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Childhood: Coming of Age Rituals: North America

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Coming-of-age rituals within an Islamic framework are interpreted and practiced in a multitude of ways in North America. The Muslim community in North America originates from a number of different countries and identifies with various cultural backgrounds. Thus, coming-of-age rituals stem from a range of cultural traditions, informed by divergent social and historical understandings of Islam.

Coming-of-age rituals are generally understood as rites of passage whereby a person is initiated into a new adult social status and reincorporated into her natal group. Rituals often make gender distinctions and serve to celebrate differences between boys and girls, men and women. Some rituals are reserved for one gender and can only be performed by men or women.

Life cycle rituals in Islam begin at birth with a ceremony called ‘aqīqa, an Arabic term referring to an initiation ceremony usually performed seven days after a child is born. It is widely observed amongst Muslims of South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African origin, as well as followers of the Ḥanbalī school of law, which decrees ‘aqīqa as compulsory. The ‘aqīqa ritual consists of selecting a name for the newborn, shaving the child's head, reciting a short prayer and, traditionally, an animal is also sacrificed whose meat is distributed to the needy. In North American society, the animal sacrifice has largely been replaced by a monetary donation to the poor. The purpose of the ‘aqīqa ceremony is to welcome the baby into its social world and to place the newborn under the protection of Allah.

The ‘aqīqa rituals for both boys and girls are similar, but in many cases the male's ceremony is accompanied by circumcision. While some North American Muslims perceive circumcision as a re-enactment of the covenant made between God and Ibrāhīm, others interpret it as a purification rite. There are also those who believe in the tradition that all the Prophets were circumcised; hence, all males should be circumcised. As such, a male's birth rite is imbued with the added significance of a sacred covenant, a purification rite, or being part of a great prophetic tradition. Since most hospitals in Canada and the United States circumcise newborn males at the request of parents, circumcision is often combined with the ‘aqīqa ritual. There is no parallel ritual performed for Muslim girls at birth in North America.

Female circumcision (also known as female genital cutting or mutilation) is a contentious practice in North American Muslim society, where it is observed by Muslims from Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia who perceive and defend it as Islamic custom. Female circumcision, in its most extreme forms, removes the clitoris or labia, the main sexual stimuli for women, decreasing a woman's sexual pleasure and supposedly preventing her from sexual promiscuity. The initiation rite is thus commonly understood as a means of guarding female chastity, one of the virtues of womanhood in Islam, as chastity is linked to the preservation and sanctity of marriage and the institution of the family. Female circumcision establishes the gendered existence of a woman by affirming her proper place within society, namely as a custodian of Islamic virtue. While the majority of North American Muslims interpret female circumcision as a pre-Islamic custom unspecified in either the Qur’ān or the sunna, Muslims who practice female circumcision cite ḥadīths that sanction the ritual. Human rights groups in North America argue that female circumcision is a ritualized form of abuse which threatens

the health and welfare of women. Although female circumcision is illegal in both Canada and the United States, it is still performed by some Muslims to maintain traditions as observed in native homelands and out of conviction that circumcision is necessary to preserve female purity. In North America, poorly trained individuals, usually women, perform the cutting since the prohibition of the act makes it difficult to find a trained physician to perform the procedure.

Wearing *ḥijāb*, loosely defined as covering of the hair, that is, veiling, is a practice more widely observed by North American Muslim women. The significance behind wearing *ḥijāb* is interpreted differently by different communities of North American Muslims. One of the most widespread perceptions of *ḥijāb* is that it should be worn to protect female modesty, as stipulated in the Qur'ān and the sunna. From this perspective, taking *ḥijāb* can be interpreted as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. The woman is recognized as a sexual being and is required to protect her feminine sexuality by wearing *ḥijāb*, a physical and spiritual manifestation of modesty. Covering the hair, as a practice reserved for women, recognizes women's distinct place in society. It also highlights the difference between Muslim men and women's social responsibilities with regard to their sexuality.

Many rituals observed by Muslims have been called into question in the North American context. Dominant social and moral structures of North American society have problematized rituals, especially in relation to women. *Ḥijāb*, for example, is often interpreted as an instrument used to oppress Muslim women, while female genital cutting is considered by many to be a violation of basic human rights. Pressure from the larger North American society has led to increasing acculturation, where many Muslims have either abandoned rituals, or adjusted them to conform to North American norms, as is the case with henna parties.

Henna parties, celebrated by South Asian, Moroccan, and Turkish Muslims, are held the night before a wedding; during the party the bride's hands and feet are painted with henna to protect her from evil influences. These parties traditionally include a formalized crying ceremony in which the bride is compelled to cry by female family members, a rite of passage marking the bride's departure from her family. Although henna parties are customarily intended for women only, in North America these parties have become an entertaining celebration of marriage attended by both men and women, rather than a restricted ritual reserved for the bride and her family.

Life cycle rituals among Muslims in North America vary significantly in form and purpose, reflecting the great diversity of communities in Canada and the United States. Those rituals that mark the passage of girls into women are of particular interest, not only to the people who continue to perform, protect, revise, reject, and reinvent them, but also to non-Muslim North Americans who often base their perceptions of their Muslim neighbors solely on their understanding of these practices.

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