

Editorial

The Importance of Rituals in Everyday Life in the Middle East

A culture can be expressed in a succinct way in its rituals, the manifestations of the culmination of its deepest beliefs. Rituals are also attempts to maintain cohesion, which they do most successfully in the material and non-material arts. Knowledge of a culture is necessary in order to portray the totality of that culture through its rituals and ceremonies. As a central topic in anthropology, ritual has been regarded as a phenomenon that is resistant to change and bound to a great extent to certain norms and regulations. Yet it is obvious that rituals are not rigid, unvarying sets of performances and that they have undergone many changes in definitions, functions and interpretations. Indeed, all aspects of culture, including rituals, are subject to change. Drawing on the past, cultures sustain their beliefs by making use of what is at hand in the present.

This issue includes articles on rituals of healing and mourning, on marriage, and on the significance of hair as an application of religious law in Judaism. The articles on kinship and hair analyse the lifestyles and traditions that keep people knitted together. Yet even in these cases some deviation from past practices is evident, as people try to continue their traditional life while allowing for the selective infiltration of changes.

The first article, 'Mourning Palestine', by Aref Abu-Rabia and Nibal Khalil, discusses mourning rituals and death rites in Palestine as they are practised by both sexes. Portraying related events from the beginning of the mourning period until the end, the authors explain the meaning of various rituals and show how they hold the community together. Conscious attention is paid to feelings such as grief and self-restraint, to the importance of key behaviours and attitudes, and to the place of children in ceremonies. The similarities between the various rites of passage among cultures reveal the rhythm and the essential form of ritual – how it begins, culminates and fades into everyday life. The tragic sense of loss that people experience because of death is lessened by recalling people's limitations as human beings.

The article by Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, 'Zâr Beliefs and Practices in Bandar Abbâs and Qeshm Island in Iran', investigates the problem of illness and how



rituals can be used to heal people, allowing them to return to a normal, everyday existence. Here is a locus where Africa, Arabia and Persia meet to tackle a form of illness inflicted by spirits. The hundred-year-old practice employs many tactics such as imposed isolation, making animal sacrifices and concoctions of blood and rose water, and using music to heal. Here again modernity (with its impact on availability due to job commitments) has created difficulties by limiting the amount of time that people, especially city dwellers, can allocate to the ritual. Hence, a ceremony that would normally take seven days to perform is sometimes conducted in a single evening. Gender segregation is practised in these rituals as a result of the Islamic law introduced after the Revolution of 1979.

In Karine Michel's article, 'Cheveux et poils dans le judaïsme', family and social cohesion is identified as the ultimate rationale for rituals. The author looks at how hair is linked to important Jewish ceremonies, such as *upsherin*. When a male child turns three years old, his hair is cut and put on a silver plate by a rabbi. A monetary amount equal to the weight of the hair is put on the plate, along with other monetary gifts, all of which will then be given to those in need in the community. This ceremony is accompanied by intense music and dancing. All of these elements are essential for maintaining social cohesion, with rituals such as this one providing the context for doing so.

Changes brought about by death and the rituals through which the community responds to them are addressed in 'The World of the Dead as Viewed among the Negev Bedouin', by Gideon Kressel, Sasson Bar-Zvi and Aref Abu-Rabia. The authors show how the burial and mourning habits of the Bedouin population in Negev have been transformed in recent generations, following the introduction of formal Islam in the camps. These changes mainly have to do with women's presence and roles in mourning rituals. Other aspects of change are due to the effects of modernisation; for instance, the number of mourning days among the Bedouin has been shortened since fewer days are now needed to reach the camps of the mourners.

Finally, the article titled 'Mariages et alliances matrimoniales à Ispahan', by Mohiadin Vatani, concentrates on societal changes during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as they have affected matrimonial practices and social processes. The author outlines the ceremony of *xastegari* (during which a family seeks a bride for its son) and the final step of *estexare* (divination) as the means by which families assess their compatibility. These specific rituals are maintained up to the present day.

It is a pity that our call for papers did not elicit more articles on rituals associated with birth, circumcision and marriage ceremonies. The dearth of papers about joyous occasions may be a reflection of the spirit of the times. However, we do hope to include such articles in the future.

Our academic and political Middle Eastern life is permeated with rituals, and students would benefit from addressing these domains. When new phenomena enter a culture, they are often initially at odds with it, but as soon as they

become part of ritualistic acts, they are better accepted. Academic conferences were rare at the beginning of the Iranian Revolution, yet today myriads of them exist. Attention to them as a ritual would help underline the fact that academia has found its place within the active culture at large.

Political rituals are even more interesting. In particular, making events ritualistic may help communicate with people. Ordinary rituals, such as the fortieth day after a death, may become occasions for gatherings that prepare the ground for future political action. Public spaces offer limited space and time for rational discourse that can be made comprehensible to the masses. At the same time, politicians take advantage of these occasions as well, making powerful use of symbolic behaviour, gestures and words to influence and manipulate people. This is a vast terrain for anthropological research that could bring together political anthropology and ritual studies in the Middle East.

– *Zubaydah Ashkanani and Soheila Shahshahani*