

# Islamic Life-Cycle Rituals

In all societies, people mark the passage of the individual through life by staging public ritual events. These rituals both celebrate and transform the individual: from a newborn into a child, a child into an adult, a single person into a married person, and a living person into a spirit.



In many Indonesian societies, the ability to read the Qur'an marks a coming of age. At the Qur'an reading, which may last up to a week, the individual will sit and read the Qur'an from beginning to end.

For the Muslim Gayo in Aceh, Sumatra, the recognition of the new infant as a member of the community may involve the child being formally introduced to the outside world. An old woman holds rice, which represents the natural elements, over an infant at the birth ritual.

(Below right) Part of the mourning rites for the Muslim Gayo entail water being poured upon the newly-made grave.



## The Muslim Life Cycle

For centuries Indonesian Muslims have developed life-cycle rituals that meet the demands of their religion, and which also fit their traditions and surroundings. In adapting the prescriptions of the Qur'an and Hadith to Indonesian culture, many Muslims have emphasised gender equality,

their close relationship to the natural world, and the importance of communicating with the dead. But others have argued that some of these rituals are inconsistent with the dictates of religion; lively debates — scholarly and popular — continue.

Of all the events that mark the individual's passage through life and beyond, four are ritually highlighted by Muslims throughout Indonesia: surviving birth, entering adulthood, marrying and dying. Other life-cycle rituals are also practised — during pregnancy and at birth, for example, or after a child has completed a recitation of the Qur'an — but the four main ones are the most consistently elaborated in a wide range of Indonesian societies.

## The Child's Initiation

Soon after the birth of a boy or girl, Indonesian Muslims stage a ritual to mark the emergence of the child into the world. This ritual fulfils the scriptural demand that parents sacrifice an animal for each child, and is often given the Arabic-Indonesian designation *aqiqa*. Some Muslims sacrifice two goats for a boy and one for a girl, others find it sufficient to sacrifice some animal, be it a goat, sheep or chicken, and that the number or size may be the same for boys and girls. For many Javanese, this ritual occurs on the fifth day as one in a series of *selamatan* designed to ensure a safe pregnancy, birth and



## THE BUGIS RITUAL OF AQIQA

The Bugis of South Sulawesi hold the Islamic ritual of *aqiqa* for the new child on the same day that they hold a pre-Islamic ritual (top). This is performed by a specialist called a *sanro*. It is not uncommon in Islamic communities to find that pre-Islamic life-cycle ceremonies have become fused with Islamic ones. The first cutting of the hair is an Islamic ritual, which symbolises the casting off of bad blood, and is held on the same day as the pre-Islamic rites. A ceremonial meal is held on this occasion to mark the child's emergence into the world.

infancy. For most other Muslims the ritual occurs on the seventh day of life.

The ritual accomplishes much for the child. By carrying out a sacrifice, an obligation to God is met (some say the sacrifice redeems the child from God). A bit of hair is cut from the child's head. For some, this is seen as ridding the child of bad blood. Sometimes something sweet is given to the child to taste, to make his or her life sweet. The confession of faith is also whispered in the child's ear. The child is given a name, the name being chosen to best fit the day or date of birth, the names of the parents, and other local ideas about how names ensure that a child shall live a healthy life. In short, the newborn being is made into a social person, a Muslim, and a named member of a particular society, and this socialisation is done according to the example set by the Prophet.

In many societies the ritual also introduces the child to various spirits that inhabit the natural world. On this day, the boy or girl first leaves the house and encounters the wider world. Dangers lurk outside, from spiritual and natural forces, and rituals include appeasements and introductions to the spirits of the water and earth.

## Circumcision

Circumcision marks the boy's entry into puberty and his recognition as a Muslim ready for adult life. It is usually carried out for a group of boys aged

between eight and fourteen. Some Muslims also, privately, incise girls at a younger age, although this often only involves a symbolic incision. In many places circumcision is celebrated after the model of weddings.

**Marriage**

In Islamic terms a marriage occurs between a boy and a girl, with a guardian representing the girl at the public event. Her permission is required, and she must be given, and accept, a token of the marriage contract that unites the two individuals. This token is the *mahar*, and take the form of gold, material goods, or a Qur'an.

The couple, once married, are usually displayed, dressed in local garments, for guests and visitors. Their placement, side by side at the same level, represents their formal equality, an equality that is also apparent in Indonesian interpretations of divorce and inheritance law.

Marriage is also, however, a moment when two social groups come together in an alliance. The alliance aspect of marriage is performed through various forms of exchange, where representatives of the families, kin groups or villages meet to exchange words and goods as tokens of their new relationship. In most societies, ritual experts exchange ritually-appropriate phrases that emphasise the obligations of both parties to the marriage, as well as foodstuffs or cloth.

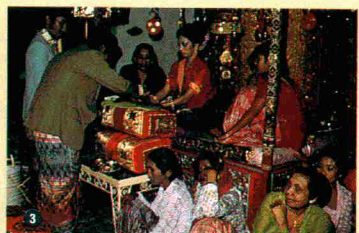
**Islamic Rites of Death and the Deceased**

Funeral ritual provides calming work for the bereaved, and fulfils a long list of scriptural commands, from bathing and burying the corpse, to praying and worshipping for the welfare of the deceased, to ensuring that costs and debts are properly paid. Indonesian Muslims meet these requirements, and many also engage in recitations of texts and verses intended to benefit the deceased. At the grave, many recite the *talqin*, a catechism in Arabic, and often also in Indonesian, that reminds the deceased of his God, his Prophet, his sacred book, and his direction of prayer, so that when questioned by angels he will be able to respond and avoid a beating. On successive evenings after the death, neighbours might gather to recite the *tahlil* (statement of faith) combined with shorter Qur'anic verses. For some Muslims these recitations are to please God; for others, by pleasing God they also benefit the deceased.

Some Muslims refrain from practicing *talqin* and *tahlil* on the grounds that reciting to or for the dead implies, erroneously, that the living can directly aid the dead, whereas in truth, everyone is judged only by his or her own deeds.



*(Top) Three children from Raha, Southeast Sulawesi are dressed up for their circumcision ceremony. Following circumcision, which is a token gesture in the case of the girls, these Bugis children (above) sit to receive well-wishers.*



**THE MUSLIM WEDDING**

The ceremony is essentially the same throughout Indonesia, involving prayers 1 followed by the young couple seeking their parents blessing 2. The groom at this Sumatran wedding has adopted Arab dress to stress his adherence to Islam. The Bugis bride will have her hands hennaed on the eve of her wedding 3, and a Bugis nobleman will arrive at the house of his bride the night before, sheltered by an umbrella signifying his rank 4. The celebration of the *nika* 5 is similar everywhere. Paradoxically, Bugis who want to signal their adherence to more orthodox trends may adopt Western dress 6. Elsewhere, traditional practices are retained, such as the Sumbawan groom giving his bride *mahar* 7 in the form of money, a token of the marriage contract uniting the two individuals. In most Islamic communities the marriage is completed by the couple receiving their guests attired in traditional dress; Sumbawa 8 and Minangkabau 9.

