

Background article: Expressions, The Muslim community

A Muslim child is welcomed

Conception

Children are a natural and welcome part of married human life and are a blessing from God. They are not surprisingly a source of great rejoicing within Muslim families! The act of sexual intercourse with the intention and hope of having a child is an act of particular spiritual character as it is God's way for the couple to open themselves to co-operate in the creation of a new life, if God so wills. Some Muslims will follow the practice of husband and wife praying two units (*rak'at*) of formal prayer (*salat*) before beginning to make love as a sign of this disposition. Others will say the *Basmala* ("In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate") before making love. There is a Hadith of the Prophet in which it is recommended to recite: "In the name of God. O God, keep Shaytan away from us and keep Shaytan away from what you provide us with" as a way of invoking God's blessing on any child that is conceived and keeping away the attentions of the devil (or Satan) from that child.

Pregnancy and labour

Pregnant women will give special attention to their nutrition during pregnancy to assist in the formation of a healthy child and some schools of Islam recommend special informal prayers (*du'a*) as the pregnancy continues, thus stimulating the awareness of the spiritual character of the new life as it develops. In the later stages of pregnancy, mothers may need to adjust their bodily positions during *salat*. The process of giving birth for human mothers brings with it a certain amount of pain, which is natural, although pain relief methods are embraced when they are required. Again, in some schools of Islam, particular *du'a* are recommended during the labour itself.

Marking the birth

The birth of the new baby is marked with greetings and congratulations to the parents and the whole family. Importantly, the greetings are to be of equal magnitude if the child is a girl or a boy. In pre-Islamic Arab society, boys were more highly esteemed than girls and indeed sometimes female infanticide was practised; this was explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an and people were counselled to rely on God's providence to be able to raise all their children [Q. 16:57-59; 81:8-9]. As soon as the baby is washed and clothed, the father or another senior man from the family or community (possibly the imam) will whisper the call to prayer (*adhan*) into the baby's right ear and the call that prayer is about to begin (*iqama*) into the left ear. This awakens the Muslim spirituality of the child and is a reminder that all children are born *muslim* and have a right to be brought up in a godly way of life. Many Muslims then follow another custom traced back to Muhammad, which was to chew a date and put some of the date juice into the baby's mouth along with a prayer for the child. It is customary for

family and friends to come with gifts and prayers of blessing for the new child and the parents.

Sacrifice and shaving the head

A week after the child's birth, two ceremonies are performed. The child's head is shaved and the hair weighed against silver or gold with the equivalent monetary value being given in charity to the poor and needy. The *'aqiqa* ceremony is also performed as an act of thanksgiving for the life of the new-born. One or two animals are slaughtered, or bought from the butcher's shop, and the meat divided between the poor, neighbours and family, with a portion being cooked on that occasion to create a festive meal for guests.

The giving of names

Giving the child a name is something required in the first week or so of life. Naming is complex in Muslim society. First the child has a given name, which might be formed from one of the Beautiful Names of God. For boys, this is done with the addition of the prefix *abd*, meaning "servant of", so: Abdullah, Servant of God, or Abd al-Rahman, Servant of the Most Merciful, for example. For girls, a derivative name is formed from one of these Beautiful Names, such as: Salma, from as-Salam, the Source of Peace, or Karima, from al-Karim, the Most Generous. Boys are often named after earlier prophets: Adam, Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), John (Yahya), or Jesus ('Isa), for example, or great men of piety in the Islamic tradition, such as Ali, Husayn or Salman, or after a particular quality, such as Amin, the Trustworthy. Likewise girls are given the names of exemplary women, such as: Mary, Fatima, Zahra, Sara or Khadija. It is common for Muslim boys to be given the name Muhammad as an honorific, but there will often be another given name by which he will be called, such as Muhammad Khalid. Finally, there are many names that are drawn from the cultures from which various Muslim communities come.

It is also common for a child to be named after her or his father, with the addition of *bint*, "daughter of", or *ibn*, "son of". So a boy might be called Abdullah ibn Musa (Abdullah the son of Musa) or a girl Karima bint Ahmad (Karima the daughter of Ahmad). This stresses the importance of knowing where one comes from as every child is entitled to know its birth parentage. This additional name is called a *nasab*. In later life, when the child becomes a parent in turn, another name might be given with the addition of *abu*, "father of", or *umm*, "mother of". So, in our earlier examples, Abdullah ibn Musa might be known as Abu Qasim and Karima bint Ahmad might be known as Umm Zaynab. This addition is called a *kunya*. Finally, some people acquire a nickname or *laqab*, after the place from which they come (al-Ghazali – from Ghazala), a profession (al-Hallaj – the wool-carder), a great centre of learning where they studied (al-Azhari – from the University of al-Azhar) or even from a distinctive feature or achievement.

Circumcision

It is part of the customary practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet Abraham that boys are circumcised by the removal of the foreskin from the penis. This has been taken into the practice of Islam and all boys are circumcised (*khitan*). It is normal that men who convert to Islam are also circumcised, although not all schools regard this as obligatory (*fard*) unless one is going to make the Hajj, when it is a requirement, thus stressing the Abrahamic character of the pilgrimage. There is no prescribed age for this to be done and practices have varied considerably in different cultures around the world. In modern times, most Muslim boys are circumcised when they are babies provided that their health permits this. In developed countries, this will be done under medical supervision in sterile conditions with anaesthetic. It is customary that this will be the occasion for a festive gathering and meal.

There is a practice that can be traced back to the times of the Pharaohs in Egypt, many centuries before the rise of Christianity or Islam, that is sometimes called “female circumcision” or in Arabic *khafd*, which is often known in the West as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This involves the cutting or removal, in varying degrees of severity, of the labia or clitoris. It is known amongst Muslim and Christian communities, and followers of African Traditional Religions, mainly in countries bordering the Sahara Desert and Sub-Saharan Africa. It is not an obligatory act in Islam: in some schools it is a recommended act, in others merely permitted and in other societies quite unknown. Some governments, like that of Egypt, have declared it to be illegal. In other countries there is a movement away from it, but it persists in some societies. In many western countries it is illegal to perform or procure another to perform it.