

# Islamic Customs and Etiquette

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51-K, Model Town,  
Lahore, Pakistan.

297.14 — dc 21  
Saleem, Shehzad  
Islamic Customs and Etiquette  
Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2005  
ii + 13.

Distributors

Dar-ut-Tazkeer  
Rahman Market, Ghazani Street Urdu Bazar, Lahore-54000  
Pakistan.  
Web Site: [www.dar-ut-tazkeer.com](http://www.dar-ut-tazkeer.com)  
E-mail: [info@dar-ut-tazkeer.com](mailto:info@dar-ut-tazkeer.com)

Hardbound

Price: in Pakistan Rs. 25/-

ISBN 969-8799-11-7

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## Islamic Customs and Etiquette<sup>1</sup>

The various manifestations of the conduct, mannerisms and pattern of living of a group of people are called customs and etiquette. No period of human civilization has remained devoid of them. We find them in currency in every clan, culture and nation. Civilizations are mostly distinguished from one another because of them. The religions revealed to the Prophets of Allah also direct their respective believers to follow certain customs and etiquette. The objective of divine religions is purification of the soul. Consequently, these customs and etiquette have been chosen to fulfill this objective. When the Prophet Muhammad (sws) was called to serve the Almighty, all these customs and etiquette existed in Arabia as practices of the Abrahamic religion. Except for a few things, the Prophet Muhammad (sws) made no addition to them. They, obviously, existed before the Qur'ān and their status is that of *sunan* (plural of *sunnah*) which were sanctioned by the Prophet (sws) and then transferred to the Muslim *ummah* through the consensus and perpetual adherence of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws). Now their source is the consensus of the *ummah* and on this very basis are accepted and acknowledged everywhere as part of Islam. In the following paragraphs, this writer shall elaborate in detail these customs and etiquette.

1. Declaring Allah's name before eating and drinking and using the right hand for the purpose

The first of these is to express gratitude to Allah for His bounties and to invoke His blessings and the second is to constantly remind us that those who are bestowed with the

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1. This article appears as a booklet: Ghāmidī, Javed Ahmad, *Rusūm-u Adāb*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Lahore: Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences, 2005.

favours of Paradise will receive their account in their right hand on the Day of Judgement. In other words, when a true believer uses his right hand while eating and drinking, he symbolically expresses his desire to be among the *aṣḥāb al-yaṁīn* (companions of the right hand) on the Day of Judgement. The Prophet (sws) has directed us to follow this Sunnah of the Prophets in the following words:

( : )

When anyone among you is about to eat food, he should say *bismillāh*. If he forgets to say it at the beginning and [remembers it later on while eating], he should say: “In the name of Allah; [count these words, O Lord!] both at the beginning and at the end of the food [I have eaten]”. (*Tirmadhī*, No: 1858)

( : )

When anyone among you eats, he should eat with the right hand and when he drinks, he should drink with the right hand. (*Muslim*, No: 2020)

## 2. The ceremonial salutation and its response when people meet one another

The ceremonial salutation is a prayer of peace and well-being for one another in this world and in the Hereafter. The one who initiates the salutation says (*al-salāmu ‘alaykum*) and the one who replies says (*wa ‘alaykum al-salām*). This salutation is mentioned in the Qur’ān as well as in various Aḥādīth. While pointing out its correct etiquette, the Prophet (sws) is reported to have said:

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( : )

The young shall say *salām* to the old, the one who is walking shall say it to the sitting and a small group shall say it to a large one. (*Bukhārī*, No: 5877)

### 3. The ceremonial utterances after sneezing

Sneezing relieves a person from an internal disorder. A person is required to say *(al-ḥamdullilāh: all gratitude is for Allah only)* after sneezing and anyone who hears him should reply by saying only *(yarḥamukallāh: may Allah have mercy upon you)*. These words are meant to remind a believer that the blessings of Allah in this world and in the Hereafter are specifically for people who are grateful. According to some Aḥādīth, it was initiated at the dawn of mankind, when the spirit was blown into Adam and he woke up in this world<sup>2</sup>. The existence of the word *(tashmīt)* for these ceremonial utterances is evidence enough that they are an age old *sunnah* which the Prophet Muhammad (sws) sanctioned and adopted for his own *ummah* also. He is reported to have said:

:

( : ). : :

When anyone of you sneezes, he should say *(al-ḥamdullilāh)* and if his brother or companion hears these words, he should reply by saying *(yarḥamukallāh)*. And when he says *(yarḥamukallāh)*, you should say: “May Allah guide you and keep you well”. (*Bukhārī*, No. 5870)

### 4. Saying the *(ādhān)* in the right ear of a new born and the *(iqāmah)* in his left.

This *sunnah* was initiated by the Prophet Muhammad (sws). The words of the *(ādhān)* and the *(iqāmah)* adopted by the Prophet (sws) in accordance with the guidance he received from the Almighty encompass very comprehensively the whole message of Islam in a very concise and moving manner. A true believer is forever an addressee of this message. We hear these words to our people five times a day from our mosques. Sounding these words in the ear of a newborn is a symbolic expression of the fact that just as his parents have transferred their physical

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2. *Tirmadhī*, No: 3368.

being to him, they have initiated the transfer of their spiritual being to him with words that convey the basic message of Islam.

5. Clipping the moustache, 6. Shaving the pubes, 7. Removing hair from under the armpits, 8. Cutting nails, 9. Circumcising the mail offspring

All these five things belong to Islamic etiquette. Large moustaches give the impression of arrogance and conceit in a person. Edibles and drinks become contaminated through them when they are put in the mouth. Dirt often accumulates in elongated nails and such nails also have resemblance with savage animals. Consequently, the Almighty has directed us to keep our moustaches trim and to cut our nails whenever they grow. The rest of the three directives are aimed at one's physical cleanliness and hygiene. So strict was the Prophet (sws) in observing these norms that for some of them he even stipulated a certain time limit. Anas (rta) reports:

( : ).

The time before which we must trim our moustache, cut our nails, shave pubic hair, remove hair from under the armpits has been fixed as forty days. (*Muslim*, No: 258)

Before the advent of Islam, Arabs usually observed these etiquette<sup>3</sup>. The source of these norms and practices is found in our own nature and the Prophets of Allah have always made them a part of religion, considering the importance they occupy in purifying and cleansing human beings – the very objective of Islam. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said:

( : ).

Five things are from among [the norms of] human nature: circumcision, shaving the pubes, cutting nails, removing hair

3. Dr Jawād 'Alī, *al-Mufasssal fī Tārīkh al-'Arab Qabl al-Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malāliyyīn, 1986), 346.

under the armpits and clipping the moustache. (*Muslim*, No: 257)

#### 10. Cleaning the nostrils, the mouth and the teeth

The fondness towards cleanliness which the Prophets of Allah want to inculcate among their followers made them include the above mentioned practices as an established *sunnah*. In history, they are referred to as *(sha'ā'ir: religious symbols)* of Arabia<sup>4</sup>. It is known from the way the Prophet (sws) did *wuḍū* (ablution) that he would specially do *(maḍmaḍah: to gargle in order to clean the mouth)* and *(istinshāq: to pour water in the nostrils to clean them)*. He was also very diligent in cleaning his teeth, and is even reported to have said:

( : )

Had I not thought that this would burden my *ummah*, I would have directed them to clean their teeth before every prayer. (*Muslim*, No: 252)

#### 11. Cleaning the body after urination and defecation

Cleaning carefully the relevant body parts after defecation and urination is another Abrahamic practice<sup>5</sup>. Depending upon the circumstances, these parts can be cleaned by water, mud cubes or other things that can serve the purpose. It is apparent from various Aḥādīth that the Prophet (sws) normally used water for this. Abū Hurayrah (sws) reports:

( : ).

When the Prophet would go out to relieve himself, I would bring some water in a utensil or a water container. He would clean himself from this water and then rub his hands on the mud to clean them. (*Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 45)

#### 12. Taking the ceremonial bath after the menstrual cycle and the puerperal discharge

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

The ceremonial bath has also remained a *sunnah* of the Prophets. As soon as bleeding ceases in both these situations, a woman must have this bath to enter the state of purity. The Qur'ān explained the *sharī'ah* regarding this issue in the following words:

( : )

They ask you concerning women's courses. Tell them: "They are an impurity. So keep away from women in their courses and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves approach them in the manner the Almighty has directed you [in your instincts] – for Allah loves those who constantly repent and keep themselves clean". (2:222)

Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, while explaining this verse writes<sup>6</sup>:

In this verse, two words have been used: (*tuhr*) and (*ṭaṭaḥḥurr*). While the former means "the completion of the state of impurity and discontinuation of menstrual bleeding", the latter implies "a woman entering the state of purity after having the ceremonial bath". According to the verse, a woman should be in a state of purity for sexual intercourse; simultaneously, it is delineated that when a woman enters the state of purity, the husband can go near her. It is evident from these words that the real reason that prohibits sexual intercourse is blood; so once this stops, the prohibition no longer remains. However, the proper conduct in this regard is that a husband should approach his wife for sexual relations once she has had the ceremonial bath.

### 13. Ceremonial bath after *Janābah*

In the religion of the Prophets, after *janābah* also, the believers

6. Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1985), 526.

must take the ceremonial bath. The Almighty has stated this directive particularly before the prayer in the following words:

( : )

Believers approach not the place of the prayer when you are in a drunken state until you are able to understand what you say nor when you are in a state of sexual impurity (*janābah*) till you have taken a bath except if you only intend to just pass through the prayer place. (4:43)

In *Sūrah Mā'idah*, this directive is stated in similar words (If you are in a state of *janābah*, have a bath. (5:6)). By *janābah* is meant the state of impurity that one enters after copulation or after a seminal/ovular discharge whether or not copulation has taken place. The ceremonial bath is necessary after this state in order to be purified. One should have this bath in a thorough and complete manner. As per the linguistic principles of Arabic, the Qur'ānic words (*iṭṭaharū*) and (*ighṭasilū*) testify to this. The way the Prophet (sws) set about following this directive, as mentioned in various Aḥādīth, can be summarized as:

First the hands should be washed; then the genital area should be thoroughly cleaned by the left hand; then *wuḍū* should be done except that feet should be washed later at the end; then while inserting the fingers in the hair, water should be soaked into it so that it reaches its roots; then water should be poured all over the body. In the end, the feet should be washed.

Following are the Aḥādīth that have reached us in this regard from 'Ā'ishah (rta) and Maymūnah (rta), the blessed mothers of the believers:

( : ).

‘Ā’ishah reports that when the Prophet would have the ceremonial bath after *janābah*, he would first wash both hands. Then he would clean his genital area by the left hand after pouring water on it by the right one. Then he would do *wuḍū* the same way as *wuḍū* is done for the prayer. He would then take some water and insert his fingers in his hair until the water reached the skin. He would then pour three handfuls of water on his head. Then he would drench all his body with water and then wash both feet. (*Muslim*, No: 316)

( : ).

Ibn ‘Abbās narrates: “My aunt Maymūnah [once] told me: ‘I placed some water [in a utensil] before the Prophet (sws) so that he could have the ceremonial bath of *janābah*. He first washed both his hands two or three times. Then he slid his hand in the utensil and poured some water over his private area and washed it with his left hand. He then thoroughly rubbed this hand on the ground and did *wuḍū* the way it is done before the prayer. He then took three handfuls of water and poured them on his head. Then he washed all his body. He then stepped aside and washed both his feet.’” (*Muslim*, No: 317)

#### 14. Bathing a dead body

Bathing a dead body is also from among the *sunan* of the Prophets.<sup>7</sup> The directive stands fulfilled if water is poured all

7. In normal circumstances, every dead person must be given a bath. However, in extraordinary circumstances in which bathing a dead body and putting it in a coffin cloth becomes a matter of great difficulty, then the body can be buried without bathing it and putting it in a coffin cloth. It is narrated in *Bukhārī* (No. 1346) that the Prophet (sws)

over the body. However, keeping in view the importance of purification and cleanliness in Islam, the spirit of the directive is that the body should be bathed with diligence and thoroughness.

The directives regarding bathing a dead body which the Prophet (sws) once gave are:

( : )

Bathe the [dead] body of this [girl] with water and berry leaves three times or five times – or even more if required and add camphor or [he said] some camphor to the water with which you bathe her. (*Bukhārī*, No: 1195)

( : )

Bathe this girl odd number of times: three or five or seven times and begin with her right side and from the limbs by which *wuḍū* is done. (*Bukhārī*, No: 1196)

#### 15. Enshrouding a dead body in coffin cloth

Enshrouding the dead body in coffin cloth after giving it a bath is also an Abrahamic *sunnah*. Though one single piece of cloth can be used for this purpose, however, to show due respect to the dead body something better seems befitting. ‘Ā’ishah (rta) narrates that the Prophet (sws) was enwrapped in three *yamanī* sheets which did not include any shirt or turban (*‘amāmah*). The Prophet (sws) says:

( : ) .

Any one among you who enshrouds your dead brother in a coffin cloth should do it befittingly. (*Muslim*, No: 943)

directed Muslims to bury the martyrs of the battle of Uḥud in this manner. This incident has been narrated in other books of Ḥadīth also. Our jurists associate such a burial with martyrdom only. However, in the opinion of this writer, this is a general exception which is based on the principle of relief (*rukhsah*) that is always kept in consideration in the various directives of Islam.

## 16. Burial

Another practice among the Prophets of Allah is burying the dead in a grave – the final resting place.<sup>8</sup> No specific way has been fixed for this. A ditch can be made by digging the earth and then covering it or a cavity can be made adjacent to a dug out ditch or the dead body may be buried in a coffin casket. All these ways can be adopted. However, the Prophet (sws) did not approve of cementing a grave or building some structure over it or writing something on it.<sup>9</sup> It has been reported in some Aḥādīth that at the time of burial, the Prophet (sws) sprinkled clay from the head side of the body three times.<sup>10</sup> While placing the body in the grave, the following words have also been reported from the Prophet (sws):<sup>11</sup> Another Ḥadīth says that the Prophet (sws) urged others also to say these words.<sup>12</sup> The following prayer for the dead after burial is ascribed to him in this regard:

( : )

Pray for the forgiveness of your brother and beseech the Almighty to make him steadfast because now he would be called to account. (*Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 3221)

## 17. ʿĪd al-Fitr; 18. ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā

Both these festivals were originated by the Prophet (sws) at the behest of the Almighty. Before the advent of Islam in Arabia, we find mention of ʿĪd festivals as (*yawm al-sabʿ*) and (*yawm al-Sabāsab*) and some others among the Idolaters of Arabia. The *sharīʿah* of the Israelites had ʿĪd festivals as well but as is evident from the Old Testament and other scriptures, these festivals related more to commemorating certain days of

8. This way is to be adopted in normal circumstances. So if a person dies on a ship and the shore is far off, the only option left is to cast the body in the surrounding water.

9. *Muslim*, Nos: 969-70; *Ibn Mājah*, No: 1563.

10. *Ibn Mājah*, No: 1565.

11. *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 3213, (“In the name of Allah and according to the way of His Prophet”).

12. *Musnad Aḥmad*, No: 5233.

their history. In the last *sharī'ah* also, the Almighty fixed the above mentioned two *ʿīd* festivals for man and associated them with two great manifestations of piety and submission to the Almighty. The *ʿīd al-fīṭr* is observed on the first of *shawwāl* right after the end of the holy month of *Ramaḍān* in which the believers undergo a period of fasting for the purpose of attaining piety. Similarly, the *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* is celebrated on the 10<sup>th</sup> of *dhū al-ḥajj* to commemorate the sacrifice offered by Abraham (sws) – something which depicts the spirit of submitting to the Almighty in the ultimate form.

It is evident from certain Aḥādīth that these festivals were initiated in Maḍīnah after migration. Anas (rta) reports:

( : ) .

When the Prophet arrived [in Maḍīnah], he found people celebrating two specific days in which they used to entertain themselves by playing and merriment. He asked them about the nature of these festivities at which they replied that these days were occasions of fun and recreation of the days of *jiāhilliyah*. At this, the Prophet remarked that the Almighty has fixed two days [of festivity] instead of these for you which are better than these: *ʿīd al-fīṭr* and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā*. (*Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 1134)

The rituals which have been made *sunnah* in these days are the following:

1. *Ṣadqah al-Fiṭr* after *ʿīd al-fīṭr*
2. The Prayer and the Sermon
3. Animal Sacrifice
4. *Takbīrs* after every prayer in the Days of *tashrīq*<sup>13</sup>

13. The 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of *dhū al-ḥajj*.

Both these festivals of *īd al-fīṭr* and *īd al-aḏhā* are occasions of showing gratitude to the Creator, remembering Him and are a means of entertainment. ‘Ā’ishah (rta), the mother of the believers, narrates that when on an *īd* day her father, Abū Bakr (rta), stopped young girls from singing, the Prophet (sws) said:

( : ) .

Abū Bakr! [let them sing]; every nation has an *īd* and this [day] is our *īd*. (*Bukhārī*, No: 909)

The routines and practices which the Prophet (sws) observed in these days have been recorded in some Aḥādīth. They are:

On *īd al-fīṭr*, he would eat a few dates before going out to pray. It has been reported that their quantity would be an odd number.<sup>14</sup>

On *īd al-aḏhā*, he would never eat anything before the prayer.<sup>15</sup>

He would return from a different route from the one he had adopted while proceeding for both the *īd* prayers.<sup>16</sup>

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14. *Bukhārī*, No: 910.

15. *Tirmadhī*, No: 943.

16. *Bukhārī*, No: 986.

