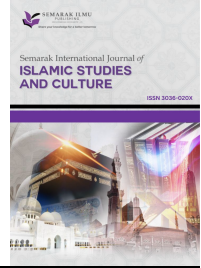




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Understanding Religious and Cultural Practices among Muslims in a Highly Urbanized City in the Philippines: An Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines is a predominantly Christian nation, especially in highly urbanized cities, where Muslims constitute a minority. Their religious and cultural practices often appear unfamiliar to the general public and are typically observed in more secluded communities. This disparity presents a gap in understanding the lived experiences of Muslims in urban Christian-majority settings. The study addresses this gap by exploring how Muslim religious and cultural practices are maintained and expressed in a highly urbanized city in the Philippines where they are not the dominant group. The purpose of this research is to understand the way of life of Muslims as a minority, focusing on how their religious beliefs and socio-cultural traditions shape their social reality. Using an ethnographic approach, the study employed participant observation and cultural immersion within a mosque-based community. Participants were selected based on three criteria: being Muslim, actively practicing their religion and culture, and having migrated to the city. Religious aspects identified include prayer (Al-Salah), burial rites, beliefs in the afterlife, and moral concepts of punishment and pardon. These practices reflect the spiritual foundation of Islamic life and its influence on daily behavior and community cohesion. Cultural aspects emerged through themes such as love, sex, and marriage; blended cultural practices rooted in both religion and ethnicity; and personal narratives of migration and adaptation. These elements highlight how identity is shaped not only by faith but also by ethnic heritage and social context. Findings reveal that Muslims are able to coexist peacefully with the Christian-majority population, supported by a socially accommodating and hospitable urban environment. The presence of mosques and freedom to practice religion affirm their integration. Ultimately, the study concludes that both religious devotion and cultural resilience play vital roles in sustaining Muslim identity in urban Philippine society.

1. Introduction

The religious foundation of Islam is built upon the Five Pillars of Islam which are the shahada (profession of faith), salah (prayer), zakat (alms-giving), sawm (fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage) which serve as the essential framework for Islamic belief and practice. Complementing these are the Six

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Articles of Faith (Arkan Al-Iman): tawhid (belief in the oneness of God), malaikah (angels), nubuwwah (prophets), kutub (holy scriptures), akhirah (afterlife), and al-qadr (divine will). Diligence to the Qur'an is a vital obligation for Muslims, as it guides their spiritual conduct and affirms their devotion [1]. The Six Articles of Faith are considered the core of Islamic belief and serve as evidence of one's religious commitment [2]. Central to this belief system is the notion that life on earth is temporary and preparatory, while true existence begins in paradise (Aakhirah), which is attained after death through God's mercy [3,4]. In contrast, the cultural expressions of Muslim life are shaped by ethnic identity, social customs, and community interactions. These include traditional clothing, food practices, marriage customs, and migration narratives, which often blend religious values with local cultural heritage. In the context of the Western Visayas, Muslims live as a minority within a predominantly Christian barangay. Their homes are scattered across the region, and their mosque (Masjid) is situated within Christian communities, reflecting both integration and distinctiveness. This differs from Southern Mindanao, where Islamic culture is dominant and Muslims are the majority. Understanding the Muslim community in this socio-geographical setting is both significant and timely. The study aims to explore their religious practices, such as prayer, fasting, and belief in the afterlife, and their cultural experiences, including dress, social customs, and interactions with the non-Muslim world. By examining both dimensions, the research seeks to illuminate how Muslims maintain their identity and navigate daily life in a Christian-majority urban environment.

1.1 Religious Dimensions of Islam

Islam is one of the world's major religions due to the number of its adherents. It is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion, alongside Judaism and Christianity, whose followers believe in God (Allah) and Muhammad as the messenger of God [3-4]. Central to Islamic faith are the Six Articles of Faith and the Five Pillars of Islam, which form the foundation of religious life. When practiced with sincerity of heart and mind, these elements shape a true Muslim.

1.2 The Six Articles of Faith

Tawhid (Belief in God/Allah). Islam is a monotheistic faith affirming that there is only one God, Allah, who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and the source of everything.

Malaikah (Belief in Angels). Angels are spiritual beings created by Allah who lack free will and exist to execute His commands with absolute obedience.

Nubuwwah (Belief in Prophets). Prophets and messengers (nabi and rasul) were sent by Allah to guide people toward salvation. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad, who is considered the final prophet and the recipient of the Qur'an.

Kutub (Belief in Holy Books). Muslims believe in scriptures revealed to prophets: the Tawrat (Torah) to Moses, Zabur (Psalms) to David, Injil (Gospel) to Jesus, and the Qur'an to Muhammad, regarded as the final and authoritative revelation.

Aakhirah (Belief in Judgment Day). Muslims believe in the resurrection, when all people will be judged by Allah according to their faith and deeds, determining their eternal destiny.

Al-Qadr (Belief in Divine Decree). Fate and divine will are central, with Allah fully knowing and determining the course of creation.

1.3 The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahada (Profession of Faith). A declaration that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet.”

Salat (Prayer). Muslims pray five times daily: Fajr (sunrise), Dhuhr (noon), Asr (afternoon), Maghrib (sunset), and Isha (night), facing the Kaaba in Mecca [5,6].

Zakat (Almsgiving). Muslims are obligated to give 2.5% of their wealth to the poor as a form of charity and social justice.

Sawm (Fasting). During Ramadan, Muslims refrain from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn to sunset as an act of self-discipline, compassion, and spiritual cleansing.

Hajj (Pilgrimage). At least once in a lifetime, capable Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, commemorating the devotion of Abraham and gathering with Muslims worldwide in worship.

1.4. Historical Dimensions of Islam in the Philippines

Islam reached the Philippines in the 14th century through traders and missionaries [7-9]. The Arabian scholar Mudum from Malaysia laid its foundations in the southern Philippines [8]. Subsequently, Raja Baginda spread Islam in Sulu, and upon his death, Abu Bakr became the first sultan, establishing a government patterned after the Sultanate of Arabia [8,10]. In Mindanao, Sharif Kabungsuwan from Johore arrived with his men, converted local tribes, and married into a ruling clan. He proclaimed himself the first Sultan of Mindanao and extended Islamic influence even into parts of the Visayas and Luzon [8]. In modern times, new adherents of Islam in the Philippines are referred to as Balik-Islam [11]. The term reflects the Islamic belief that all humans are born as natural Muslims, but due to circumstances such as parental or cultural influences, some are raised in other faiths. Thus, reversion to Islam is not considered conversion but a “return” to the original faith [11].

1.5 Cultural Dimensions: Practices and Beliefs

Islamic culture emphasizes that earthly life is temporary and preparatory for the eternal life in paradise. Entry into paradise, however, depends on one’s deeds, faith, and ultimately, the mercy of Allah [3,4].

Death and the Afterlife. Muslims believe that angels record all human actions until death, after which the angels Munkar and Nakir interrogate the deceased about their faith. The soul enters Barzakh, a state between death and resurrection, reflecting their eternal fate [2,3,12].

Burial. Islam requires immediate burial, ideally the same day. Cremation is prohibited. The body is ritually washed (by persons of the same sex), shrouded in cotton cloth, and positioned facing Mecca [1,3,13]. Funeral prayers (salat al-janaza) are recited, debts are settled, and the body is interred loosely in the earth [2,14].

Mourning. Loud wailing is discouraged, though crying is permitted. Traditionally, women are restricted from attending burials or visiting graves due to expectations about emotional restraint [3,15].

Belief in Paradise and Salvation. Prophet Muhammad described paradise as a place of eternal peace, joy, and divine favor, surpassing all worldly pleasures (Saheeh Muslim #186; Saheeh Al-Bukhari #6568). The Qur’an promises paradise to those who believe and do good deeds (Qur’an 4:57) while warning of severe punishment for those who reject faith (Qur’an 3:91; 6:27). Death is seen as predetermined by Allah and must be accepted as part of divine will [14]. True happiness, according

to Islamic teaching, is found in submitting to Allah's commands and remembering Him, which brings peace to the heart (Qur'an 12:28).

2. Methodology

This study is intended to understand the religious and cultural practices of Muslims in a highly urbanized city in Western Visayas. This reveals the practices and beliefs of Muslims, especially those who are actively engaging in these practices. Immersing in their practices and understanding them in detail and the meaning that they derive from them. Ethnography, a design of inquiry, was used to capture the detailed and holistic cultural portrait of the group -sharing from the participants' perspective, specifically their cultural practices and beliefs [16,17]. For this, the research utilized interpretivism as a theoretical perspective on ethnography for the research design and data generation, which included participant observation, memoing, in-depth interviews, etc. This study was conducted in one of the progressive cities in Western Visayas. The city is the center for commerce and tourism, where commercial establishments are everywhere and their tourist spot is a destination known all throughout the country. A complex way of life ranges from a food hub to a commercial complex, which made it to highly urbanized cities and the developed cities outside the Philippine Capital. The participants of the study are members of the Muslim community, which was chosen after confirmation with consent from the leaders of the Muslim community. The said participants are active members, actively practicing, and adherents of Islamic practices and beliefs. Added to this, the purposive sampling method employed in the selection of the participants through the snowball method in the study. The data-gathering method used is cultural immersion through participant observation, memoing, and an in-depth interview done through a researcher-made guide question on the religious and cultural meaning of practices among Muslims. Specifically, the data gathered focuses on religious and cultural practices among Muslims, which include their beliefs about their religion, their beliefs about social-cultural life, which is no longer part of Islam, and how this religion and social life affect their social reality. After the approval of the leaders of the said religious entity, the researcher personally administered the data gathering to the target participants. To analyze the obtained data, the following methods will be utilized: (1) interview and (2) observation of the key informants; (3) probing, where the data of the key informants will be checked through their imam, who asked the informant to participate in gathering information to determine whether the informant's statements convey consistent and reliable data. After the recording of the interviews and observations of the informants, they will be subjected to transcription and then translation from the local language used by the informant to English (a language understandable to readers). To validate the obtained data, Creswell and Miller [18] utilized the following validation strategies: (1) theoretical triangulation, where there will be utilization of multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence; (2) clarification, where the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, etc. that might shape the researcher's interpretation and approaches to the study; and (3) member checking, where there will be a solicitation of informants views of the credibility of the findings and interpretation. To further analyze and interpret the obtained data, the coding and analytic memo writing by Saldana [19] will be utilized to provide proper sources and descriptions in the retelling of the stories of the participants.

3. Result

3.1 Understanding Islam and Muslim Practices: Religious, Cultural, and Historical Dimensions

"I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know and the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?" [20]. This study sought to understand Muslim life and practice through immersion, yielding insights across three dimensions: religious, cultural, and historical. From the gathered data, six central themes emerged: (1) prayer (Al-Salah), (2) burial, (3) belief in the afterlife, (4) love, sex, and marriage, (5) punishment and pardon, and (6) stories and history.

3.1.1 Religious Dimensions

3.1.1.1 Prayer (Al-Salah)

Prayer is central to Muslim faith and is considered the foundation of a successful relationship with Allah. Muslims call their prayer Al-Salah, a structured guide to worship performed five times daily, from dawn until nightfall [5,6]. Each prayer lasts about 15 minutes, and before it, believers perform ritual washing (wudu) to cleanse body and mind. Observations revealed distinct practices inside the mosque: footwear is left downstairs, men wear prayer caps, and worshippers wash before entering. Women wear long dresses on Fridays and pray at the back, separated by a wall to maintain focus and modesty. For Muslims, prayer is not only worship but also a form of protection, believed to drive away demons and renew spiritual strength. To be a Muslim is to submit fully to Allah. Regardless of ethnicity, all believers are equal before Him. The title al-hajj is given to those who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, considered one of the highest forms of devotion.

3.1.1.2 Burial practices

Death in Islam is viewed as a passage to Allah and an opportunity for eternal life in paradise. Burial must take place within 24 hours, emphasizing the immediacy of returning the body to the earth [21]. Embalming and cremation are prohibited; instead, the body is washed, perfumed, wrapped in a white shroud, and positioned facing Mecca [3,22]. Graves are dug four to five feet deep with a side chamber lined with hollow blocks. Funeral rituals include transferring the body to the mosque and prayers led by the imam. As Ross [3] and Coward [22] note, denial of proper burial prevents the soul from finding rest, hence the urgency of the ritual. .

3.1.1.3 Belief in the afterlife

The afterlife is considered the ultimate goal of a Muslim's existence. At death, angels Munkar and Nakir interrogate the soul: "Who is your God? Who is your Prophet? What is your religion?" [3,12,23]. Based on the answers, the soul enters Barzakh, an interim state in the grave until the Day of Resurrection [2,12]. Paradise is described as a place of beauty, peace, and eternal youth, where the faithful are rewarded with palaces, food, and companionship [4]. Repentance and obedience to Allah's will are necessary for entry. Hell, by contrast, awaits those who reject faith and commandments. Muslims view earthly life as temporary and preparatory; true life begins in paradise.

3.1.1.4 Punishment and pardon

Islam teaches accountability for every action. Sins can be committed through words, deeds, or even thoughts, often attributed to the temptation of demons. Yet, Allah is merciful: repentance, forgiveness, and pardon are highly valued. Offenses against individuals may be forgiven personally, but ultimately Allah is the supreme judge [3].

3.2 Cultural Dimensions

3.2.1 Love, sex, and marriage

Marriage in Islam is both a religious duty and a cultural milestone. It requires a dowry (mahr), arranged by the woman's parents and mediator, and is a non-negotiable component of the union. Early marriage is permitted, often arranged by parents, with strict rules during courtship, such as requiring a chaperone for women. Polygyny is allowed, with up to four wives, though equitable treatment is required. Some Muslim husbands create schedules to divide time among wives. If jealousy arises, it is viewed as a spiritual weakness rather than a structural flaw of the arrangement. Sexual intimacy is guided by religiously sanctioned practices, including the recitation of blessings. It is considered essential for marital harmony and believed to produce obedient offspring. Divorce is permitted under Sharia law, with specific rules for child custody and property distribution. Inheritance laws distinguish between dowry (solely owned by the wife), conjugal property, and individually acquired assets.

3.2.2 Ethnicity and daily life

Muslims in the study trace their roots to Southern Mindanao, particularly among the Maranao, Tausug, Yakan, Maguindanaoan, and Iranon groups. Each has distinct languages, though in urban areas they often use Tagalog or Hiligaynon to communicate. Ethnic identity, alongside faith and family, plays a vital role in social life.

3.3. Historical Dimensions

3.3.1 Stories and migration histories

The narratives of Muslim migrants in Western Visayas highlight both challenges and resilience. Many arrived in the early 1980s, engaging in trade and eventually establishing places of worship. Their first mosque was a rented space in a commercial complex, later replaced by a nipa hut structure, which was eventually reconstructed into a permanent mosque through community contributions. Other mosques have since followed, including spaces for Balik-Islam converts. As noted by Angeles [7], Agoncillo [8] and Newson [9], the Muslim presence in the Philippines is both historical and contemporary, shaped by waves of migration, trade, and religious commitment. Balik-Islam which a term preferred over "convert" [11], that reflects the belief that all humans are born Muslim but was raised in other faiths. Returning to Islam is thus considered a reversion, not a conversion. Personal stories also highlight intermarriage, especially with Ilongga women, who are described as hospitable and nurturing. These unions are seen as evidence of cultural accommodation and coexistence.

3.4 Findings and Insights

From the religious, cultural, and historical accounts gathered, the following key findings emerged:

1. **Faith, family, and ethnicity** remain central in Muslim life, with faith ultimately transcending cultural boundaries.
2. **Shariah, Qur'an, and Salah** serve as the bedrock of belief, guiding everyday actions.
3. **Minority status in Western Visayas** has not hindered Muslims from practicing their traditions, including intermarriage and language adaptation.
4. **Burial practices** reflect strict adherence to Qur'anic and Sharia prescriptions, often misunderstood by outsiders.
5. **Death is viewed as a return to Allah**, the ultimate purpose of life, with paradise as the reward.
6. **Earthly life is temporary**, with paradise as the true life awaiting the faithful.
7. **The afterlife entails both reward and punishment**, depending on one's deeds, faithfulness, and God's mercy.

4. Conclusion

The investigation found that, in Islam, earthly life is temporary and preparatory for the eternal life that every Muslim aspires to paradise with Allah, the summum bonum of existence. Attaining this goal rests on three essential conditions: the reality of death, the manner in which one lives according to the commandments of Allah and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and, above all, Allah's mercy. For Muslims, death does not signify an end but a passage into new life with Allah. Those who are faithful in prayer (Al-Salah) and obedience will inherit paradise, while those who disobey risk eternal punishment in hell. Yet, even beyond human deeds, salvation ultimately depends on Allah's mercy, which envelops every stage of existence. Islamic burial rites reinforce the sacredness of the body as a vessel to be raised again on Judgment Day, underscoring the Muslim belief that the physical and spiritual are inseparably bound in the hope of eternal life. While faith is paramount, cultural factors such as family and ethnicity shape the religious life of Muslims. The findings show that Islamic practice in Western Visayas is intertwined with familial obligations, marital relationships, and local traditions of language and hospitality. Muslims in the region have adapted to their minority status by engaging in intermarriage, particularly with Ilongga women, and by adopting local languages as a means of communication. These accommodations demonstrate that, although faith transcends cultural boundaries, Islam also interacts with and adapts to the social and cultural realities of the community. This dynamic reflects both resilience and openness, enabling Muslims to maintain their religious identity while coexisting harmoniously within a pluralistic environment. Historically, the presence of Muslims in Western Visayas illustrates a narrative of migration, adaptation, and continuity of faith. Despite being a minority, Muslims have established mosques, fostered spaces for worship, and preserved their religious and cultural practices across generations. Their stories highlight both the challenges of practicing Islam in a non-Muslim majority region and the opportunities created through local acceptance and integration. The persistence of burial practices, prayer traditions, and intermarriages reveal a historical trajectory of endurance, one that affirms Islam's place not only in Southern Mindanao but also in the broader Philippine landscape. Thus, the lived experiences of Muslims in Western Visayas mirror the long-standing history of Islam in the country: a history of faith that adapts to context without losing its core spiritual commitments.

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