supernatural world.

The local title "Dai" is used to refer to the traditional midwife who accompanies births in the home. However, she is not a religious expert. A seasoned midwife, she possesses a substantial amount of folk knowledge. The customs of the participants, including the prohibition of outsiders during meals, the denial of some colors, black threads or metal wearing, the restriction of late-evening movement, and the avoidance of attending funerals, visiting shrines, graveyards. These practices illustrate how tradition has continued to shape mothers' experience. The mother is considered unclean for 40 days after the child's birth. She is not allowed to taking part in religious practices like namaz, fasting or recitation of Quran

during this time. A tawiz refers to a written sheet containing Quranic verses, crafted by religious instructors or spiritual authorities. It is thereafter swathed in material and fastened with a string for wearing. The practice of donning a Quranic amulet for the purpose of protection is quite prevalent in Poonch.

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