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# Daily practice

Everyday life is characterised by de Certeau (1984, p. 43) as a 'vast ensemble' of '*procedures*'. Islam, perhaps more so than any other religion with the exception of orthodox Judaism, places a great focus on orthopraxis, the following of correct procedures. The daily lives of Muslims involve an array of religious obligations, and as such, these procedures have come to be more indicative of Islam in the non-Muslim sphere than the actual tenets of Islamic belief to which they relate. The five pillars of Islam dictate the obligations Muslims must attend to continually, daily, monthly, annually, and in reference to *Hajj*, once in a lifetime. This chapter looks at two of these obligations, that of daily prayers and the annual fast during the month of Ramadan, both of which set Muslims apart from their non-Muslim peers during everyday activities. The following discussion shows how individuals manage their religious obligations in everyday situations and circumstances. We see in these accounts how our sample of young Muslims encounter a variety of external expectations and demands regarding their time and religious behaviour. These testimonies highlight how religious practice is tied not only to family traditions and ethnicity, but also to how daily life in Hong Kong influences religious observance. Islamic practice is identified as part of the rhythm of everyday life in Hong Kong. These accounts of religious practice add context to an emerging theme in this book; that is, Islam is not a contentious or volatile issue in Hong Kong and Muslims are free to observe their religion both legally and socially.

Of all daily commitments a Muslim makes, prayer is the one that sets them apart from the regular processes of the day in non-Muslim communities. Unlike consuming halal food, which can be performed alongside non-Muslims however problematic this may be, prayer fixes a moment where Muslims must leave their non-Muslim peers and perform as a Muslim alone. It is a daily obligation that must be made five times. There

are specific rites about how each prayer should be performed and at what time. Prayer times vary seasonally and relate to ambiguous Qur'anic guidelines which are supplemented by the example of the prophet Muhammad as outlined in the Sunnah. In a Muslim country the call to prayer by the *Muezzin* from the mosque minaret releases Muslims of the need to be mindful of these times themselves; they are informed. In a non-Muslim society the time must be obtained from the local mosque, through Muslim friends, or sought out independently online. From the beginnings of the religion of Islam, it was understood that prayers could not always be made at their exact times and so if Muslims are unable to perform one of the daily prayers, they are given the concession that they can make them up another time by adding them to a later prayer.

The circumstances of the participants in the research vary in terms of their willingness and ability to perform the daily prayers. The vast majority of the youth pray every day and on average manage three of their daily prayers. At least nine have a daily routine in which they complete all their prayers each day. Out of the 37 respondents, seven are infrequent prayers who prefer to leave the precise details of their prayer life ambiguous. In some cases this is due to other commitments in their daily lives, while in others prayers are simply a low priority. School obviously presents an obstacle in attending to prayers. For Indonesian foreign domestic workers, prayers are simply not possible during the busy demands of their daily work.

The extent of the difference in the performance of daily prayers is immediately apparent when we address how the first prayer of the day is approached. This prayer is called the *fajr* prayer, the dawn prayer, and can be performed between first light and sunrise (Qur'an S 24:58). At the time of writing the Islamic Union of Hong Kong's website (<http://www.iuhk.org>), which lists the time for the daily prayers, says that *fajr* starts at 04:24 and that sunrise is at 05:47. Ashja wakes early each morning and performs his prayers with his father and brother. Along with praying, Ashja uses this early start to the day to do extra studies and homework before he has breakfast and travels to school. For Qaaria, the morning prayer is also an important part of her daily routine. However, she feels that her busy schedule prevents her from participating in the other prayers over the course of the day.

**Qaaria:** ... I've got so many other things to do. After school stuff, so I don't really pay much attention to my religion (*said as starting laugh*).

**Paul:** That's fine.

**Qaaria:** I mean I do. But I don't pray five times a day or anything like that.

It is sometimes difficult for non-Muslims to grasp that Muslims do not always attend to their prayers because Islam is generally essentialised in terms of orthopraxy. Not all Muslims worship regularly; many Muslims pray simply when they feel like it (Basit 1997, p. 41). These responses highlight again how young Muslims have considerable autonomy regarding how they choose to follow Islam.

Prayers are an important part of Jumana's daily routine; the morning prayer is a central focus in her morning schedule of waking and preparing for school. Elisha also prays every day when she wakes. However, a number of other girls do not always manage this prayer and omit this observation entirely. Many feel that the *fajr* prayer is simply too early. Sahira generally does not perform her morning prayers. Her mother often wakes her at 05.30 to pray, but despite this, she just stays in bed and falls back to sleep. For Pari the situation is much the same, in relation to the first prayer of the day she says that 'in the morning I can't get up from my bed'. Many respondents are a little guarded about how frequently they pray, but for Dil this is not an issue, she is happy to declare that she prays when she can and that this is sufficient for her.

**Dil:** Actually I can manage only three of the daily prayers because the two prayers I miss, one is very early in the morning. I can't wake that early, and the second one is about one o'clock to two thirty and I am in school at that time.

These accounts not only challenge an essential or monolithic idea of Islamic culture, they also show young Muslims being innovative about their religious practice. Here, we see Muslim youth exercising a choice. Prayers are simply a part of everyday life; they do not define Muslim youth any more than any other everyday factor.

In contrast to the morning prayer, which for all the participants is something to attend to at home, many of the other prayers performed throughout the day occur during school time. The different schools that the participants attend all have differing levels of support for Muslim

students. The Chinese Islamic school makes provision for students to perform all their prayers during school time and to also have a special communal *Jumu'ah* prayer for Muslim students to attend together. *Jumu'ah* prayer is the most important prayer for Muslims each week and takes place on Friday lunchtimes. The importance of this prayer is also acknowledged and facilitated by the principal of the government school that Waqi, Elisha, and Inas attend. Their school in contrast to the Chinese Islamic school is a secular government institution. It is, however, a school closely associated with South Asians in the territory. Each Friday the school makes a room available for the *Jumu'ah* prayers but has no space or time allowed in the school day for the other Muslim prayers. The lack of Islamic provision or guidance at this school and the other secular government school included in the research contributes to a variety of negative feelings that have been reported by some parents. These concerns have been voiced alongside other complaints regarding the school system which focus on a lack of discipline, poor monitoring of school uniforms, and students' informal interaction with staff (Ku et al. 2003, pp. 50–51). The school that Dil, Hadaf, and Ashja attend had little support for students' daily prayers when I first visited in 2006. Hadaf told me at that time that students who wanted to pray on Friday for the *Jumu'ah* prayers had to travel to a local mosque either in Sham Shui Po or Tsim Sha Tsui. This was allowed by the principal although there were some concerns that some Pakistani boys might just take Friday afternoon off as a break. Now the situation has changed and Muslim pupils are allowed to perform their prayers in the school gym in between classes and are given full use of this space for *Jumu'ah* prayers on Friday lunchtimes. The international school that Qaaria attends has the least provision for prayers with neither time nor space available for the few Muslim students they have.

At Waqi's school, students are given the use of a classroom for their weekly *Jumu'ah* prayers. This provision is one that seems to be used exclusively by Pakistani boys, as Waqi explains.

**Waqi:** Most of the Pakistani boys go, we have some boys from Malaysia and Indonesia they are Muslim but they don't come. They are Muslim, they know they are Muslim and they should come to pray, but they don't. Most of the Pakistani boys come.

While religion in Hong Kong is generally accepted without conflict, it is interesting to note that among Muslims, Islamic practice is sometimes

used as a way of criticising other ethnic groups. Waqi's comments are thus reflected back on to his own ethnicity by Inas. She provides an interesting insight when talking about prejudice and anti-racism at school. Despite her school having over 40 different nationalities on the register, she states that there are no real activities raising awareness of different cultures or combating racism. She reveals that there are certain issues of difference and prejudice at her school.

**Inas:** The Pakistanis are so straight, they have to wear the headscarf and long clothes. Sometimes they don't talk to the Christians at school, some hate them.

In numerous discussions with Muslims at the mosques, schools, and with asylum seekers at Chungking Mansions, I encountered similar remarks regarding how Indonesians, Pakistanis, Africans, or Filipinos practised Islam. This again shows the diversity of Islamic practice, that it is versatile and adaptable to different cultural spaces and traditions. These comparisons never debated the tenets of belief, but instead were critical of practices and observance. Muslims in Hong Kong therefore appear to be perfectly aware that there are different ways to follow Islam, though they may not always be tolerant, or positive about them. It is very clear that Pakistanis, Indonesians, and *Hui* have different attitudes and beliefs regarding Islam. In light of these comments, it is also worth noting that some ethnic groups exercise hegemony over religious spaces. The *Jumu'ah* prayer room at Waqi's school and Ashja's reticence about attending the mosque underline these factors. Those who do attend the mosque are male and they refer to the mosque as a part of their social territory. They meet friends, eat, play games, and shop in the areas surrounding their local mosque.

The mosque that Insaf occasionally attends is a converted office space in the Indonesian consulate and as such is exclusively patronised by Indonesians. In this respect, practising Islam in Hong Kong for Insaf is ultimately a monocultural experience; he does not worship, or discuss Islam with other Muslims and only visits Muslim institutions that are connected to his homeland. Through various questions I came to understand that Insaf infrequently visits the 'office' mosque. He clearly does not go during the week and states that he is unable to perform *Jumu'ah* prayers because of his school timetable. He usually only goes to the mosque during festivals or celebrations. Despite this, Insaf appears very humble,

earnest and softly spoken on the subject of Islam. Whatever can be taken from these responses needs also to be placed in the context that Insaf has only lived in Hong Kong for one year and is due to return to Jakarta in three more years. I speculate that Insaf considers Islam a mostly stable and secure part of his life and it therefore does not require the attention that school and social activities do in his new home. For Insaf it appears that learning English, being among peers from a variety of different cultures, and becoming familiar with Hong Kong are the most pressing of daily concerns. In light of this, I gathered that while his religious practice has altered since arriving in Hong Kong, his beliefs, and Islamic principles have not really changed since leaving Indonesia.

## Ramadan

Each year during Ramadan, Muslims take on an additional daily religious obligation to fast throughout the month. During this month, Muslims are required to abstain from food and drink during daylight hours; they must read the Qur'an and be more mindful of religion in their daily life. Amisha, an Indonesia domestic helper, finds that Ramadan is very special in Hong Kong. She takes the time to think about others less fortunate than herself and to read the Qur'an. Her employers have no objection to her fasting and she feels supported in her religious commitments. Ramadan for Amisha is just as special in Hong Kong as it is in Indonesia. While many Indonesian foreign domestic helpers do not observe fasting while in Hong Kong, this does not bother Amisha. She simply asks that her friends not eat around her during the hours of fasting. The celebration at the end of Ramadan is termed *Hari Lebaran* by Indonesians and Malays. The communal prayers that take place at this time in Victoria Park are popular among all types of Indonesian foreign domestic workers, whether they are observant or not. Amisha noted that many Chinese employers support the religious festivals and commitment of their Indonesian helpers. She had even heard of some cases where women have been working in Hong Kong for several years and their employers have paid for them to make *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Waqi provides a contrast to these accounts. He has lived in Hong Kong for many years and provides an illuminating insight into the challenges of Ramadan as a male Muslim in the territory.

**Waqi:** In Hong Kong it is really very hard to have this month. Each day we eat in the morning but we don't have anything else to eat until six or seven o'clock in the evening. Everything, even our eyes, ears and lips they can't do bad. Our lips can't say wrong things, ears can't hear bad things, and eyes can't see bad things. But here in Hong Kong it's very hard to protect our eyes and our ears, because girls wear short skirts and easily you can see a girl who is wearing a short skirt. In Pakistan they wear the full dress and it's different from here than in Pakistan.

Waqi's account provides context to understanding the practice of Islam in a non-Islamic country. Hong Kong has been described as a 'louche and lascivious city' (Morris 1997, p. 55) and in many ways Waqi has tacitly acknowledged this in his comment. It could also be argued as an insight into the heightened visibility of contemporary Westernised femininity and sexuality, on display and to be gazed upon. In reviewing research on Muslim minorities, I have never encountered such an articulation of the challenges during Ramadan. It is an informative insight into a different type of test during Ramadan, which, instead of relating to pangs of hunger, details the difficulty of avoiding lustful thoughts. His response is presented with the awareness of having lived in an Islamic country. It highlights a concern about being a good Muslim during Ramadan that is particular to his experience of growing up as a young man in both Hong Kong and Pakistan. It is a street-level insight about an everyday issue.

Waqi, however, was not alone in highlighting such conflicts. Iftikhar from Somalia joked with Franky from Ghana that there were plenty of temptations and distractions in Hong Kong during Ramadan. Franky explained that he has spent Ramadan in various different countries. He once spent the month of Ramadan in Saudi Arabia and cherishes this special time. He also recalls fondly how Ramadan is celebrated in his home country Ghana. Even though the country has a religious mix, Christian businesses respect Ramadan and adapt to the daily fast and open in the evenings instead of the daytime. For Franky, Hong Kong during Ramadan is only reflected in the services at the mosque. For him, everyday life pretty much remains the same. With this normalcy comes distractions and obstacles.

**Franky:** Something you don't want to see, you see. Something you don't want to hear, you hear.



This is clearly challenging for Iftikhar too. He explains that 'where I am from everyone is Muslim' and as a result no food, or restaurant, is available during daylight hours in Mogadishu. Everyone experiences Ramadan together. In Hong Kong, by contrast, Ramadan is a non-event. Unlike many of the other respondents, Franky and Iftikhar, as asylum seekers, experience religious festivities in a lonelier manner with no family to celebrate with. As a result, their experience of Ramadan speaks of the street-level absence of festivity, change, and the typical religious solemnity experienced at home.

Family is central to the accounts of Ramadan given by many of the young women. Elisha visits the mosque with her family during the two *Eid* celebrations and brings beef as a gift to give to family, friends, and relatives. Elisha's visits to the mosque are now no longer ones in which to learn, they have become occasional visits of religious significance during festival times. She attends with her family, not independently, and the focus is not upon prayer but upon celebrating, eating, and meeting with friends and relatives. A similar account is given by Qaaria in which she details what the women's prayer hall in the Wanchai Mosque is like.

**Qaaria:** We only go once every year during Ramadan. I think it's the same in all mosques, but there is this separate section for women and men. We are on the top floor, then men are just below us and the guy that conducts the prayers is downstairs. There is a hole in the floor in the women's prayer room. We can hear what he says in the men's prayer room below and you can see the men. We all stand together and we start praying.

Qaaria does not note any particular obstacles to fasting during Ramadan, but many others describe fasting when friends are eating as the greatest challenge throughout this month. Pari, who considers herself Chinese in many respects, explains Ramadan to her Chinese friends and tells them when she is fasting. They appear to respect this and let Pari do as she pleases. Aseelah also fasts among many non-Muslim friends, in particular outside of school with her best friend who is Chinese. She comments that friends are sometimes curious about fasting and her best friend tries to fast also. This is a very good example of youth engaging with the diversity that surrounds them and learning about the different cultures with which they come into contact. Aseelah's friend learns from her about fasting during Ramadan and even participates in the religious practice in

a basic manner. Aseelah provides a contrast to suggestions that Muslim youth are radicalised by Islam and encouraged to strictly follow the faith by their parents. Like many others, Aseelah spoke about her enthusiasm to fast as a young child, though her parents encouraged her to put off fasting until she was older.

**Aseelah:** When I was young I used to be interested in fasting. I would say I am going to start fasting. This is easy to say but it's hard when you feel hungry ... When I was young my parents wouldn't allow me to fast because my dad felt we were too thin. He thinks that we are too thin and it's not healthy to fast.

When she was younger, around the age of 12 when children are expected to join in fasting, her parents would let her only fast for one day during the month of Ramadan. Aseelah's account highlights again the presence of parents in overseeing the religious affairs of their children. Such behaviour relates to the findings of both Basit (1997, p. 40) and Bauman (1996, p. 85) that children are eager to be involved in religious practice and parents often want to protect them from religious responsibility too young. While it is often the case that enthusiastic young children want to participate in Islamic practice, these same parents often encounter another issue when their children become adolescents. Parental interference with how frequently their children pray or read the Qur'an is very common. Many participants report that their mothers chase them up about prayers and fasting.

**Dil:** My mum is always after me that I should pray but sometimes I just skip it because I am tired ... My dad doesn't pray but my mum makes her prayers everyday.

**Paul:** So does she tell your dad off as well?

**Dil:** She does but my dad just says, 'I am a working man.'

Elisha gives a similar example.

**Elisha:** Sometimes I skip the prayers because I am tired. Really, really tired. My mum gives me this lecture, telling me that she used to pray five times a day and that she learnt to cook at the age of eight and she did all the housework.

Such responses again underline the argument that women are the transmitters of culture (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 196): a pattern that is also

discernible in the role that mothers play in the early education of children regarding prayers and the fundamentals of Islam. For many of the Pakistani girls, Ramadan is another topic that illustrates the importance of their home life. Elisha, Dil, Aseelah, and Kiran all speak with warmth about their family and the pastimes that they share collectively.

Kiran provides a rich description of her close relationship with relatives while referring to the practice of eating prior to sunrise. Each morning of Ramadan, families wake up very early to have large meals to see them through the day. Kiran's mother knows that the family often does not want to eat a hearty meal at such an early hour and therefore plans the meals carefully. Each morning the family is presented with their favourite foods to ensure that they will eat lots in order to give them stamina for the day ahead. Kiran also describes *Chaand Raat* night (meaning 'the night of the moon') which is a particularly popular Pakistani celebration on the last night of Ramadan.

**Kiran:** My cousins come to my house. Before the night of *Eid* we have the Pakistani culture called *Chaand Raat* Moon night. All the girls get together and dance and do henna painting. We check out our clothes and everything like that. In the morning we have to pray and then all our cousins come to visit and we get a lot of money and eat a lot of food. All the girls go shopping and have dinner together.

During this shopping spree Kiran buys stationery or 'girls' stuff' and visits some of the big shopping malls or department stores with her female relatives. Kiran's account blends a number of different themes together. It highlights a transnational theme in the persistence of a culturally specific Islamic celebration *Chand Raat* in Hong Kong. It also reveals the enjoyment she has celebrating with her aunts and cousins, and shows that there are strong bonds between them. Kiran also gets the opportunity at this time to fully indulge in girl consumption patterns, the hallmark and confirmation of contemporary female youth (Harris 2004, pp. 121–123).

## Living Islam in Hong Kong

At the start of Ramadan in 2010, a group of beggars gathered outside the Tsim Sha Tsui Mosque on Nathan Road. The group, an annual presence, had grown in size since the previous year as a number of Mainland beggars had now joined the local Hong Kong beggars. The new additions

caused friction among the veteran Ramadan panhandlers and a scuffle took place. This bizarre anecdote provides a very basic truth about Islam in Hong Kong; it is part of the rhythm of everyday life. It is recognised and incorporated into the workings of the territory. These beggars understand that during Ramadan many Muslims contribute to charity; performing *Zakat* is one of their religious rites. This knowledge of Islam in Hong Kong, and this annual performance outside the Kowloon Mosque, demonstrates Islam as a living part of Hong Kong's hybrid culture.

The varied accounts of the participants in this chapter provide a rich insight into the different ways in which young Muslims follow and live Islam in Hong Kong. Anecdotes regarding prayers and fasting show how the youth navigate a variety of obstacles and circumstances in religious observance. These descriptive accounts of religious practice illustrate the fact that Islam in Hong Kong is for many Muslims a sphere of life which is tied to their ethnicity. It also shows that many different types of Islam are practised in Hong Kong, not just in terms of national and ethnic cultures, but also individual practices that are constantly in flux. These accounts support the argument that Islam is a facet of culture and identity that is cultivated in innumerable ways over an entire lifetime (Zine 2001, p. 404). We see that the participants practise their religion amidst an array of differences and ambiguities regarding religious obligations. The fact that the Muslims in this study choose to attend to all their prayers, few, or none at all, appears to be something that fits with their day-to-day lifestyle and the actions of their peers. While parents and particularly mothers encourage Islamic observation among their children, it is not strictly enforced, and as such youth have a good deal of autonomy and freedom to follow Islam within certain boundaries. In the case of Insaf, Hong Kong's diversity appears to have little impact on his religious observation. Insaf's cultural mix permeates his life, but it currently makes a shallow impact on the way he practises Islam. Individuals are not uniformly culturally mixed; hybridity is uneven, and not every aspect of their daily life and culture is a fusion and representation of the mixing of cultures.

In acknowledging the discourse of Muslims as minorities we can again consider how everyday hybridity facilitates a broad understanding of the lived experiences of young Muslims. Here, we engage with the daily practice of religion and we are reminded that Muslims are not defined by Islam, that it is simply a part of the ensemble of their lives.

Media reportage and fears concerning Islamic ideology have obscured these truths. Muslims are too frequently only understood through a distorted lens regarding the challenge and threat of Islam. Many Muslims never manage to pray five times a day, or seldom read the Qur'an. These representations of Muslims, mundane and banal as they may sometimes be, are necessary to counter the overwhelming amount of information that addresses Muslims as individuals and communities only in terms of conflict. The next chapter closely examines the issue of halal food for Muslims in Hong Kong, revealing once more a variety of different attitudes to everyday religious observance.