For everyone everywhere life has its rhythm and frequently these rhythms of life are replete with religious significance. The celebration of life and events has been a fundamental part of life since humanity began. Also, they usually incorporate facets of religious beliefs thus becoming expressions of faith. As the wilderness wanderings helped to coalesce the Israelite tribes into a people and nation, God ensured that celebration was part of their life. Each day there were the daily sacrifices as well as the annual festivals: the Passover or the Festival of unleavened bread and the Feast of first fruits; Pentecost; trumpets (beginning of the civil year); Day of atonement; and the Feast of tabernacles or booths. That is there was a celebration about every two months! For those churches that follow a church calendar, there are many notable Sundays as well as ‘feast’ days though the year. However, today, most of these are only celebrated within that particular religious context. Protestant Christianity, however, basically limits its celebrations to Christmas and Easter. Whatever, those celebrations still bring with them a rhythm to life.

The simplest rhythm of life, at least for most, is that of day and night. Another rhythm that influences our lives is the weekly one with its work and no-work; or of school and no school while for some it is sport and no sport. Add to those there are the annual rhythms of life associated with the change of the seasons. At the north and south extremities of the globe the difference is between ‘mainly light’ and ‘mainly darkness’. In the equatorial regions, it is a ‘dry’ and ‘wet’ rhythm: while in between, the cycle of ‘summer, autumn, winter, spring’ determines the pattern. For the Olympians, there is yet another - a four-year one!!!

Not surprisingly then, Islam too has its rhythm of life.

The daily rhythm of life for the Muslim is punctuated by the five irregularly spaced calls to prayer and if one is particularly devout there is the opportunity of an added nightly prayer time. Interestingly though, while the call to pray rings out loud and clear for many the challenges of life are more demanding and the call to prayer goes unheaded.

Then there is the weekly rhythm to their lives: the Friday prayers with its own format, is different from the daily prayer pattern. While including prayer cycles there is also the ‘sermon’ (kutbah) usually delivered from the minbar (an elevated place). Sermons can be delivered either from a standing or seated position. In the Muslim country where I lived, initially the week followed the western model; Saturday and Sunday were the ‘rest days’. To go to Friday prayers one had to take time off work. It seemed that the mosques were well attended. However, that changed and Friday was made the ‘holiday’ to make it easier for people to attend prayers. Strangely, it seemed fewer people attended. Maybe with the resurgence in Islamic devotion this may have changed. I have no way of telling. One thing I do recall was that the sermons I heard were loud, highly impassioned and repetitive especially around festival times or in response to some political or social event.

As well there is an annual rhythm to Islamic life though in comparison to the Gregorian calendar it is a shorter one. The Muslim lunar calendar consists of twelve months with a total of 354 or 355 days which means that it rotates through the seasons of the Gregorian calendar over a thirty-three-year period. So events occur at different times each (solar) year, some ten to eleven days earlier than the previous one.

As with most cultures, New Year is a day for celebration – however sometimes one must ask, which New Year? For those following the Gregorian calendar it is 1st January; for the Muslim, it
is the 1st Muharram, which in 2017 correlated to the 21st September. For Muslims it ushered in the year 1440AH. The abbreviation AH refers to ‘after the hijri.’ The Muslim calendar years are calculated from the date - 16th July, 622CE - when Muhammed having experiencing persecution and rejection left Mecca and settled in Medina. In Arabic, this transition is known as the hijri. Yet in some other Islamic contexts, Nau Roz (Nowruz), the first day of spring or the day of the spring (vernal) equinox is consider the first day of the year!!! Some aspects of these celebrations reflect pre-Islamic traditions.

For Shi'ite Muslims, the first month of the Islamic calendar, Muharram, includes a special celebration. On the 10th Muharram (Ashura – a day of fasting for all Muslims) they recall the martyrdom of Hussain Ali, the prophet Muhammed’s grandson, whom the Shi’ites consider was the rightful successor to the Prophet. Ali along with at least 72 others was killed in the battle of Karbala. From my observations 10th Muharram celebrations included a procession of men, women and children; a richly decorated white horse; any number of elaborately decorated ‘person carried floats’ representing Hussain’s tomb, banners, usually black carried on a pole with a hand on the top and men flagellating themselves, or being flagellated – sometimes with serious consequences. Drums, the shouting of slogans, the thumping of chests, crying and weeping were all part of the scene. Not infrequently this celebration is marred by violence, usually perpetrated by other Islamic factions who disagree with or disapprove of the celebration. Ali’s death is also celebrated on the 20th or 21st Safar and is known as Arba'een which is calculated as forty days after the battle occurred. (An Islamic cultural practice is to celebrate a person’s death, forty days after it has occurred.) On Arba'een thousands of pilgrims, flock to Karbala to celebrate this event. At various times, Sunni Muslim leaders, including Sadam Hussain, have banned this Shi’ite practice.

However, the two most significant events in the Muslim calendar revolve around the month of fasting, Ramadan (Ramazan or Ramzan depending on which part of the world you are from) and the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Since these events are calendar based, they also occur at different times each year.

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, both commences and concludes with the confirmed sighting by the religious authorities in that country of the thin crescent sliver of the new moon. In Saudi Arabia, the Supreme Court makes the announcement. If the moon isn’t sighted on the first day, the fast automatically begins on the second.

During Ramadan the fasting begins at sunrise in the morning and concludes at sunset in the evening. The meal before the sunrise is called suhur though the call to get ‘ready to end the fast’ is sounded about an hour earlier while the meal at the end of the day’s fast is called iftar. During Ramadan, special food is prepared and for many much of the night is spent in feasting, while for some it means an increase in their devotional activities.

Some Muslims celebrate laylat al-barat on the 15th (Shab’an) – about 15 days prior to Ramadan, claiming authority for it from the Qur’an (44:3-4) and various hadith. However, as a celebration it is disputed. Like the laylat al-qadr it is believed that if one prays through the night their sins are forgiven. For many it is also an opportunity to honour their dead by lighting candles, saying prayers and reading the Qur’an at the graveside. For the Shi’a it is a significant day since it is believed to be the birth date of their final iman. In many places mosques will be decorated with lights while in the homes lamps and candles will be burnt. On one occasion this event occurred while I was staying in a mountainous area. Around the mountain side thousands of candles and lamps glimmered and shimmered in the darkness. In some areas, these names and the celebrations appear interchangeable.

The other celebration which for some has greater significance and importance is the laylat al-qadr (‘night of Power’) usually celebrated towards the end of Ramadan, often on the 27th. This night
celebrates the revelation of the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad. Its Qur'anic justification is found at Q97:1-4. On that night, which is considered better than 1000 others, many will attempt to read/recite the Qur'an through from beginning to end believing that this holy act will have significant impact on their lives. It is said that Gabriel and the other angels will come to earth to say amen to their prayers and that they need to ask for forgiveness of sins. In some places the mosques are decorated. Alongside the reciting of the Qur'an, in some places, including mosques there are talks and poetic recitations.

One of the most significant celebrations in the Muslim calendar is the end of the fast, again determined by the sighting of the moon. When the fast month has occurred during the hotter months of the year, the demand that one does not drink anything during daylight hours can be particularly harsh. There is also a sense of relief for the end of the fast means that life resumes its normal rhythms – eating and sleeping at ‘normal’ times. *Eid ul-fitr* is a day of great celebration. It is a day for new clothes, for visiting relatives; for giving alms to those in need; for participating in Eid prayers and for attending the special prayers in the ‘Eid mosque’. On several occasions, I have noticed young girls participating with their male relatives in those prayers. Each local mosque also holds special ‘eid’ prayers earlier so that all can attend the main ‘eid’ prayers. It is a day when fasting is banned and it includes a lot of feasting and the sharing of food. Many will travel to be with their families, while others will take the opportunity to visit deceased relatives and pray at the graveside.

The next most significant event in the Islamic year, indeed in the last month of the Islamic year, is that of the hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca to circumambulate the Ka’ba as revealed to Muhammed (Q 3:90-92). So important is it that the hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam. While it is enjoined that every Muslim should do it at least once in their lifetime, many are financially unable to do it. Some, though, do it more than once. Some while unable to do the ‘great’ haj do participate in what is known as the ‘lesser’ hajj *umrah* though it is not considered as meritorious. The hajj in itself consists of days of ritual practices which include a lot of liturgy. Each male pilgrim dons two white sheets which he wears during the week of celebrations which includes circumambulating the Ka’ba seven times, running back and forth between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah; drinking from the Zamzam Well, going to the plains of Mount Arafat to stand in vigil, spending a night in the plain of Muzdalifa, and performing a symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing stones at three pillars. The Hajj concludes with *Eid-ul-Adha* (The feast of sacrifice) which celebrates Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Ishmael. During the hajj period pilgrims are considered ‘holy’ and are limited in what they are allowed to do. At the end of the hajj men have their heads shaved or trimmed which also signifies the end of the ‘holy state’.

Another annual celebration is that of the prophet’s birthday (*maulid*); a practice which is (strongly) rejected by some of those Muslim scholars who adhere to a more literal interpretation of the Qur’an but more favoured among the Shi’ites. Interestingly, the Prophet’s birth date is not known, so this event is celebrated on the day of his death. These are usually public occasions which include speeches, recitations of poems and the singing of special songs regarding the prophet. Where I lived, schools often went to considerable effort to celebrate this event.

In some areas of the Muslim world, though for some an even more suspect annual celebration, is that of the death of a Muslim saint or *urs*. A Muslim saint is usually a Sufi who through his mystical experiences has achieved recognition and fame as a spiritual advisor and director, often skillful in folk medicine. Many consider these pirs to be intermediaries between humanity and god. On such an occasion the Sufi master’s devotees will flock to his burial place where various celebrations take place. Included in the celebrations will be prayers, singing and dancing; the sharing of food as well as explanations of his teaching or religious practices. In some places, there is also a procession through the streets. It is usually led by a disciple either wearing a green coloured or a many patched coat, accompanied by the beating of drums, followed by at least four bearers carrying between them a stretched out green cloth bordered with a ‘gold trim’ with gold
writing. Onlookers sometimes throw flowers or money onto the cloth. Such celebrations may last from a day to a week.

Depending upon the particular country, which has adopted Islam into its way of life, there may well be other festivals that are celebrated and which have developed an Islamic perspective to them. However, the above festivals are those that have been established by the Qur’an, usually with varying degrees of support from the Hadith.

Rhythms of life and celebrations usually go hand in hand and often incorporate a religious significance whether it be for the Israelites, Christians or Muslims. Celebrations are also an important part of one’s heritage and form part of the warp and woof of one’s life. Understanding a culture’s celebrations gives a window, then, to what is considered important, valuable and worth celebrating as well as insights into that culture’s religious and spiritual life. They also provide a significant opportunity to discover another’s spiritual beliefs and practices as well as to share one’s own through a shared experience.

**Selected Bibliography**


Momen, Moojan, 1985, An Introduction to Shi’i Islam, The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism, New Haven, Yale University Press.


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1 Dr Ruth Nicholls: Research Assistant, Arthur Jeffery Centre for the Study of Islam. Ruth spent many years in an Asian Islamic country.
2 According to Geijbels (Al Mushir, vol XXIII, no 3, Autumn 1981, p 89) during this Shi’ite celebration, Shi’ites gather at the Imam bargah, their permanent meeting place or in a ‘ten day house’ where the celebrations take place. Both places are decorated with either green (the colour of Islam) or black (the colour of the Shi’ites) cloth, sometimes both. Speeches, prayers, and poems which usually arouse great emotion are included. Sadly, on several occasions, other Muslims have used this as an opportunity to kill and inflict serious injury on members of the Shi’ite community.
3 Cf. Momen, p 263 refers to the opening of the borders between Iraq and Iran permitting pilgrimages once again.
4 An interesting article which appears to be well-document which was apparently written by Sh. Abu Aaliyah Surkheel on 21 June, 2013. It is found at [http://muslimmatters.org/2013/06/21/fussing-over-the-15-shaban/](http://muslimmatters.org/2013/06/21/fussing-over-the-15-shaban/) cited 12 Jan 2017
6 Cf. Momen, p 239 lists the Shi’ite religious commemorations and also identifies those which are public holidays in Iran. Islam in Iran is predominately Shi’ite.