

Islamic Rituals, A Pillar in Bengali Culture

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I was born in the United States to Muslim immigrants from a little Southeast Asian country known as Bangladesh. Very dense in human population, Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country with very few resources. Many of its inhabitants leave to search for better opportunities elsewhere such as in America. Upon arriving here, many of these families are faced with real predicaments. One problem is accepting that their community's culture—their religion and language—is vanishing among their children and even themselves. People are falling away from the community. They have become so preoccupied with maintaining their socio-economic needs that they feel as if they are losing the very essence of what their forefathers fought so hard for. This paper suggests that the Bengali community relies heavily on the daily ritual requirements of their religion, Islam, to keep their beloved cultural identity and sense of community intact.

Let's consider the history of Bangladesh, a fairly new nation. Having been born a "Bengali," I have been told the story of Bangladesh's independence and I must say we are very proud of what our people have fought for. In the mid-1900s Pakistan was divided into two, the East and West, that had little in common with the exception of their religion, Islam. Their cultures were completely different and so was their language. East Pakistan believed they were being economically and politically discriminated against because demographically the West was occupied by the wealthy, who spoke Urdu. In the East, the poverty-stricken inhabitants who spoke Bangla thought they were being economically neglected because of their language and culture. Their differences led to a war of secession. History books say Bangladesh fought for its independence for political and economic issues, but ask any native and they will tell you that they fought to keep their culture alive (since the Pakistani government was trying to get rid of it).

In Bengali culture, religion pretty much defines a person and plays a key role in everyday life. The life of a Muslim requires discipline and regulation. As a practicing Muslim, I can explain that "Muslim," originally Arabic, means "one who submits to God." Now however it describes an adherent of Islam. Growing up I was taught that Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion (faiths deriving from or associated with the origins of Abraham) which was based on the Quran (holy text of Islam) which is believed by Muslims to be the direct word of God revealed to them by the prophet Muhammad. According to Islamic teachings, Muslims are to pray—either alone or in a congregation for religious worship, usually at a mosque—five times a day, at dawn (*fajr*), at noon (*zuhr*), right before the sunset (*asr*), once just after sunset (*maghrib*) and finally at nightfall (*'isha'*). So

here I am born and raised as a Bengali Muslim and yet for this anthropology paper I choose to observe the Muslim prayer routine of rituals and observances from the outside looking in. It was only recently that I gave up being a “blind follower” of faith and started some introspection as to why I believe what I believe. Observing this ritual allows me to suggest that those who attend mosque prayers use religion as a cultural system.

In Islam the mosque, similar to a church, is the place of worship but it also serves as a community center. I'd like to observe a mosque, Masjid Al-Aman, which I have regularly attended throughout my life. Of course this time I will be going there with different intentions and purposes. Masjid Al-Aman is located in the heart of the large Bangladeshi-American Muslim community located on the Brooklyn-Queens border. The mosque itself is in Brooklyn but its surrounding neighborhood and most of the people who attend are from Queens, specifically Ozone Park. It holds five daily prayers. It is about five minutes walking distance from where I live and has been there for more than twenty years. Although generally mosques allow women to pray in them, this mosque does not; in accordance with Islamic teachings, women and men are to pray separately and this mosque because it was long being renovated, could not accommodate the needed separation of women. In order to conduct my observations, I began by requesting consent from the Imam, or the leader of the mosque similar to a pastor or priest. Because I am a regular attendee, I did not have to have permission of all the other attendees since it would be no surprise for them to see me there. I decided to go to the evening prayer called *maghrib* which is now held at 7:40 pm daily. The time varies according to the time of the year following the Islamic calendar as well as the time the sun sets. I chose to attend this prayer specifically because I thought it would have the most people in attendance. Many would attend this prayer service since they are home by this time from work or school. I also decided that I should walk to the mosque and not drive. I promised myself to observe this prayer service as if I were observing it for the first time. The way I chose to do this was to note down whatever I deemed as necessary information on my phone as well as participate in the prayer services being conducted. Also, I conducted an informal interview with one of the regular mosque attendants.

To analyze what I saw, I'll consider Clifford Geertz's book, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* in which he describes two peoples that practice Islam differently. This work was not an assigned reading, but Geertz and his work in anthropology have a great influence on the content of this course. Geertz seeks to explain how religions react to deep changes within society. His study of Islam in two very different countries allows a comparison to be made. Geertz explains how although rituals play a big role in a religion, it is that society's culture that defines how to go about those rituals. This work supports my argument that the community uses religion to develop their identity.

Members of the immigrant Bengali community pursue the preservation of their culture, and it seems that they use motions of ritual Islamic prayer to attain that goal. Victor Turner has stated “Communitas is rather a matter of giving

recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society” (328). “Communitas” is the Latin word for the unity of a community. Turner notes that humans in general rely on an attachment to each other to achieve a bond, for without it there is no sense of community. I suggest that the attachment may form from the actions of ritual Muslim prayer. Imagine that five times a day you attend a prayer service with your fellow Bengali men to attain salvation together. You do this with specific motions: you stand alongside each other, shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet and, following the imam’s command, prostrate before your lord in a repetitive synchronizing motion. This surely induces unity. The imam, naturally, has a key role; every community requires a leader, and he plays this part by leading the ritual.

When attending the ritual prayer, Bengali men refer to one another with the term “brother.” Muslims base this practice on the belief that they are all children of Adam and Eve. This notion creates strong bonds, giving one the feeling that when they are practicing their faith they are doing so with their family. Emile Durkheim suggests that a religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (45). In our case it would be a mosque and not a church, yet the emphasis on uniting the community is relevant since the term “brother” denotes unification. Bengali men only refer to each other as brothers when they are in the space of “ritual holiness” so “brother” can almost be understood as a sacred term; only then is the term appropriate.

Geertz defines religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (“Religion as a Cultural System” 59). He says that a system of symbols connotes importance to an object, a feeling or an idea. He explains that culture patterns are unique in the world in that they are a model for and a model of the society that they come from. This is true for the people of Bangladesh since their ritual procedures are distinctive. For example the older men seem to be found seated towards the front of the prayer services and the young found in the back. This reflects Bengali culture where respect for elders is emphasized. All cultures teach respect for your elders but Bengali culture believes with age comes wisdom, whereas youth connotes inexperience and opinions that may be disregarded. Other ethnic mosques I have attended had a random seating arrangement. Geertz says observing the rituals allows us to create moods and motivations, for instance, joy in the mosque when prayer services come to an end and some men stay back to exchange hugs and to perhaps express their gratitude towards each other that they have attended the prayer. The gratitude then motivates one to continue coming to the mosque to pray. Individuals develop a strong tie with their people and feel encouraged to return and feel good about it.

In short, in attending ritual prayer you are essentially engaging in an act to be a part of your culture again. Speaking from experience, when one hasn’t

attended mosque services for a long period of time, you can be seen as a negative figure in the community, and one to be avoided. This occurs even though one of the beliefs pushed by Islam is not to judge others. There can be only one explanation; the mosque in this community is strongly culture driven.

After observing my fellow Muslims pray, I feel that a big part of the Islamic belief system is unity. This concept is further prompted by the Bengali culture since people feel as if after leaving their motherland, they have lost their sense of cultural identity. Fortunately, their faith in Islam and the rituals it requires them to observe, allows them to reconstruct that identity by unifying with one another through a prayer which is required five times a day. Followers go to the mosque which acts as a center to reunite this community and reinforce men's strong ties with one another. Even I as an observer felt a strong sense of unity multiple times during the course of this observation. Of course being Bengali, my whole life has contributed to my feeling this way, but this was the first time I analyzed and understood why. It began when everyone was holding the same pose during the prayer, then when one Muslim greeted another as "brother." I am a perfect example of what the leaders of my community worry about; I risk losing all ties to the culture which they fought to gain independence for! Now I feel that it was necessary and a good insight for me to observe my faith from a distance only because, for the duration of my observation, I felt that my sense of individuality was dropped; during the prayer I felt a deep cultural sense of harmony with my community.

Works Cited

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