

**Between *Khatam Qur'ans* and *Slametans*:  
Gender and Class in South Asian and Indonesian Interdomestic Rituals**

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June 2016**

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**Abstract**

My paper compares the *khatam Koran* ritual, as celebrated by Muslims in Pakistan and North India, including their diasporas, with the Indonesian *Slametan*. It points to the striking similarities scholars have identified in the way that such rituals allow for the creation of an everyday interdomestic domain controlled in large measure by women and based on female networking. Class and gender intersect in such networks, allowing for different configurations of inter-household relations in villages, neighbourhoods and urban contexts. If the *slametan* was an extension of South Indian *kanduri* celebrations, the contemporary spread of communal Koran readings to Indonesia highlights the continuing interconnections across the Muslim world as these affect women's capacities to network beyond the constricted, restricted domestic domain.

**Introduction**

The recent revived anthropological interest in the 'everyday', and especially everyday ethics, has also inspired an interest in 'everyday Islam'; in particular, the extent to which Islamic normative pietist or Salafi revivalist movements have stifled

the creativity and transgressive 'fun' of much everyday life in the Muslim world. In a masterly review of the literature, Nadya Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando argue that ethnographies, such as those by Schielke (2009, 2015) and Marsden (2005, 2010), that stress the lapsing from strict normative injunctions, especially by young men, create an orientalist opposition between 'secular modernity and its radical other' (2015: 81) in which 'Salafism, it turns out, is not only unnatural; it is also difficult to sustain precisely because it is unnatural. Over the long term, Salafism and the pious Muslim subject aiming at ethical perfection are ontological impossibilities' (ibid.: 79). Indeed, the authors argue, by 'naturalising' the practices of everyday Muslims that highlight curiosity, ambiguity, scepticism and heterogeneity – and, one might add, transgressive sensuality, sexuality and fun – these everyday Muslims are grasped by readers as familiar and 'human': they share 'values, sensibilities, and attitudes are not just universalized but also naturalized as the normal state of human nature' (ibid.: 75).

In a parallel move, my own study of Muslim Punjabi women's transgressive expressions of sexuality, creativity and fun on ritual occasions, such as during the *mehndi* wedding rite, as well as during some popular cultural events, may well be subject to the same sort of accusation (see Werbner 1986, 1996, 2010). I too highlight the way women's licentious performances, masquerade and clowning is the subject of normative disapproval of male elders and, indeed, pietist women. The difference, perhaps, is that I see such performances as ritually licensed; that sexually explicit songs

...are sung on prescribed ritual occasions and that the risqué jokes, sexual barbs and mock challenges they articulate are customary expressions of sexual or gendered conflict on *framed* occasions; that the songs, obscene

joking, mocking and masquerading are, in other words, licensed, substantively marked as 'hot', and are thus also *ontologically transformative*. (Werbner 2010: 188)

Another possible critique of the current 'everyday Islam' trend is that the emphasis on textual 'tradition', Islamic veiling and other daily practices such as prayer and fasting has led to a neglect of the widespread, frequent celebration of domestic rites of passage and rituals countering suffering of affliction, with their attendant rites of offering and sacrifice, which are equally to be grasped as routine activities of everyday Islam. As I argue below, these too are managed primarily by women. Here I draw on Michael Lambek's argument that 'where ethics is largely embodied or reproduced through ritual and practice, the abstraction or discrimination of distinct ethical traditions or traditions that are distinctively ethical might be less expected' (Lambek 2015: 245). The key point is that rather than focusing on the individual, whether pious or transgressive, the focus on domestic rituals stresses a communal, collective morality that emerges through shared ritual practice. It highlights how social networks are created and managed, and especially so, as I show below, in the diaspora, but also in places as far apart as Pakistan and Indonesia.

In the present paper I draw a comparison between two commonplace everyday rituals in Indonesia and Muslim South Asia – the *slametan* and the *khatam qur'an*. At stake in this comparison, I shall argue, is not only the place of gender in these rituals but of class as well.

It is worth reminding ourselves at the outset of Clifford Geertz's original insight into what he describes as a 'core' ritual:

At the centre of the whole Javanese religious system lies a simple, formal, undramatic, almost furtive, little ritual: the *slametan* ... [it] is the Javanese version of what is perhaps the world's most common religious ritual, the communal feast, and, as almost everywhere, it symbolises the mystic and social unity of those participating in it. Friends, neighbours, fellow workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near-forgotten gods all get bound, by virtue of their commensality, into a defined social group pledged to mutual support and cooperation. (Geertz 1960: 1)

In Geertz's ethnography, the *slametan* is depicted as primarily a neighbourhood, household-centred ritual attended and convened by men; held in the front of the house, it consists of an appeal to a range of indigenous spirits and ancestors to whom food and incense are dedicated, before the men partake of some of the food and then, wrapped in banana leaves, carry it to be consumed in their own houses nearby with their families. In *The Religion of Java* the *slametan* is conceived of, above all, as a ritual held by the 'Abangan' peasantry, still immersed in pre-Islamic beliefs in spirits. The ritual virtually disappears in the book when Geertz turns to discuss the *Santri*, the urban reformist Muslims, and the *Prijaji*, the urban elites and aristocracy who command Javanese high culture and art. If the *slametan* is a 'furtive' little village ritual, it virtually vanishes from sight among educated townspeople, men and women (though we are told everybody still convenes it).

Equally furtive, perhaps, despite similarly being a core ritual, *khatme qur'an* are virtually absent in scholarly writings on Pakistan and Muslim South Asia.<sup>1</sup> I first encountered the ritual in Manchester, UK, in 1975, and, much like Geertz found in Java, observed that it was repeatedly convened in response to a myriad of

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<sup>1</sup> The one exception I found was in an article by Regina Qureshi on Canada in which she calls the *khatam qur'an qur'ankhwani* (1986: 56-58).

occasions, from dangerous accidents to thanksgiving or fulfilment of a vow. It was also, as in Indonesia, a domestic ritual, convened by a family or household. This set it off from other public ritual observances, though *khatme qur'ans* are also held in the mosque when a person dies. In South Asia, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the mosque is above all the domain of men and serves as a backdrop for the performance of communal rituals and festivals, for theological punditry and for political-cum-ethnic organisation. Domestic rituals are held in the home and are often dominated by women. The congregation attending these rituals is selected by the conveners and represents, as in Indonesia, their significant circle of friends, kinsmen and neighbours.

Of all domestic rituals convened at home, perhaps the most central is this relatively simple, unelaborated ritual that most resembles the *slametan* in Indonesia. It is known as *khatam qur'an*, the 'completion' or 'sealing' of the Koran, or *qur'an sherif*, the 'noble', 'beautiful' Koran. In times of danger, thanksgiving or transition, Pakistanis convene their fellow migrants for a ritual of formal prayer and commensality. Like the *slametan* for the Javanese (cf. Jay 1969: 188-238), this seemingly simple ritual lies at the heart of Pakistani religious observance and may be regarded as a 'core ritual' (cf. Geertz 1960: 1). It is performed by a congregation composed mostly of women who are gathered in the house of the ritual convener. Between them the assembled guests read the entire Koran in one sitting. Each of the participants reads one or more chapters (*siparas*) out of the thirty in the Koran. The reading is dedicated to the person convening the event, and is regarded as a service performed by the readers for the convener and his or her family. After the reading of the Koran has been completed at least once, a du'a (supplication) is uttered over an offering of food, which is distributed to the guests. In Pakistan a share of the food is

set aside for the poor as charity (*sadqa*), but this is not done in Manchester as 'there are no poor people here.' By custom, the Koran should be read with absolute accuracy, so as not to confuse Arabic words which vary only slightly in their spelling. A high degree of ritualism thus characterises one part of the proceedings. Otherwise, the structure of the ritual is very simple, and it contains little figurative elaboration.

Despite this apparent simplicity, however, the ritual embraces central religious and moral ideas and forms the basic model for a series of other rituals, all concerned with the two themes of sacrifice and prayer. The analysis of labour migrants' perceptions of the ritual, and of related rituals, brings into sharp focus what they consider are the fundamental features of the rites. It thus highlights the crucial elements of sacrifice and offering from a novel angle, lending some credence to certain approaches in the general debate about sacrifice and offering.

*Khatme qur'an* gatherings constitute important loci of interhousehold women-centred sociability. The performance of these was a feature of migrant life mostly absent during the all-male, initial phase of migration, and only introduced into Britain with the arrival of wives and families. The form of the ritual is very widespread and appears in different variations from North Africa, throughout the Middle East and South Asia, to Indonesia. It has Hindu and Sikh variations (on one form of this ritual, cf. Hayley 1980). Its structure is almost everywhere essentially the same, with a sacred book being read first, often in an esoteric language, followed by a meal or fruit offering. In the Hindu version, this food is first offered to an image of a god or goddess, but this act is, of course, absent in the Islamic form of the ritual. Despite its ubiquity, there appear to be, outside Indonesia, few anthropological accounts of the ritual and its sociological or symbolic significance.

Symbolically, the moral attachment of a family to its current home and surroundings is tangibly expressed during *khatme qur'an* through a transformation of secular into sacred space. One room in the convener's house \_\_\_ and, by extension, the whole house \_\_\_ assumes, temporarily, certain features of a mosque. Shoes are taken off at the threshold to the room, and people read the Koran seated on the ground. Along with the burning of incense, these observances serve to define the space as holy or sacred. The following description sets out the basic features of the ritual.

The food prayed over at the completion of a Koran reading consists, usually, of water, milk, a sweet dish, rice and fruit. The fruit is distributed first, immediately after the reading is completed, while the readers are still reclined on the floor. The selection blessed is representative of abundance, purity and the essential ingredients of a meal. The portion of the food prayed over is distributed first in order to ensure that it is entirely consumed, and none thrown away.

### **The Countering of Misfortune**

Occasional *khatme qur'an* gatherings are held in order to ask for forgiveness (*bakhsh*), thanksgiving (*shukriya*), and divine blessing (*barkat*, or *baraka* in Arabic). Although the three notions appear at first glance to be different, the ideas surrounding them are closely linked (cf. also Hubert and Mauss 1964: 14). The emphasis depends on the occasion. If the *khatam qur'an* is held to celebrate recovery from an illness, it is held for *shukriya*, thanksgiving. Since, however, there has been, it is believed, an unwanted intervention by God or spirits, a sin possibly committed either knowingly or unknowingly, an act of expiation is also involved. The convener is thus seeking to rid himself of the condition which caused the misfortune

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or affliction (*bala, musibat*) while at the same time seeking *barkat*. Hence, the ritual is intended to transform the state of the convener from that induced by negative intervention or lack of divine protection into one of *barkat* — endowed through positive divine intervention. *Barkat* is thus the obverse of affliction. This opposition is expressed in the formal structure and permutations of different offerings or sacrifices Pakistanis make.

The *khatam qur'an* ritual is divided into two key phases: in the first phase the Koran is read. This is the phase of consecration. In the second phase, food, which constitutes, in part at least, an offering, is presented to the assembled congregation. The two phases, although closely linked, represent two separate religious acts, each surrounded by a set of theological and cosmological beliefs.

The central feature of the first ritual phase is the recitation of the Koran. This recitation is considered to have immense power. The divine force invoked in the recitation has the power to expel evil spirits and to protect against them. The reading of the Koran also evokes *barkat*, which is then imparted to the food served. *Barkat*, or *baraka* in Arabic, is a 'beneficent force, of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order' (*Encyclopaedia of Islam* 1960: 1032). The text of the Koran is charged with *barkat*. A *khatam qur'an* is intended to transform the state of the convener into one of *barkat*, which is also shared by those reading the Koran in his or her name. The complete recitation of the Koran, especially if done in a short time, is considered a meritorious achievement. Pakistanis say they read the whole Koran because they 'cannot be quite sure what particular passage suits the occasion', and this is particularly so where danger is present. The Koran, they say, includes a saying for every type of occasion, but the location and meaning of these passages is known

only to God. By reading the Koran in its entirety, they ensure that they have read the appropriate passage. In this way they hope to influence God, which is the intention of the *khatam*.

This type of explanation clearly stresses the substantive or magical power of the Koran in invoking God and influencing the spirits. The Koran objectifies the power of God, and the stress is on this objective power which is contained in the word or text of the Koran and is transferred metonymically to the convener and the congregation. This objectification is indicated by the great emphasis placed on accurate reading. There must be no change of *zabar* or *pech* (minor vowel marks in Arabic), for this might change the meaning of the word. Indeed, the Koran is read in Arabic, which few Pakistanis understand (although most migrants have, of course, read the Urdu translation of the Koran).

In an alternative explanation, the morality of the Koran is emphasised. The Koran contains 'all the laws and sayings needed to live a good life'. When moving to a new house, I was told, it is right that the whole Koran be read. Where the Koran has been read, one is reluctant to sin or, if one does sin, one feels guilty about it.

Although the Koran is the book most commonly read in Manchester, on different occasions different books may be read. In one variation, held exclusively by women, stories of Fatimah are read. In another variation known as *Milad* various sayings of the Prophet (*hadith, kalma, gyarvi sherif*) and stories about the life of the Prophet are read. Usually one person leads the reading, while in between passages proverbs and *nats* (praise poems) are sung by the congregation. *Milads* are usually held on joyful occasions. Whatever the script read, the attendant women must be ritually pure (*pak bilkul*), i.e. they must not be menstruating, and they must have performed their ablutions before the reading. I witnessed a *Milad* in Pakistan held by Sayyid women

at the beginning of a saint's *'urs* (festival).

### **Sacrifice and the Mediation of the Poor**

Going against the objective power of the Koran as a book containing *barkat* is the notion of intention or *niyat* (*niya* in Arabic) central to Islamic religious observance.

While much emphasis is placed on the accurate reading of the Koran, the reading is followed by a prayer over the food asking God for forgiveness for any errors made in the proceedings. Pakistanis are clear that the intention supersedes the ritualistic aspects of the event. Perhaps the most important difference between the two phases of the ritual— the Koran reading and the offering made— relates to this distinction. Paradoxically, perhaps, the reading of the Koran represents the more ritualistic phase, while the commensal meal and the associated offering given away to the poor is closely tied to the intention of the convener. And, moreover, the difference between the way in which offerings are made is linked to subtle differences in intention rather than in the form of food or money given away. Was the *khatam* held for *shukriya* (thanksgiving), for *barkat*, during illness, to consecrate a new house? The intention is all important.

The problem of how to manage misfortune or deal with affliction is at the heart of all these observances. Pakistanis tell me that, according to Islam, nothing happens without the will (*raza*) and knowledge of God. Hence their view of affliction and misfortune is closely related to their view of the moral order, of good and evil in the eyes of God. A serious illness or misfortune is believed to be caused by the intervention of evil spirits, and these can only be exorcised with God's help. Indeed, they should not have afflicted a person in the first place unless he or she lacked divine protection. In cases where *khatme qur'an* or sacrifices are performed for a

person who is seriously ill or has a chronic illness or an unnatural condition (such as barrenness in women), or in times of misfortune or trouble (*bala*), the ritual is held for the explicit purpose of expelling evil spirits through the recitation of the Koran and through almsgiving. Some migrants, who deny the presence of evil spirits even in the case of serious illness, talk instead of the presence of misfortune or danger caused, in their view, by sin. It is the misfortune, *musibat* (or *bala*), which a person rids himself of through almsgiving and prayer. Reading the Koran is seen both as a protection against such misfortune and as a means of exorcising evil spirits or *jinn*s.

Not all *khatme qur'an* rituals are associated, however, with exorcism, or even primarily with expiation since, as we have seen, many are intended to seek divine blessing or as thanksgiving, after the danger has departed. As will be seen, the ritual stress dictates the ritual form. In de Heusch's terms, is the intended effect 'conjunction' or 'disjunction' (1985: 213)?

A crucial feature of sacrifice in this regard has to do with what parts of a sacrificial victim or offering are consumed and what parts are given away or destroyed.<sup>4</sup> In substituting a 'sacrificial schema' for a prior evolutionary model of sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss recognised the highly complex but nevertheless ordered variation in sacrificial procedures, even within a single society. Crucial to this schema was a distinction between sacrifices of sacralisation and desacralisation, and although de Heusch has recently criticised this contrast (1985: 213), it remains – perhaps in modified form – fundamental for an analysis of the transformation through sacrifice of relations between the gods, the sacrificer and the congregation participating in the ritual.

From this perspective, the significance of the commensal meal following the Koran reading cannot be understood apart from other practices of Pakistani sacrifice.

Hence, true sacrifice, i.e. the ritual slaughtering of an animal, may take a number of different forms. In Manchester, many Pakistani migrants perform animal sacrifices locally on two main occasions: at the annual *Eid Zoha* festival and after the birth of a child, particularly a son. The first sacrifice is known as *qurb'ani*, the second as *haqiqa*. The structure of the *qurb'ani* sacrifice represents an explicit model for the proper division of an animal in personal sacrifice, where the ritual act is intended to be both piacular and for the sake of divine blessing.

*Qurb'ani* sacrifices are performed to commemorate the binding of Ismail by his father Ibrahim (the Islamic version of the binding of Isaac by Abraham in the Old Testament). This myth, whether in its Biblical or Koranic form, exemplifies the principle of substitution of a life for a life in sacrifice. According to Islamic tradition the *baqra* (sacrificial victim) is supposed to be divided into three equal parts, with a third shared by the family of the sacrificer, a third by kinsmen and friends, and a third given away to 'the poor'. In Manchester, since 'there are no poor', two-thirds are given away to kinsmen and friends.

As performed locally, the victim is slaughtered in the very early hours of the morning of the festival, either by the local Muslim butcher or by the sacrificer himself, who accompanies the butcher to the local abattoir. Often several families join in making a single sacrifice, usually a lamb. The victim is then cut up by the butcher and divided into portions. After the morning prayers members of a family gather for a mid-day meal, and in this a third of the victim is shared. The sacrificer allocates the rest of the meat, usually divided into two-pound portions, among his neighbours and friends living in Manchester. Usually, he knocks on the door of each house he visits and hands the meat over to the person on the threshold, telling him or her that it is *qurbani*. If the people are close friends, he enters the house, but if they are mere

acquaintances he will usually hand over the meat on the threshold to whoever opens the door. In some cases I found that people were not quite sure of all the families who had presented them with *qurbani* that year. It may happen that the meat is handed over on the doorstep to one of the children who does not remember the name of the donor. Knowing who brought *qurb'ani* is not very important, for no expectation of reciprocity is implied, and no debt has been incurred. The sacrifice is made in the name of God (*khuda da nam*) by the sacrificer and his family, in order to gain merit or to expiate sin.<sup>5</sup>

The choice of persons to whom *qurbani* is given is not, however, arbitrary or accidental, but follows a similar pattern to the choice of partners in other rituals which migrants perform. In the central residential cluster — where neighbours are usually known — they receive a fair share of the meat. Among businessmen and professionals living in the inner suburbs *qurbani* is distributed among friends. Other migrants, among those living on the periphery of the central cluster, avoid performing *qurb'ani* locally altogether. Instead, they send money for it to be performed in Pakistan.

The *qurb'ani* sacrifice contrasts significantly with another form of personal sacrifice known as *sadqa* (from the Arabic *sadaqa*, a term also used for almsgiving in general). *Sadqa* sacrifices are always performed in Pakistan. They are preceded by a *khatam qur'an* and are held, I am told, 'for the life'; if someone is mortally ill or has escaped a very bad accident, a *sadqa* sacrifice is made. The idea appears to be one of substitution, and the unusual aspect of this type of sacrifice for Pakistanis is that the animal is given away to the poor in its entirety. Neither the sacrificer nor any of his kinsmen are supposed to partake of the sacrificial victim. To do so would be to detract from the efficacy of the ritual act.

In cases of abnormal illness, I was told, the meat is not even given to the poor, but is thrown away.

Two beliefs are implicit in *sadqa* sacrifice among Pakistanis. On the one hand, as the name of the sacrifice — *sadqa* — indicates, the sacrifice is an extreme act of almsgiving. On the other hand, it is also an act of expulsion of evil spirits or misfortune. For Pakistanis there is no belief that a sacrifice should be burnt or destroyed, nor is there an explicit view that the 'life of the flesh is in the blood' (Leviticus 17:11). There is, moreover, no sacred altar or shrine. The idea that God is partaking directly of any tangible substance, such as the blood of the animal, is abhorrent (cf. Weir 1908). The blood of a sacrificial victim is for Muslims *haram*, i.e. prohibited and sacred. Their view is that the flow of blood signals the intention and removes all impurities before the animal is shared and consumed. In other words, the flow of the blood is a purificatory element of the sacrifice.

Islam recognises, moreover, no priestly order.<sup>6</sup> Nor do the poor constitute scapegoats, bearing or accumulating the sins of the donors (Parry 1980). The gift to the poor completes and seals the act of offering or sacrifice (for a structural analysis of the processual form of a sacrifice cf. Richard Werbner 1989).

Communication in sacrifice is therefore achieved for Pakistanis indirectly, via the poor, and through an act of giving. Who are 'the poor' (*lokan gharib*)? For Muslims the poor may include any person, even members of one's own kin group or village, such as widows or orphans. They do not form a clear category of outsiders, and this is made quite explicit in the Koran. The notion of 'the poor' cuts across the categories of family, friends and fellow villagers, such as low caste or landless labourers, to embrace the widest humanity Pakistanis recognise: the beggars around Saints' tombs, or the residents of orphanages, leper homes, etc. I

was frequently told that I could not imagine real poverty, living in Britain. There are, moreover, no persons in Britain willing to define themselves as poor and take the remains of a commensal meal or sacrifice. It is worth noting here that although the part of the meal given away to the poor is the equivalent of the *juts*, or leftovers, given among Hindus to lower castes, the Islamic idea of giving to the poor is not as dearly predicated on a notion of intrinsic inequality. It does, however, presume the existence of hierarchy. It implies real inequalities in wealth and property as a 'natural' feature of society. Thus it is that offering and sacrifice fit into a more general pattern of a hierarchical gift economy I have described elsewhere.

Pakistani labour migrants universally direct their almsgiving via the mosque or various charities towards Pakistan. If they hold *khatme qur'an* offerings, *qurb'ani* or *haqiqah* in Manchester, it is because they feel that the further crucial social category of friends is present here. Without sharing among friends, there is no commensal meal, no *barkat*, no communication with the divine. It is possible to hold all these rituals by proxy, through kinsmen at home, in Pakistan. The sacrificer sends the money for a meal to be prepared or a beast slaughtered in his name. Many migrants, especially more recent arrivals of village origin, virtually always perform these rituals at home. Perhaps for them, more than for middle-class, urban migrants, the poor area known and personalised group. The village or home neighbourhood remains the focus of their significant relations; they remain rooted back home, symbolically, emotionally, experientially. Yet over time, they too come under increasing communal and social pressure to reconstitute a moral universe in Britain. Like the *slametan* in Indonesia, the ritual 'symbolises the mystic and social unity of those participating in it.'

## South Asia and Indonesia Compared

I have described the *khatam qur'an* ritual in some depth in order to tease out its comparability with the *slametan*, before going on to analyse its gendered and classed dimensions. A striking feature elided in the early historiographical accounts of the ritual in Indonesia relates to the belief in evil spirits, jinns, etc. In fact, such beliefs are common in both Indonesia and South Asia, although in South Asia a multitude of invisible agents is regarded as part of Islam, even mentioned in the Koran, whereas in Indonesia, as argued by Geertz, for example, these spiritual agents are defined as indigenous and pre-Islamic.<sup>2</sup>

Even beyond this, the contrast between the rituals in South Asia and Java seem stark at first, even if in both rituals a commensal meal is preceded by a *du'a* (supplication): on one side is a ritual predominantly convened by women, centred on a holy book, the Koran, in which all the congregants present participate in the

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard it is instructive to compare contemporary beliefs in Pakistan and Indonesia documented in the 2012 Pew Foundation survey.<sup>2</sup> According to the survey, belief in jinns is higher in Pakistan (77 per cent to 53), somewhat lower on sorcery (50 to 69), higher on the evil eye (61 to 29), and much higher on the use of talismans and other charms (41 per cent to 4). Virtually all Pakistanis and Indonesians display Koranic verses in their homes (90 and 88), while slightly more Pakistanis use traditional healers (55 per cent to 38). Only 7% in Pakistan and 20% in Indonesia have witnessed an exorcism of evil spirits. See <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-4-other-beliefs-and-practices/> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superstition\\_in\\_Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superstition_in_Pakistan) (both accessed 4/11/15).

reading and the hosts' intention is often not declared publicly. On the other side is a male-dominated ritual in which a single person chants an Islamic prayer and pronounces a statement on behalf of the hosts regarding the food and intention of the ritual. In the *khatam qur'an* a portion of food blessed should be dedicated to the poor if it is to constitute a proper offering rather merely a feast. In the *Slametan* the spirits are said to partake of fragrance of the food and incense.

More recent scholarly revisions of earlier interpretations of the *Slametan* have recuperated its Islamic dimensions and with it, its direct connection to South Asia, particularly South India. Mark Woodward in particular has argued that rather than being understood as a synthesis of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, in which animism is numerically and conceptually predominant (Woodward 1988: 55), the *slametan* can be seen to be derived directly from Sufi texts and interpretations. Like others, Woodward rejects the tripartite division between the *Abangan*, *Santri* and *Prijaji* in Java in favour a simple distinction between *santri* and *kejawen*. Instead, he argues,

The distinction between *santri* and *kejawen* is a culturally specific instance of the recurrent tension between *shar'ah*-minded and mystical interpretation characteristic of Sunni Islam. Both derive from the Qur'an and the emulation of Muhammad, claiming to capture the true meaning Islam. (ibid.: 56)

The *santri* support the less knowledgeable *kejawen*, as one *santri* told Woodward: 'I take pity on Javanese people because they don't know any Arabic and cannot pray properly. I want to help them so I pray for them at slametan and when they die' (ibid.: 62). Indeed, according to Woodward both groups consider the *slametan* to be a Muslim ritual. Against Geertz's view, not only are ritual meals characteristic of Islam and authorised by the scriptures; the *hadiths*, the sayings of the Prophet, mention

feeding the poor as meritorious and, indeed according to Woodward, 'Kejawen Muslims take pains to invite poor people to *slametan* or, at least, to send them some of the food. Many also donate uncooked rice and other foods to augment the small amounts of sacred food distributed at the ritual' (ibid.: 63). They regard spontaneous piety as of greater value than that regarded by the *Shari'ah*.

At this point in his article Woodward draws an explicit connection between the *slametan*, also known as *kenduri*, and the Indo-Persian *kanduri*, also practised elsewhere (Malaysia, Aceh). Meaning feast, it derives etymologically from the Persian word for incense (ibid.: 64). Woodward adds that

With the exception of rites required by the *shari'ah* the *kanduri* is the most common ritual in Malay, Achenese, and South Indian Islam. In all these societies the *kanduri* is remarkably uniform. Like the *slametan* it includes recitation of portions of the Qur'an, the distribution of blessed food, and prayers for saints and the local community. (ibid.: 65)

John Bowen describes the *kenduri* in Gayo, Sumatra, similarly to the *Slametan* and even draws a comparison with the *khatam qur'an* (1993: 230 ft.). In the light of the reach of the *kanduri* ritual, Woodward comments, the *slametan*, while being local, may also be regarded, as part of a much wider transcultural tradition paralleling that of the *shari'ah*. Furthermore, he argues, the *slametan* is not primarily a village ritual and is not limited to the *kejawen* community. Indeed, most royal rituals are elaborate *slametans*, suggesting a strong link between court and village community (Woodward 1988: 85). There are many other resemblances across vast geographical areas: of the ritual aim of peace and blessing for the community following a supplication, and even the kind of foods offered (mainly rice in various

forms). Hence not only scriptures but also such local rituals can 'travel' from one place to another.

### **The Intersection of Gender and Class**

Alongside this revision of the Islamic nature of the *slametan* has come a revision in the role played by women in the *slametan*, from being an all-male affair to something a lot more complex. The *khatam qur'an* obviously demands a certain proficiency and literacy in reading Arabic. Most Pakistani women in Manchester do not know Arabic, but they have been taught to read the Koran accurately. This accuracy signifies the magical power of the Koran: it is not the meaning of the text that is salient but the text's sacred effectiveness to ward off evil spirits and bring *barkat* (*Baraka*, blessing) to the hosts and the assembled congregation. Although reading Arabic is an accomplishment not found among women in village Java, in other respects, the rituals enable female-centred networks of sociality much in the same way as among Pakistani women. In a 2007 article, Jan Newberry rejects the view of contemporary *slametans* in Java as male-dominated rituals. As she says,

The *slametan* has been described as a ritual focussed on the male head of household as the formal and public representative of a coresident family group. Hosted out of the main front room of the house, the conventional description of the *slametan* supported a structuralist reading of the house as split into a front, male, public space and a back, female, private space (Rassers 1960; cf. Keeler 1983). By taking the role of the house seriously in the staging of a *slametan*, we can see this plan of the house is less apt than one that figures its role as conduit to community exchange relationships managed by both males and females. (Newberry 2007: 1311)

For a start, she says, people attend *slametans* as couples. Both men and women can officially host the ritual. Moreover, female labour underpins even the smallest *slametan*. This may require many days of planning. A large ritual requires the mobilisation of kinswomen and neighbours beyond the immediate household, the helpers arriving through the back door. This is where people laugh and joke, by contrast to the solemnity of the front room. Women can also be mobilised through the back door to cope with any food shortages and the like. Food was also distributed according to established channels defined by female labour. As Newberry says,

A focus on the front door and the people fed during the *slametan* is only a partial picture; it is the flow of women, resources, services, and food through the back door—before, during, and after—that makes the *slametan* possible. And this reciprocal, mutually reinforcing flow of resources and aid defines houses less as discrete structures than as nodes and conduits in a network of neighbourly exchange and connection.

So too, Ann Stoler argues in similar vein that in Kali Loro, a village in Central Java, Focusing our attention on the distribution of food, rather than the symbolic aspects of ritual, it becomes clear that the real mediators of interhousehold relationships in the *slametan* are the women and not the men. The women buy, cook, and make the decisions as to how the food will be distributed, the latter a task often more complex than Geertz's description might imply. (Stoler 1977: 86)

Although this leads Newberry to define the *slametan* as a 'community' ritual, my own argument, as presented elsewhere in detail (Werbner 1990/2002) is that such rituals establish a separate domain between public and the purely domestic. I have called

this the 'interdomestic domain', a domain of sociality and of ritual and religious celebration focused on familial, friendship and neighbourhood networks. Among Pakistanis it is a social domain is perpetuated and reproduced through the extension of personal gifts and services, and through hosting and feasting on domestically important occasions. Within this domain the gift economy flourishes (for a similar domain of gift exchange in Java see Asmussen 2004). Others too have noted the centrality of women in preparations for *slametans* (see, for example, Hefner 2008: 147, citing Bianca Smith). For Malaysia Judith Nagata says it is the 'domain of women' to be involved in preparations of *kenduris* (Nagata 1974: 97). *Khatme qur'an* do not entail an obligation to reciprocate but they tend nonetheless to mirror these networks, based on gifting and reciprocal exchanges.

Whereas the official, public, communal sphere is almost exclusively an adult male domain, involving at any one time only a small segment of the adult population, the interdomestic domain catches up almost everyone, men and women alike; and it is mostly women who dominate here through the managing of ritual, labour and gift exchange networks. Through these interdomestic networks, equality and inequality, friendship, caste, *biraderi*, and class find their daily expression. A man's status thus remains for most men who are not active politically crucially anchored in this interdomestic realm, in large measure controlled by his wife.

### **Women, Literacy and Islam**

Most of the Pakistani women I knew were able to read the Koran in Arabic, though without understanding its meaning, and could thus participate in *khatam Qur'an* rituals. For Pakistani women who cannot read the Koran, however, equivalent rituals are substituted, much as in the *Slametan*, relying on a leader to lead the religious

part of the ritual. For example, in a ritual known as ‘the story of Bibi Fatima (*bibi fatima ki kahani*), the leader tells the story of miraculous events in the life of Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter. Pakistani women, including middle-class literate women, also convene *mehfil el milads* gatherings to recite poems praising the life of the Prophet Muhammad, with the audience joining in refrains following the main reciter (see also Qureshi 1986: 53-55).

As Islamic reform movements have spread from the Middle East to South Asia, there are those who reject the familiar Pakistani *khatam qur’an* ritual on the grounds that the readers don’t understand the words of the Koran in Arabic. In other words, the magical quality of the Koran as an efficacious sacred object with the agency to protect, heal and bless is challenged by the reformists. Instead, reformist women told me, they hold a *dars* in which a leader reads and interprets verses from the Koran, often in front of a mixed audience of men and women (middle class *khatam* rituals were often mixed in the past as well). This is followed, I was told, in the usual way, with a *du’a* and a meal which constitutes a food offering.

Throughout Southeast Asia too, female literacy, and with it the capacity to read the Koran, have spread widely. In Malaysia, for example, one author reports that the *kenduri* has changed from being male centred in the rural context to having exclusively female rituals in the urban context, called *majlis doa* (Cederroth 2004: 4). There are ceremonies in Malaysia for the completion of reading the Koran called *khatam Koran*, as in Pakistan (see Nagata 1974: 94), but Malaysians do not seem to convene separate *khatam* rituals. In Jakarta, Indonesia, Anne Rasmussen has studied events convened by elite women in which, as one reviewer of her book sums up the argument, the women ‘embody, encode, and enact the sound of the recited Qur’an in ways that transmit knowledge of Islamic texts and aural experiences of the

divine through female subjectivities' (Silverstein 2012: 105). Though Rasmussen connects the holding of *khatam Qur'ans* in Indonesia to Arab rather than South Asian sources, the events she describes resemble their Pakistani counterpart in that the Qur'an is recited as a collective oral performance; in this case by thirty *qari'as* (female reciters) in under an hour, in a "tapestry of human voices" (Rasmussen 2010: 83) that produces 'heterogeneous textures of sound' (Silverstein 2012: 106).

The resulting 'dense cacophony' of voices described by Rasmussen (2010: 83) differs, however, radically from the soft murmur of the Koran reading characterising Pakistani *khatams*. Like in them, though, through such recitations women are said by Rasmussen to create a 'gendered sphere' (Silverstein 2012: 106). The author links the emergence of *khatam* celebrations in Jakarta to the broader rise of Islamic feminists in Indonesia. Despite similarities, the one *khatam Qur'an* event Rasmussen describes in detail, however, differed from the usual Pakistani *khatam qur'an*: it was an elite event in which the Koran was recited by accomplished female experts koranic singers, dedicated to several causes simultaneously: thanksgiving for the health of one woman, blessing the child of another, praying for the health of a third, celebrating circumcision of a woman's son, and 'many many other reasons' (Rasmussen 2010: 82). Although not mentioned, one can only assume that the reading is followed by a prayer and a ritual meal.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Beyond the differences between *slametans*, *khatam Qur'ans* and other domestic rituals centred on a single household throughout South Asia and Indonesia, I have pointed in this to paper to the striking similarities scholars have identified in the way that such rituals allow for the creation of an everyday interdomestic domain

controlled in large measure by women and based on female networking. Class and gender intersect in such networks, allowing for different configurations of inter-household relations in villages, neighbourhoods and urban contexts. If the *slametan* was an extension of South Indian *kanduri* celebrations, the contemporary spread of communal Koran readings to Indonesia highlights the continuing interconnections across the Muslim world as these affect women's capacities to network beyond the constricted, restricted domestic domain.

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