



## CUSTOMS AND CEREMONIES AMONG KASHMIRIS

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### ABSTRACT

Like its scenic beauty, Kashmir valley is even famous for its cultural heritage. The valley of Kashmir is very rich as far as different aspects of its culture are concerned. Kashmiris though followed different religions; more or less belong to same stock. There are certain differences in the customs of birth, marriage and death in case of Muslims and pandits of the Kashmir. Therefore, many of their traditions, customs and ceremonies and even dresses bear many resemblances. And it is to be noted that the life of the people of Kashmiri was ruled by customs (Rewaj) and tradition. It was very difficult for the people to maintain a subsistence level when he had to spend expensively on occasions of marriage, birth, death and other religious and social ceremonies. The present paper attempt to reveal the customs and ceremonies related to Birth, Marriage and Death among the Muslims of Kashmir.

**Key words:** Kashmiris, Muslims, customs, ceremonies, tradition.

### Introduction

The inhabitants of the Kashmir observed several customs and beliefs like that of which were followed by other people of the state. It must be explained that the customs vary according to the positions and wealth of families and that there is a difference between the observances of the city people and the villagers. But the chief incidents in birth, marriage and death are the same. It is not out of place to mention that there are many points of resemblance between the Muslim customs and the pandit customs<sup>1</sup>. Although there are certain points of similarity, and the curious prominence of the walnut, salt, and the use of the *mehandi dye*, will be noticed. Besides the *mehnzrat*, or use of the *mehandli dye*, in both religions there is the *laganhir/santham* or fixing of the marriage day. *Phirsal*, the visit paid by the bridegroom to the bride's house after marriage: *Gulimiut*, the giving of money and jewels; the dress and the title of the bridegroom as *mahaaraz* and of the bride as *Maharani*. *Phirsal*, the visit paid by the bridegroom to the bride's house after marriage, *chudsu*, the giving of presents on the fourth day after death to the priest's etc<sup>2</sup>.

### Customs and Ceremonies of Muslims

#### Birth Ceremonies of Muslims

Both Muslims and Hindus adhere to some beliefs and practices during the pregnancy period. For instance a pregnant woman was not allowed to carry heavy loads for fear of abortion. In Kashmir, the birth is celebrated with rites of welcome and blessings-songs, happy distribution of sweets, auspicious unguents, gifts for infant and mother<sup>3</sup>. The Muslim baby first sees the light of the day in the home of his mother's family, she having gone there about two months before his expected arrival<sup>4</sup>. Immediately after its birth, the baby was given a bath in Luke-warm water after which it was indoctrinated. When the child was born the priest comes in and taking the infant by the ear, he whispers the Azan, welcoming the arrival to this world of faith and he repeats in the left ear the *takbir*

and adds a warning that death is the end of all things. The mother fasts for one or two days and then has a meal of wheaten bread and eggs; the grass bed on which she is known as *hur* and is changed daily. The woman was regarded as unfit for the performance of religious duties like the daily prayers as long as the usual discharge after child birth continues, its utmost limit being forty days. On the seventh day after the delivery, which is known as the *sindar day*, the mother bathes and the child is given its name. The name is given by the *pir* (priest) of the family<sup>5</sup>. Two or three months later the mother returns to her father-in-law's house, carrying with her presents, among which will be copper utensils.

Shaving of head (*Zar Kasan*) ceremony is the general custom among the people of Kashmir to go along with their family barber at the shrine of some famous saints (*Charar-i-Sharief, Hazrat Bal, Baba Rishi, Maqdim Sabun, Zain shah Sabun, Amir Sund etc.*) to get the first shaving of head of their children<sup>6</sup>. On this occasion the women folk used to sing the songs. At the age of four or five the child would be circumcised and this is an occasion of great rejoicing. Friends are invited and the child's feet are stained with the red *mehandi* dye and he is decked out in brave apparel. For seven days the ceremony there is nothing but singing and feasting and on the day of the circumcision (*khutma*) the child was placed on a basket under with a cock is cooped, the perquisite of the barber who performs the circumcision. All friends and relatives used to kiss the child's hand and give him money (*gulli-myonth*) after which the guests go off to a shrine with the boy and return to the house for a feast<sup>7</sup>.

### Marriage Ceremonies of Muslims

The institution of marriage has been found to be more enduring than any other social institution. The people in every civilized society are interested in the maintenance of the institution of marriage as it is the foundation stone of society of which family forms an important organ. Marriage, a necessity for human being, is a fundamental pre-requisite for setting up of a family and as such the religious sanctity for it, gives birth to the various kind of morals to be followed in its performance. Kashmir being a multi-religious region, mainly inhabited by Muslim, has a set of ceremonies which the followers of different religion perform<sup>8</sup>. Marriage is the deemed essential for virtually everyone in Kashmir. For the individual marriage is the watershed in life, making the transition to adulthood; generally this transition, like everything else in Kashmir depended little upon individual violation but instead occurs as a result of the efforts of many people. Arranging a marriage is a critical entailed some redistribution of wealth as well as building and restricting social realignment and off course result in the biological reproduction of families<sup>9</sup>.

In Islam marriage of a grown up girls and boys obligatory as the basis of good moral conduct in the society. The Muslims consider marriage a socio-religious contract which requires the necessary proposal and acceptance before the marital agreement is reached<sup>10</sup>. Marriages except those solemnized by religious rules were unknown in the valley. Neither the males nor the females had the freedom of selecting their partners and this right is solely reserved by the reserved by the parents. Before fixing the date of betrothal (*nishani*), it was obligatory to match the *sitar (horocopes)* of the prospective bride and groom. Besides this, the other factors which were into consideration while selecting a match, status and moral character of the family of the prospective match and their close relatives. All this and more is taken into consideration before the alliance was finalized. The wedding date (*sath nam*) is proposed by both the families. There were no restrictions placed up on intermarriage except with Saiyads at the top of the social and menials at the bottom<sup>11</sup>. The Sheikh Muslim (converts) of the valley has retained, for some time after their conversion to Islam, some of the Hindu custom of endogamy within the caste and of exogamy outside the gotra. But there is no trace now of these customs and the different tribal names or *krams* are names and nothing more; there is no restriction on marriage and a Muslim of the *tantr ram* can either marry a *tantr* girls or any other maiden of the villages, provided she be one of the agricultural families. The only line drawn is that one must not marry into Saiyad families on the one hand or into families of market gardeners and menials on the other. The cultivators looked down upon the boatmen and would not intermarry with them, as they consider them lax in the matter<sup>12</sup>. It would be interesting to trace the origin of the *kram* names, although by intermarriage the *krams* have ceased to have any individuality or distinction and to inquire whether the various *krams* have from a Brahman, Khattri or Vaisya origin. It is supposed by many that Muslims of the *pandit, kol, but, aitu, mantu, and ganai krams* are decedent or Brahmans who converted to Islam in the fourteenth century. The only gradation in the social scale which is recognized among the agricultural families is that the zamindars are superior to the taifidars that is the market- gardeners, herdsman, shepherd, boatmen, minstrels, leather-workers, and the menials of the villages. And this gradation is maintained by the fact that the agriculturist would intermarry with these inferior castes<sup>13</sup>.

Marriages in Kashmir are arranged and assisted by the go-between called (*Manzimyor*) in Kashmir. This go-between was usually a man of great powers of persuasion and he visits families with marriageable daughters and tells highly-coloured stories of the magnificence and generosity of his client. He then suggests marriage and would take his leave. Afterwards, on the festive occasion's viz. *Eid-Ramzan, Eid-Qurban, Mehraj-un-Nabi, Ursi Nabi*, the boy's father would send presents to the girl, and then later the marriage day was fixed<sup>14</sup>.

The Muslims, if possible, marry their daughters to some near relation, and if this was not possible, the father of the girl asked some man of his own class or tribe for a boy whom he took into as Khanadam<sup>15</sup>. Khana-damad or *Gari-path* is a term used for son-in-law who lives at the house of father-in-law. This marriage is generally made when the father-in-law has no hair. He treats his son-in-law as his own son after marriage with his daughter. This type of marriage is very economical. It is generally practiced by farmers

in rural areas of Kashmir. The Khana-damad is given gift deed of some movable and immovable property by the father-in-law, only after his proper assessment. On the death of his father, the property is devolved upon the daughter and not to the Khana-damad though, in actual fact he exercises full control on the estate<sup>16</sup>.

The marriages were generally set by middle-man who appoints a day for *nishani* (engagement). Once the two families agree to the alliance, a formal commitment ceremony would take place in the form of *nishani* (engagement ceremony). Shortly after, the boy's father would go with a small party of relatives and friends with presents to the girl's house. The presents, as a rule were consisted of gold and silver ornaments, cash, and some special sweets<sup>17</sup>. An auspicious day is chosen for the *livun*, another ritual which is traditional cleaning of the house before a wedding. On this day, the floors of the Kashmiri houses are cleaned. This is also the day when the *waza* (family cook) arrives and puts together a mud-and-brick oven called *wuri* in the backyard of the house. This is where the traditional meals will be cooked for the wedding ceremonies.

Another ritual the *Maenzraat* in which the women wearing red and blue *pherans* (Kashmiri gowns) would sing marriage folk-songs for the *Maenzraat*, the night when heena would rubbed on the hands and feet of the bride and the groom. Feasts are given by both the parties to their friends and relatives. *Heena* and ornaments still continue to be sent to the bride. On those occasions all the women that have been called to the feast stain their hands and feet with *heena*. Cheerful concerts are held by women day and night<sup>18</sup>.

Then the wedding guests present among the relatives and neighbours were invited for lunch. The food prepared by the *waza* consisted, variety of dishes. *Wazwan* is regarded by the Kashmiri Muslims as a core element of their culture and identity. Guests are grouped into four for serving of the *wazwan*. The meal begins with invoking the name of Allah and a ritual washing of hands, as jug and basin called the *tash-t-nari* are passed among the guests<sup>19</sup>. Kashmiri *wazwan* is generally prepared in marriages and other special functions. The *wazas* remain in great demand during the marriage season (May-October). Some of the essential *wazwan* dishes are, *mayth maz*, *kabab*, *tabaq maz*, *rista*, *goshtaba*, *aab gosh*, *marts wangan qorma*<sup>20</sup>.

But before marriage procession leaves for the bride's house, the groom must visit the nearest shrine and the ancestral graveyard where he seeks the blessings. The groom and his party (*baraat/yeni-woul*) leaves for the bride's house accompanied by a group of people<sup>21</sup>.

On arrival of the marriage procession relatives of the bride greet the procession warmly. The father of the bride and the father of groom embraced one another symbolizing the solemnization of the relationship with a promise of a life-long friendship. The women sing folk- songs on this day<sup>22</sup>. On this day *nikah* or marriage bond is drawn up and the *mahr* was fixed. The deed cannot be drawn up without the consent of both the bride and bridegroom. They are therefore generally represented by some of their new relatives. The bridegroom's father had to pay the qazi, the mosque<sup>23</sup>. The groom and the bride before leaving the house of the bride, the eldest female member of the family or the bride's mother kisses the bride and the groom on the forehead.

The newly-weds were welcomed in the grooms house in a playful moment, the groom's eldest aunt would refuse the newly-weds entry into their home until she was given some cash or jewellery. In the joyful moment the eldest woman (mother-in-law of bride) of the groom's family approaches the room where the bride was made to sit, before kissing on the forehead of the bride, this ceremony is known as *mohar tulen*, the mother-in-law of the bride used to give presents to the bride in cash, silver or golden ornaments. In return bride also offers presents to her mother in law, in the shape of an ornament or cash known as *Hash Kant*<sup>24</sup>.

The bride stays in the house of bridegroom for seven days. During this time the bride's father had to send various dishes and suits of clothes to the bridegroom's father. On the third day of the marriage dry tea, sugar and cakes are sent to the bridegroom. These are distributed amongst the bridegroom's friends and relatives<sup>25</sup>.

The bride would go to visit her parents after the seven days of marriage. Her husband and a couple of children, probably those of her sister-in-laws, accompany her. The parents of the bride had to give the bride a set of new clothes and cash. The groom was also presented with new clothes. This is called *sathrath* ceremony followed by another ceremony *phirsal*. This is the ceremony that takes place when the couple visits the bride's parents for the second time. Once again, they are given new clothes to mark the occasion<sup>26</sup>.

The last ceremony related to the marriage of Muslims is *phiryun*. This is equivalent to the modern day reception held at the girl's palace. The bride's close relatives come to the marital home and escort the bride back to the parent's home for one day. The bride wears all the jewellery given to her by her in- laws and proceeds to her parent's home. The bride's family prepares a lavish spread of non-vegetarian delicacies for the relatives from both homes. After the grand meal, the parents of the bride gifts to their son-in-law and after a stay of few days both return to the marital home to begin their family life<sup>27</sup>.

## Death Ceremonies of Muslims

Everybody born in this world has to die one day or the other. Obviously the inevitable draught of mortality has to be tasted by everyone. The occasion of passing away of a person was followed everywhere by religious practices. At the same time local customs played a great role in the performance of these ceremonies. The death of an infant or young child is a common event, causes sorrow but usually not major social disruption. The death of a married adult has wider repercussions. Various funeral rites, feasts and mourning practices affirm kinship ties with the deceased and among survivors<sup>28</sup>. However when a person is near the point of death, he is laid with his head towards north- south direction, and he is given as his last drink a *sharbat* made of honey. His relatives and all those who are present begin to recite the kalmia (Recitation of the names of God and the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W) and if possible the dying man too is made to recite it. Immediately after the person's death his eyes and mouth are closed and those around him dears and relatives break into weeping<sup>29</sup>. His relatives get a big plank from the nearest mosque and place the body on it, with the face turned towards the sky. The body is then washed with warm water and wrapped into a cotton white cloth known as *Kafan* which consists of a long piece of hand switched inner, *Tah-band*, tied at feet, and a cover *Sar-band*, with three knots at feet, naval and head. The dead body wrapped into *Kafan* is placed into a wooden box called *tabout* (coffin) which is available in every mosque. Keeping the *Tabout* in front, with feet of the corpse toward the south, the men folk stand behind their Imam, in rows, facing *Qibla* (west) and offer *Nimaz-i-Jinazah* (the last prayers) to the deceased. The coffin is then taken on shoulders by near relatives to ancestral graveyard followed by other relatives and friends who recite the verses of Holy Quran. Then the dead body is taken out from the *tabout* and buried in the grave which is so many feet under the beneath of earth<sup>30</sup>.

On the day of the funeral, and for three days after, the guests and priest are feasted by some relative of the deceased, as no food is eaten from the deceased's house. Up to the first Friday after the burial the relatives and the friends of the deceased go to the graveyard early in the morning every day and recite a few verses from the Quran<sup>31</sup>. On the fourth day following the death family members and relatives go to grave yard to pray for the peace of the departed soul which is called *Fatih-i-Khawani*. The people after returning from graveyard went their way to the house of the departed person and are served with light refreshment, in the shape of tea and breads; a big feast is given there. For forty days prayers used to offer up for the deceased and food is given to the priest and to the poor. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day, a semi religious setting under the supervision of local Imam is held, in which the Quranic verse were recited for granting peace for the soul of the deceased. For one year presents must be given every month to the priest and hereafter on the anniversary of a man's death the priest would receive a gift. Majority of the Muslims also observe 15<sup>th</sup> day, 40<sup>th</sup> day and death anniversary in the memory of departed soul<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusion

A vast number of rituals are more prevalently practiced in rural areas of Kashmir. The rituals of Kashmir were inherited from the ancestors and are still existent in full sway in the valley of Kashmir. From the birth of a child, marriage and the cremation, number of customs and ceremonies were held on different occasions. The customs and ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death in Kashmir during the period of our study were elaborate and very expensive. And it is to be noted that the life of the people of Kashmiri was ruled by customs and tradition. On the whole the customs and ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death of the Kashmiri Muslims did not undergo much perceptible change.

## Endnotes

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