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Forced Migration and Muslim Rituals: An Area of Cultural Psychology?

I

The psychological foundation of rites de passage have long been debated within the history of religion and related areas (See e.g. Honko 1979; Nenola-Kallio 1982). The significance of such rites in facilitating emotional readjustment to a new life situation have been particularly stressed. But the available material has only indirectly been able to verify such presuppositions, consisting as it has of observations of the rituals or tradition lore.

Moreover, the interpretation of emotion raises particular problems for cultural research due to its preoccupation primarily with collective analyses. Emotional reactions on the individual level largely remain outside the competence of anthropologists, despite their awareness of the general influence of culture on this as on other areas of human endeavour. Researchers like Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner have suggested that ritual symbols affect the way individuals experience their world. But they have not looked in detail at the individual to substantiate their suggestions¹.

I am presently engaged in a project on traumatized female refugees from Iran at the interdisciplinary Psychosocial Centre for Refugees, University of Oslo. Based on therapeutic sessions over many years, it will render possible an analysis of highly personal experiences attached to such upheavals as torture, flight and exile, from the perspective of cultural psychology. In this connection, however, I will restrict myself to the question of whether the changing living conditions which have provoked traumatic experiences in the lives of these refugees have been in any way related to Muslim ritual requirements or rites de passage.

¹ Juha Pentikäinen's (1978) work on a female Karelian refugee represent a Nordic exception, which is based on extended personal contact with the informant.

Ritually related situations may already have failed from the perspective of the clients prior to migration. The period preceding the flight seems especially vulnerable, marked as it is by the exceptional conditions of war and revolution. For example, the political annexation of martyrdom as the paramount ethos for the postrevolutionary Iranian society poses certain emotional complications for opponents of the present regime. As the mourning rituals of the Shi'ite Muslims have become mandatory symbols of political commitment to the state, their ability to comfort the repressed and exiled has simultaneously decreased.

Good and Good (1988) deal with revolutionary alterations in Iranian society by making a distinction between rituals of transformation, which focus on permanently transforming the status of the participants, and rituals of transcendence, where such changes remain restricted to the duration of the ritual, as a starting point. According to the authors the originally transcendent Muharram ritual received, at the time of the revolution, a transformative character replacing the old order of things by a new law and justice.

The revolution grew out of the Kerbela paradigm anchoring the protest in mourning and martyrdom². The Ta'zieh Passion plays include dramatized scenes of separation, such as when the young son of Hussein takes leave of his father, implores his mother to let him proceed to death by martyrdom, or tearfully caresses his little sister in farewell. Paralyzed with sorrow, his mother wraps him in a shroud and clings to him. He tears himself away in order later to be returned by the imam dead into the arms of his mother.

Similar emotionally compelling events supersede one another as many more relatives of the prophet are martyred. But the ritual reenactment of the tragic happenings also evoke anger at injustice, and an accompanying dedication to the establishment of a righteous society, among participants. In the present situation emotions like this have become charged with powerful contemporary political symbolism. It is said that where villagers used to go to the cemetery in order to cry, nowadays they go there for celebration, while life affirming rituals are repressed.

The Iranian leadership has strongly criticized the Persian New Year No Ruz celebration, and intensified public funeral marches for troops killed at the front prior to it, in order to produce a more proper atmosphere of mourning. Such an approach is in conformity with the prohibitions of exaggerated celebration of Islamically questionable occasions and rites de

² This is a point also raised by Jan Hjärpe (1989).

passage, by other Islamist regimes, such as the Pakistani (Ahlberg 1990).

Episodes narrated by the refugees suggest that both public and private emotional discourse have become subjugated to the scrutiny and control of official policies to an extent previously unparalleled. They often refer to the “bearded brothers” or “Islamic sisters” appearing as guardians of Muslim morality in public places. According to their accounts these revolutionary zealots are, for example, entitled to “remove make-up with a handkerchief filled with broken razor blades or use scissors against visible hair”, and arrest people while measuring out “Islamic” punishments as described below.

But the frequently tragic fates of third world refugees reaching the borders of our welfare societies disclose that intercultural migration does not automatically solve, but may on the contrary further reinforce an initially distorted development. Three approaches to the interrelatedness of ritual observations and traumatic changes in the lives of refugees are thus called for:

- under normal circumstances at home,
- under exceptional circumstances at home,
- as migrants in our societies.

II

Lavik (1977) defines life-cycle rituals from a psychiatric viewpoint as collectively institutionalized solutions of problems of separation and belonging. Since the functions of rites are dependent on personal emic meaning, an outsider perspective such as that of participant observation is not enough in their analysis. Anthony Jackson (1979) thus forwards a multitude of analytic perspectives for the study of ritual, of which I will here consider those of the very structure of the rite itself — if it is correctly performed; and its social relational context — any possible negative social outcome of the rite; as well as preceding norm breaches.

Moreover, I will consistently base my treatment on categories on an individual as well as a collective level.

Level of analysis	Norm breach (exist?)	Ritual performance (correct?)	Consequences (exist?)
Individual	+ –	+ –	+ –
Collective	+ –	+ –	+ –

I will start with an example from the "normal" childhood of a female refugee-to-be in lower middle class Teheran, which illuminates a rite de passage celebration which has left psychological scars, despite the fact that it might have worked normatively as intended on the collective level. In this case an innocent person was socially stigmatized, and banished to a questionable lower status, as part and parcel of the ritual.

One day after several years of treatment the patient in question arrived for an appointment complaining of diffuse pains in her left side³. The first time she felt a similar kind of pain she remembered very well. She had no foreboding of what was happening to her when, one day, she returned home with bloodstained trousers. Her older sister, who according to tradition carried the responsibility for her upbringing, became furious. Confused by accusations of having lost her virginity and being battered, she was taken for a gynecological examination, where the onset of menstruation was ascertained.

The big catastrophe followed during her wedding in the presence of a considerable number of far-away-guests. As the celebration was reaching its climax at dinner time, the bride and bridegroom were about to consummate the matrimony in the sleeping room of her parents-in-law. Attached with safety pins to the linen were four pieces of cloth, which were to be distributed among the two families as evidence of the consummation of the marriage, as well as of the virginity of the bride.

The client was unaware of her husband-to-be as well as her coming fate. "Everybody hastens to eat in order to be the first one to peep through all available keyholes and windows. There one does it for the first time in one's life in front of everybody". On earlier occasions she herself had taken part in this race for the fun of being the first one out for the bloodstained trophies. This is because, by triumphantly viewing "the evidence", one receives a reward of money. "At times they enter even before the bride and bridegroom have had a chance to get their trousers on."

But this time it did not happen since her husband-to-be yelled in order to save his own honour in advance⁴. "You are no virgin! I have been deceived to believe myself to have got a proper wife, and what have I received but a widow." To her desperation there was no trace of blood to be seen. Recently having reached the age of sixteen, she remained scared stiff while furious people poured into the room in order to defame her. She has not been able to repeat what they said or did at that point.

³ Concerning the prevalent "psychosomatization" among Iranians as perceived by Western medical personnel see Ahlberg 1989.

⁴ Like the loss of virginity male impotence is considered a very serious handicap.

“But my mother and father had to walk with their heads bowed down, the celebration was brought to an end and everybody went home. Often violence, hospitalization and visits by the police follow from these kinds of things.”

Thus it happened that she was to remain an innocent person, regarded by others as of lower status, in a lonely, nightmarish and childless marriage.

But it was even worse for my mother. When she was nine years old she was married to someone twelve years older. When he returned home from work, she was simply playing with her dolls while the demands of housework were beyond the scope of her comprehension. Because of this she was severely punished. When only ten years old she gave birth to my elder sister.

Example of a wedding ritual in Teheran under “normal” conditions

Level of analysis	Norm breach (exist?)	Ritual performance (correct?)	Consequences (exist?)
Individual	—	—	+
Collective	+	+	+

Ritual marking of the transitions of life naturally give no assurance of psychological wellbeing. They limit individual freedom of choice, assuming emotional subordination in relation to collective demands. Notwithstanding personally experienced sorrow, participants in Shi’ite Muslim celebrations are, for example, expected to cry aloud, just as traditional wedding rituals gently but firmly give the marriageable girl a new status relatively irrespectively of her own wishes.

Traditionally fixed rituals may thus have get the opposite effect of the generally assumed instrumentally moderating, if emotional aspects turn against the parties involved. Many a young person who has been circumcised has, like the young mother of the above example, in reality only a slight insight into why or what is actually going on, ending up as a passive and emotionally perplexed onlooker at their own celebration. In other words we cannot assume that ritual expression is automatically in harmony with inner feelings.

On the contrary, one has to allow for the fact that ritual participants, especially those who are obliged to attend, independent of their personal feelings, will adapt their behavior to the situational expectations. In traditional societies social birth, puberty or even death may, moreover, overshadow the biological development with discontinual or forced leaps

as a result. Or various expelling mechanisms on the collective level may pose psychosocial problems for the individual.

III

A movement in cultural time or social space always involves danger of imbalance *within* the individual and *between* individuals and the society. Migration, like the ordinary transitions of life, involves psychosocial wandering that activates feelings preserved in age-old mythical motives: of longing and pain from what is lost, but also new possibilities and triumph over the old inhibiting world. In the case of forced migration multiple and sudden loss of social, material and cultural circumstances, without traditional ritual or network support, may, however, foster a chronically painful marginality.

The disengagement from the old order of things often begins ahead of the migration itself, during quite exceptional circumstances in the country of origin, or a lengthy stay in the primitive and ruthless conditions of many a refugee camp. Psychiatric material from war-torn Iran shows many links between psychological stress and forcibly altered ritual circumstances⁵. Ritual pollution from corpses during combat, or the general absence of washing facilities, may, for example, result in obsessive acts. In at least one known case sexual intercourse in a ritually polluted state brought contagious effects on the conceived child, who was expelled as unclean and exposed to severe maltreatment.

These are ritual situations, which from the point of the individual actors themselves have been interpreted to their disfavour as carrying negative sanctions, even though overt social condemnation has failed to appear. In the examples quoted here the therapist was cooperating with both the family network of the patients, as well as with the religious scholars carrying out the ritual purification of the afflicted. According to the latter the situations were, however, interpreted as Islamically legitimate exceptions to ritual demands.

From this follows a somewhat different pattern depicting the imbalance between individual and collective interpretations in my diagram.

⁵ I thank psychologist Hassan Namwar, who worked at the Iranian front with war injured soldiers and their relatives prior to his own flight, for initially focusing my attention on such cases.

Wartime ritual requirement as an example of an "exceptional culture"

Level of analysis	Norm breach (exist?)	Ritual performance (correct?)	Consequences (exist?)
Individual	+	-	+
Collective	-	+	-

A third world refugee is, moreover, in many ways already exposed by definition, since he or she has left a society based on moral obligations which emphasize loyalty to God and the existing tradition. An obligation based moral code, such as the Islamic, carries a general assumption of naturally vulnerable agents subdued to their weakness of will, ignorance and interdependency. Thus the freedom of the individual to realize himself in a modern Western sense is not regarded as a common good.

It is, for example, a common custom to give away "the weaker gender" by arranged marriages, and even parallel dissolution of marriages is in evidence. As a result of transgressions in one, but independently of the wishes of the spouses in the parallel case: "If Ali uses violence against our Aysha, we will in addition to her also take our daughter Amina back from his brother Mohammad".

Every society offers time-honoured status corresponding to performance obligations to individuals of various talents. Both are necessary for social action. But what is considered more fundamental, natural or valuable, differs: the roles to be performed or the individual people who play the parts. The obligation-based moral of tradition-bound societies, in contrast to the modern rights-oriented, gives priority to social arrangements according to which the moral value of a person can be measured.

It judges as fair any actions that ensure a properly fixed role performance between members of the group, while psychological qualities or personal skills are of lesser importance. The traditional interpretation of social roles as a natural necessity, and permanent in relation to those individuals who at any point in time happen to fill them, may accentuate the problems of potential or exiled refugees. As evidenced by the Rushdie case, there does not exist any indispensable freedom to plead deviation or exceed gender roles. The private domain becomes subordinate to the role expectations lest one is considered morally corrupt.

Female clients of mine thus report how their husbands have been expelled as kafirs by "Islamic" reasoning, according to which they have defected from their religion by fleeing the Islamized Iranian society. According to this logic of the local pasdaran, taking flight has moreover entailed that the wives and children of these men have been left unprotected. As a

consequence of this the latter have been raped in direct proportion to the number of male relatives who have fled their responsibilities as defenders of their honour.

Since it is the concern of men to protect women in order that the honour of the family will not suffer, sexual torture of females and children has been underreported. Episodes of this kind will, independently of any individual guilt, risk bringing the whole family into disrepute⁶.

There are two pillars in the life of a man. His namus (honour) is dependent on his wife and the soil, for which the shahid gives his life. In the Iraki war one had to fight for one's country because if it fell into the hands of the enemy, they would rape and plunder both the soil and the females.

Even in prison, one had to get used to it in spite of being innocent. Many are those who have committed suicide following rape in prison. I have seen them kill pregnant females, and you will not find any argument for it in the Koran. It was since the filth started getting out. It is easy to lose one's belief from less. All the deceased get a stone on their grave but these get an 'unknown' grave. A mother whose child is killed does not even have a stone to visit, knows no place to go for crying. Their destiny is to be flung in a big godforsaken hole.

One central theme which follows from the refugee specific situation concerns the meaning of various types of boundary crossing, as seen against culturally defined ideals. In other words, given what a good life in an anticipated social context consists of: What kind of meaning will the innumerable transgressions and ruptures refugees encounter carry? How are elementary ethical breaches such as various forms of torture interpreted? What about members who deviate physically or psychologically, such as westernized females or children, "crazy" relatives and violated people generally?

IV

On arrival many clients seem to be full of unrealistic anticipation of their life in the West (Ahlberg 1989: 207). Such factors can be quite decisive, as evidenced by the case of another client in danger of losing her children. For years she bore harsh maltreatment by her husband in the hope of an unavoidable flight to the West "where men do not hit. And where females, as opposed to the practice of Islam, get custody of the children

⁶ For an analysis of the sexual maltreatment of Vietnamese refugee females see Mollica 1989.

in case of divorce". She never reckoned with the eventuality of ending up with a resolution by the child welfare authorities, according to which her children were removed to an unknown resort for further investigations⁷.

The situation of the client in the above mentioned Teherani wedding case (under "normal" circumstances at home), was later made worse by imprisonment and torture, as part and parcel of revolutionary Iranian gender politics (under "exceptional" circumstances at home). She had chosen to oppose encroachments by her spouse as well as the pasdaran patrolling the neighbourhood. Against all anticipation she managed to obtain education, got divorced after many years of struggle, and remarried despite massive opposition with her chosen-of-heart.

She even refused to accept any morning gift while offended representatives of the authorities failed to obtain their share. For this reason she was left with "a plastic document instead of a silky one", which later turned out to create unexpected problems (as a migrant in our society). But this was after she had managed to flee, through a third country and many hardships, to the free West. While here she met with new and quite unexpected resistance towards, once again, accepting either her love marriage or acquired education.

Suddenly she stood in danger of losing her status as a political refugee, and consequently her husband's right of repatriation, due to having produced contradictory statements in police interrogations. According to them she alleged to be married, while at the same time comparing her marital status to couples living together "without formalities" in the West. This was, however, quite correct since she had contracted a temporary *mut'a* marriage, the existence in present-day Iran of which the Norwegian authorities at the time were quite unaware.

There are naturally many things that can go wrong in the receiving countries. When, for example, the refugee's expectations concerning the way of managing fundamental transitions of life do not correspond to actual practice, this might result in increased fear of those unknown circumstances where anything could happen. "I wonder whether they are cruel people unaquainted with law and justice in this country, since they allow many dead bodies in the same grave, thereby risking to desecrate a pure soul with a sinful one? Do they really turn up the graves after some time and sacrilege their dead?"

Not the least worry in connection with the ritual performance of a burial on foreign soil is that many things might go wrong so that the dead will

⁷ A similar case has been analysed in Lien 1986.

end up as outlawed ghosts, leaving their kinsmen in restless grievance. Another client, who like most refugees has experienced a great many losses of near and dear kin, moreover lost a child in Norway. The parents had to rush to the hospital with a child who shortly afterwards died.

According to her, they were asked to control their sorrow as expected in this country "where people mourn with dignity". A paradoxical reaction in a hospital corridor during such a tragic moment marked by strong traditional expressions of sorrow? This family carried certain expectations concerning handling a case of death, which were not in accordance with actual practice within the Norwegian health care system.

The result was a mother stuck in the feeling of her child simply having disappeared, and shame for not having been able to fulfil her last obligations towards a deceased son. "Our child was simply taken away from us and we were instructed to meet at the funeral". Behind such statements lies an uncertainty gnawing the heart, as to whether correct funeral practice was followed. To be sure, she was deprived of her traditional right to take care of him herself; wash, dress and perfume her son properly for the grave.

What is more; "Now he is not going to get peace, but will forever lie restless in his own blood". The fatal thing had happened that an autopsy was made without consulting the parents, and that was perceived as desecrating the corpse. "Why, why did they tear up his tummy and destroy him? The wounds will never heal," she stated.

However, the fact that the traditionally required leave-taking, which intends to free a child from obligations tied to his mother's milk, was mediated before the moment of death has been a consolation. But there is more to it. This child, who was supposed to be buried among the mountains of Kurdistan, was now left lying about blood-stained in a slope of a Christian cemetery. "Why did they choose a grave site at the bottom? I would not have wanted it that way."

In order to understand this case one has to be acquainted with certain parts of folk religion which might influence the process of mourning, such as the concept of "the dead without status" (Pentikäinen 1968; Pentikäinen 1969)⁸. "My child is so pure. He should have a lot of space in order that no dirt will touch him. Those who have lived a bad life get crowded in their grave, but pure people shall have a big space".

⁸ If one takes a closer look at the part of this cemetery where Muslims are buried, it becomes obvious how most graves situated here belong to "dead without status". This is since, as a rule, every effort is made for ordinary people to be sent home for burial in the soil of their forefathers.

On Fridays this woman still offers the favourite dish of her deceased child to the children of the neighbourhood, whom she gathers on the local playground. She has never dared to approach grown-ups for fear of being considered mad “but the children do not understand what this is all about”. And thus she nevertheless manages to fulfil at least one obligation.

Migrational example of a death in a foreign country

Level of analysis	Norm breach (exist?)	Ritual performance (correct?)	Consequences (exist?)
Individual	+	-	+
Collective	-	+	-

For quite some time she was also searching for her son around the place of his death out of fear that he might not have found peace among the dead. She described his condition as that of a person being locked up in a room equipped with many doors, but unable to find his way out. In this example we moreover find an actual norm transgression complicating the matter, since the little boy took his own life. But this fact is not pursued by the surroundings which, at least officially, have left such argumentation.

A couple of years and many sessions later the picture is, however, changing as the client alleges to have visited her son’s dwelling in the beyond, describing it in an animated way. Though to his mother’s desperation he is found walking back and forth with mud up to his knees, as for himself, he seems to be quite content. According to her, he has even become capable of mediating in front of God, prematurely as he was taken away from this life.

This is since he is now seen as representing what is generally referred to as a “second” shahid⁹. He might appear to his mother if his brothers and sisters quarrel in order to comfort, putting his arm around her while they sit on the sofa.

My mother did not exactly tell anybody either though my brother, who died from torture, likewise appeared to her for years. If I asked her about it, she just answered that it was no business of children’s. But naturally my sisters and I understood, when, for example, we always had to bake a certain type of bread if the deceased had visited, and we were not allowed to spill any left-overs on such a day, but distribute everything among the poor.

Do you know of others who experience similar things? It is a quite common occurrence if a close and dear person dies. Those who have lived a good life God

⁹ The first ones consist of people died in fighting for God’s cause.

will release from their graves in order that they might visit home, for example for namaz (prayer).

Bjarne Hodne (1980) has analysed changing attitudes towards death in the Norwegian countryside from the 19th century to the First World War. While most urban people today confront death privately in a hospital setting, surrounded by professionals, death was formerly an occasion that concerned the whole neighbourhood. But one has to remember that this was an obligatory norm in order to ascertain the status of the death as well as to protect the living against unwelcome apparitions.

Parting with the deceased in a quite concrete way was thus often imposed even on small children out of ulterior educational motives. Besides entailing a proper way of mourning, this practice, however, at times brought severe traumatic experiences remaining into old age. According to the author, the former acceptance of death as a fact of everyday life next seems to have brought a denial, which again today contrasts with the practice of certain migrant groups as well as wishes among our own.

I will conclude by referring to a letter addressed to the Norwegian foreign authorities concerning the religious anguish of a client:

To the responsible authorities in Norway. The undersigned wishes to express thanks for all effort and endeavours by the personnel working with refugees. We are quite content with both the possibilities and good contacts with locals in this town. But due to some problems of our belief which have brought us psychological problems, we applied for change of abode to a southern town, where day and night are normal.

Then follows an explanation concerning prayer times in relationship to the movement of the sun, supplemented by reference to relevant texts and the various practices of different sects as well as countrymen. And the letter concludes: "Because of such obligations, we are required to live in places where day and night follow a normal pattern. We never expected to be sent to a place where such problems arise."

An obligation-based code has several distinctive features. It is the code that takes precedence and is the object of interpretation and elaboration, while the individual per se and his various interior preferences are of little concern. The parity of the motive is less important than the quality of the act and its degree of conformity to proper conduct, which the individual is supposed to match or be punished and considered corrupted if he does not.

V

The present internationalization of religious topics is increasingly making ethical controversies crosscultural in a way that would require closer analysis in many areas of society, such as the social and health care system. Though it is the conflicts of international politics that capture most attention, the presence of third world refugees in our society entails other less obvious but nonetheless profound effects.

Forced migration is generally considered a cumulative psychosocial trauma characterized by initial stigmatization under protracted exceptional conditions, followed by a whole series of unforeseen problems in exile. Among these are the impact of migration on traditional ritualisations.

By way of clinical examples I have elucidated the relationship between personally experienced traumas in Iranian refugees and ritual situations.

- All the examples show a psychosocial imbalance presumed to be characteristic of exceptional ritual situations where something has gone wrong from the perspective of the individual though not necessarily the collective,
- and which are related on the one hand to physical, psychological or ethical transgressions such as autopsy, suicide and breaches in chastity, purity or ritual demands,
- and on the other hand to social outcomes in the form of innocently “fallen” women, mutilated apparitions, young martyrs or ritually unclean children.

Such considerations are liable to further aggravate the refugee dilemma of abandonment, deprivation and absence of belonging. The frequently tragic fates of third world refugees in our welfare societies could be seen as a sort of inverted pilgrimage characterized by a gradual removal from the starting point at “the holy place” and in a “mythical past” towards an unknown and frightening future.

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