

Research Article

Cultural Maintenance and Muslim Rites of Passage Practices in Sweden and the UK

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Abstract

Cultural maintenance of immigrants has been a contentious and polarising subject in the West. While Sweden and the United Kingdom has a similar percentage of Muslims, both nations approach cultural maintenance of Muslims from a differing perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this comparative study is to examine the similarities and differences of minority Muslim communities' cultural practices in Sweden and the United Kingdom regarding rites of passage, specifically focusing on birth, circumcision, marriage, and death rituals, and the response of the majority populations. The research analyses how sharī'ah traditional practices are modified and adapted within two Western European contexts, each with distinctive demographic compositions, legal frameworks, and historical relationships with Muslim populations. Through comparative analysis of religio-cultural practices, the research demonstrates that cultural maintenance operates as resistance against assimilative pressures while simultaneously adapting to legal constraints and social contexts of host societies. Various aspects of the rites of passage are first defined by taqlīd, and then compared to practices. Key findings include: the impact of animal welfare legislation on sacrificial customs (‘aqīqah), varying regulatory approaches to male circumcision, differing marriage age requirements and recognition policies, and adaptations in Islamic burial practices within Western cemetery systems. The study identifies three principal factors influencing cultural negotiation within Muslim diasporas: the normative influence of host society culture, legal framework constraints that shape religious practice interpretation, and generational adaptation processes among second- and third-generation Muslims. These factors result in a dynamic religio-cultural realignment that maintains core Islamic identity while incorporating contextual modifications.

Keywords

Cultural Maintenance, Muslims, Birth, Circumcision, Marriage, Death

1. Introduction

When examining the concept of “rites of passage”, one might presuppose that the discourse centres exclusively upon ritualistic practices. However, as Forth elucidates, rites of passage transcend mere ritual, fundamentally embodying the collective celebration of profound life transitions [1]. The moments discussed encompass birth, circumcision, marriage,

and death. This conceptualisation does not diminish the significance of ritualistic elements within rites of passage; rather it emphasises the importance of communal cohesion and the shared experiences of significant life moments. This article is concerned with the cultural maintenance practices of minority Muslims in Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK) regarding

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such life changing events, and examines ways in which these customs are altered in the two national contexts.

The introductory part of this article includes a brief comparison of Swedish and UK demographics, an explanation of cultural maintenance, before discussing birth, circumcision, marriage and death within minority Muslim communities in Sweden and the UK. While beginning with Islamic views of rites of passage, as understood through a presentation of normative *shari'ah* traditions (*taqlid*) in the official Sunni juridical schools (*madhāhib*),¹ and a desire for culture maintenance, this article compares practices between Sweden and the UK, and analyses reasons for those dissimilarities. When discussing Muslim traditions in the broadest sense, *taqlid* will serve as the proposed archetype, against which various practices will be compared.

Sweden and the UK exhibit comparable demographic patterns with substantial and expanding Muslim minority populations; Sweden at 8.1% and the UK at 6.3% [2]. Nevertheless, significant distinctions exist between these nations' Muslim communities. In the UK, approximately two-thirds of Muslims are of South Asian heritage, having commenced migration principally in the post-Second World War period from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The remaining Muslim demographics comprise Turkish, Bosnian, North African, Middle Eastern, and diverse other ethnicities, whose migration emerged later than the South Asians [3]. Muslims in the UK have very diverse languages, with Punjabi, Urdu, and Bengali being the most commonly spoken [4]. Conversely, as according to Larsson and Sorgenfrei, Sweden's Muslim population consists primarily of Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, Bosnian, Somali, Afghan, and Syrian communities [5]. Consequently, Sweden's Muslim populations offer a differing linguistic landscape, with Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi as prevalent. By the second generation, however, there is a shift towards the respective national languages, English in the UK and Swedish in Sweden. A prevailing discourse suggests that Western perceptions erroneously conceptualise Muslims as a homogeneous entity [6]. Upon examination of the differing Muslim demographics between solely Sweden and the UK, the notion of a uniform Muslim populace becomes indefensible. Cultural heterogeneity and praxis differentiations emerge not only as a consequence of the national contexts from which diasporic Muslim populations originate, but equally as a result of the European societal environments which these communities inhabit. The interplay between historical heritage and present geographical situatedness propagates distinct expressions of Muslim identity which resists reductive categorisations.

2. Cultural Maintenance

For numerous immigrants relocating from their homeland to the West, there can be some similarities in the diasporic

experience regardless of their national origins. The initial phase frequently encompasses an enthusiastic anticipation of resettling, and notions of integration into the predominant society. Correspondingly, the dominant host community typically demonstrates a preference for the speedily assimilation of newcomers into their expected societal norm. Nevertheless, linguistic barriers and cultural differences create an expectational gap which invariably renders them unattainable. This discrepancy between anticipation and reality generates tensions between the majority and minority populations. Moreover, within the Muslim immigrant acculturation experience, the additional religious dimension further amplifies this dissonance. Consequently, immigrants frequently settle within nearby localities to facilitate mutual support, predicated upon shared religio-cultural frameworks which does not necessitate exposition nor justification [7].

In the endeavour to preserve ethnic cultural heritage and identity, counteract assimilation into the host society, and transmit cultural signifiers intergenerationally, immigrant communities employ mechanisms of cultural maintenance (whether through deliberate strategy or unconscious praxis). The *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* claims that cultural maintenance is "...the act of keeping one's culture alive. It is the sustainability of one's cultural traditions, values, lifestyle, and language, often to counter negative and historical forces..." (Banks 2012: 905) Elsewhere this is further explained as "The effort to sustain a culture by asserting its way of life (the ideology, life style, arts, language, etc.) and preserving its material embodiment (landscapes, architecture, and other artifacts) [8]." Whilst it might appear self-evident that all ethno-linguistic groups engage in cultural maintenance practices, including those comprising the dominant society, for diasporic populations, this phenomenon has a greater significance as it constitutes a resistance against the pervasive influence of the indigenous culture. Particularly first-generation migrants frequently stress the importance of their value frameworks through linguistic preservation, religious observance, and cultural distinctiveness for subsequent generations. This process manifests through the concerted efforts of both individual familial units and the broader diasporic community. Thus, cultural maintenance represents both an individual and communal undertaking [9].

When examining cultural maintenance among the Muslim immigrant communities, it becomes imperative to define the compound term "religio-cultural." Within the context of secularised Western societies, there exists a tendency to compartmentalise religion and culture into separate, divergent categories. Consequently, the expression "religio-cultural" may be problematic for certain frameworks. Nevertheless, culture and religion demonstrate an intricate intertwining relationship, which resists simplistic bifurcation. The blurring of boundaries between religious practice and cultural expression is particularly useful when examining communities for whom these dimensions constitute integral components of identity.

¹ There are four schools, (*madhhab*, *madhāhib* pl.), of Sunni jurisprudence which are the Ḥanafī, the Mālikī, the Shāfi'ī, and the Ḥanbalī; each of them have their own *shari'ah* traditions.

Not all scholars agree on a single definition of culture, and concept continues to evolve. Nevertheless, Rohit Manglik presents culture as a set of “values, beliefs, and norms that are understood and shared” [10]. For Manglik, values constitute societal standards; beliefs encompass assumptions (both true and false) regarding humanity, the cosmos, and their interrelationship; whilst norms represent societal behavioural expectations (right and wrong). However, culture transcends merely the esoteric or intangible phenomena of values and beliefs. Culture equally incorporates “observable artifacts” [11]. These cultural artifacts include linguistic systems, symbology, rituals and ceremonial practices, constructed physical environments, and tools [12].

Similar to culture, religion is not easily defined and has undergone scholarly debate and theoretical augmentation. The pervasiveness of religious traditions within society renders precise definition particularly challenging. Kevin Schilbrack asserts that “Many of the beliefs, practices, institutions, and communities that are called religious” arise from diverse theoretical perspectives [13]. Correspondingly, Jaco Beyers claims that, “It is clear that religion and culture cannot be separated” [14]. Consequently, for all intents and purposes, culture and religion are virtually indistinguishable, exerting comparable influence across most societies. The term “religio-cultural” has the advantage of including religion and culture as equal components within ethnographic landscapes. Within the Muslim community, many also find it difficult to distinguish the difference between religion and culture. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, “religio-cultural maintenance” and “cultural maintenance” are synonymous.

Perceived discrimination, coupled with a concentration of migrant populations within economically disadvantaged communities rather than in areas with greater social agency, may create unfortunate results. Generally, second-generation immigrants benefit from biculturalism with increased cognitive capacities, language skills, and the ability to traverse two (or more) cultural realities, which is proficient to compensate for self-esteem issues related to racism. However, the second-generation may adapt to an impoverished environment, potentially assimilating some of the most undesirable attributes of the host culture [15].

Saroglou and Cohen propose that the relationship between religion and culture can be conceptualised through six potential modalities: “religion may (a) be part of culture, (b) constitute culture, (c) include and transcend culture, (d) be influenced by culture, (e) shape culture, or (f) interact with culture in influencing cognitions, emotions, and actions” [16]. The connection between religion and culture have equal influence within social systems; therefore, separating them becomes an impractical exercise.

A major aspect of cultural maintenance among immigrant populations entails the preservation of cultural heritage. If cultural maintenance could be perfectly applied, then the immigrants’ culture from their homeland would be precisely duplicated within the framework of the host society. However,

despite concerted efforts by newly established communities, cultural reproduction cannot be fully reproduced. As immigrants negotiate interactions with populations beyond their ethnic ingroup and confront contend with an unfamiliar environment/landscape, new realities develop. Consequently, religio-cultural traditions encompassing ideology, lifestyle, artistic expression, linguistic practices, architectural forms, and material artefacts, undergo transformation. This is particularly salient amongst subsequent diasporic generations.

3. Methodological Considerations

Religio-cultural values, meanings, and practices guide attitudes and actions, and these are altered due to the influence of time and place [17]. Whilst these elements may seem to be immutable, comparative examination reveals generational shifts in values, meanings, and practices. Hence, a comparative methodological approach, predominant within social scientific disciplines, is used to “focus on description and analysis” [18]. Therefore, this analytical approach involves a trinitarian, multi-parameter comparison between the elements of Islamic tradition, Muslims communities residing in Sweden, and those within the UK. This analytical approach allows for “obtaining general qualitative estimates” [19]. Within this framework, both a Coordinate Comparison of shared rites of passage components between the two nations, and a Subordinate comparison, where Islamic tradition serves as an analytical “lens” in order to explore the phenomena. This comparison strategy leads to the basis of similarities and differences, and allows for a broader range of application in consideration of various nations, languages and ethnicities [20]. These comparisons encompass both differences and likenesses which are used in order to reduce essentialism, and accent diversity as features of analysis.

The selection criteria for relevant sources in the comparative analysis were regulated by subject matter, publication date, language, and relevance. Academic journals, books, articles, and online media, published after 2010 and written in English or Swedish, were employed in an attempt to provide an array of material to reflect a spectrum of Muslim experiences [21]. Perhaps the most profound limitation of this study is the overall scope of the theme in a single contribution. Each rite of passage, (birth, circumcision, marriage, and death), could be developed into a further published study. Likewise, the scale of material from Sweden and the UK, could support independent studies focused on a particular national context. This created a need to conduct searches for concurrence of practices or definite distinctives, and thereby some potential sources were deliberately excluded.

4. Birth

There are numerous traditions associated with childbirth among Muslims, many of which may be unfamiliar and ar-

guably more ritualised than those common in Western contexts. As with most global traditions surrounding birth (including those of the West), these are generally concerned with the health of the mother and child, and the celebration of new life [22]. Family and friends typically visit the new mother “straight after birth and continue for two to three weeks. The purpose of these visits is to celebrate the coming of a new child and health of the mother. Visitors will bring food and gifts, and will sit with the mother for a friendly chat” [23]. It is often the extended family who assist the mother in hosting, thereby allowing her to focus on the newborn and her recovery.

Many Muslims prefer that the first words the newborn hears are the *adhān* (call to prayer) recited into the right ear, and the *iqāmah* (the second prayer call signalling the congregation to line up inside the mosque) into the left [24]. In the UK, it is therefore common for parents to request silence in the delivery room at the moment of birth. However, as reported in a PhD study exploring British Muslim women’s experiences of motherhood within NHS maternity services, many women reported playing an audio recording of the Qur’an at the onset of labour [23].

Soon after birth, and prior to the infant’s first feed *tahnīk* is performed. Softened dates (preferably pre-chewed) or, alternatively, honey, is rubbed into the baby’s mouth [23]. “A respected member of the family often performs this, in the hope that some of his/her positive attributes will be transmitted to the fledgling infant” [24]. This practice is also believed to offer medicinal benefits. Both mother and child are expected to perform *ghusl*, a ritual bath of purification following states of ritual impurity. The timing of the mother’s *ghusl* depends on the Islamic juridical school she ascribes. Until this purification is complete, “sexual intercourse, entering or making a halt in a mosque, [and] touching the script of the Qur’an is *haram*”, thereby underlining its significance [26].

The seventh day following birth is highly noteworthy. On this day, circumcision is recommended (a subject discussed in greater detail in the following section, due to its significance for converts or when performed at a later age). Additionally, the performance of a sacrificial slaughter (*‘aqīqah*) is encouraged. The meat is divided into three portions: one for the immediate family, one for relatives and friends, and one for distribution to the poor [27]. Similarly, the infant’s birth hair is shaved (*ṣadaqah*), then weighed, and a corresponding weight in silver is donated to the poor. Traditionally, this is undertaken by the family to support the local community.

In Sweden, the practice of *‘aqīqah* is somewhat contentious due to national legislation on animal welfare. Islamic tradition requires the ritual slaughter of *ḥalāl* animals to be eaten. However, Swedish law mandates prior sedation (dependent on the animal species) for slaughter, with no exemptions for religious practices. Nevertheless, *ḥalāl* meat may be legally imported [28]. Although Islamic law permits both stunned and non-stunned slaughter, the former may place the meat in

an ambiguous position between religiously permissible and unacceptable. Most *ḥalāl* meat produced in Sweden is consumed privately or by restaurants [29]. Conversely, while generally requiring the stunning of animals prior to butchering in the UK, there are religious exemption guidelines for the *halal* slaughter of animals [30]. In both contexts, the personal approach to *halal* or sacrificial slaughter of animals has been removed from most of the Muslim’s experience. The uncertainty surrounding the religious permissibility of stunned animals has led to alternative solutions. For example, Islamic Relief, a humanitarian and development organisation, offers a means for Muslims in the West to fulfil *‘aqīqah* and *ṣadaqah* obligations through donation. The cost for an *‘aqīqah* donation is \$170 for a boy and \$85 for a girl. Under this scheme, 5 kg of meat is distributed “to the most vulnerable members of the community, such as widowed women, children, older people and those who have been forced to flee their homes” (Islamic Relief 2022). The cost of *ṣadaqah* is set at £10, which “...will cover the required value of the weight of the child’s hair in silver” [31].

In the Liverpool-based study, Shalma Hassan reports that some families expressed discomfort with Western medical practices. For instance, Muslim women often preferred not to be seen by male medical staff. The presence of non-Muslim medical staff caused some of the Islamic practices to be delayed for Muslims. Families were concerned about being scrutinised or misunderstood, particularly in relation to practices considered culturally or religiously sensitive [23].

Another significant, though under-studied, Muslim practice related to childbirth is the burial of the placenta by a family member. As the placenta is regarded as part of the human body, Islamic tradition mandates burial rather than cremation [25]. Hassan notes that, in the UK study, although all participants mentioned the practice, only two of the forty-three were able to personally bury the placenta [26]. This was largely due to difficulties in securing a suitable burial site. Given that it is required by Islamic law, this may cause distress for Muslim families [32]. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of literature on placenta burial in Sweden, perhaps due to the private or medical nature of the issue.

Migration to Western societies has also impacted the roles traditionally assumed by men and women. The birth experience is often considered a woman’s domain: “It is a heavy responsibility in Sweden because in the home country there is always someone that helps, such as a mother-in-law, an aunt or sister” [33]. However, the same study found that men often take a more active role in the birthing process in the West than they would have in their countries of origin. This may be attributed in part to challenges such as visa or travel restrictions that prevent extended family members from attending, resulting in the mother relying more heavily on the father. Additionally, fathers may be required to fulfil hosting duties traditionally carried out by female relatives [33].

5. Circumcision

Male circumcision is a controversial subject for many Muslims and non-Muslims living in the West. In Sweden, approximately 3,000 Muslim boys are circumcised each year [34]. The religio-cultural aspect of circumcision is often confusing for many Western Europeans. Brusa and Barilan argue that “in the context of circumcision, we find the moral dimension of the distinction between the ‘religious’ and the ‘cultural’ rather tenuous” [34]. In other words, because of the interweaving of religious and cultural aspects of circumcision, it continues to hold significance and meaning for the vast majority of Muslims. The importance is highlighted by the high circumcision rate in the Islamic world, which stands between 90-100% of men [36].

There is a growing number of Muslim scholars who challenge the practice of circumcision, arguing that it is “neither ordained nor even mentioned explicitly in the Qur’an” [37]. Nonetheless, most Muslims globally continue to practice male circumcision, considering it a religious obligation. Others regard it should be considered a preferred or recommended traditional practice. For those who understand it to be obligatory, the act carries rewards and punishments in the afterlife contingent upon whether or not the individual has fulfilled this requirement. The religious dimension is also evident in the stipulations that a person must be circumcised to become an imam or to perform the Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islamic practice [38].

Outside of the West, circumcision is conducted either by unqualified traditional practitioners, such as barbers, or by trained medical professionals, depending on the region and socioeconomic status. Many Muslims prefer that the procedure be performed in a hospital. The ritual’s significance lies not in the method or location but in the bodily act of removing the foreskin [35]. While the preferred age for circumcision is early, between seven and fourteen days after birth, it can be conducted any time up to the child’s seventh year. In some cases, the circumcision ceremony is treated as a rite of passage, leading parents to delay the procedure in order to save and plan for a celebratory event [38].

In Sweden, male circumcision is frequently contested for several reasons. First, there is a cultural divergence; “...the native Swedish population does not, and has never, practiced infant circumcision for any reason” [34]. Circumcision is neither part of the religious heritage nor the cultural fabric of Swedish society. Second, the issue of consent is pivotal. Since infants and young children cannot provide informed consent, the procedure is often viewed as “...a violation of bodily integrity and self-determination of his own body” [39]. Third, there are concerns about causing unnecessary pain or harm to the child.

Similar to the Swedish opposition to circumcision, within the UK, the child’s best interests are paramount to the permission debate. The British Medical Association (BMA) stresses that the child’s desires, values, understanding, phys-

ical and emotional needs, and potential outcomes must be considered alongside the family’s religious and cultural background. Given the subjective nature of these factors, healthcare professionals may prefer to delay the procedure until the child can make an informed decision. However, this is not always feasible, especially when families insist on early circumcision [40]. Dabbagh notes that “...most circumcised Muslims, whether male or female, do not seem to regard themselves as net harmed or harmed on balance by virtue of their circumcision” [37]. Even those who acknowledge some degree of harm often believe the “psychosocial or religious benefits” far outweigh any negative effects. Furthermore, most children circumcised in infancy have no memory of the event.

Several Swedish authorities have publicly opposed religious circumcision. For instance, both the Örebro County Council and the region of Kronoberg have decided that “...the health service will not perform circumcision of boys on cultural or religious grounds” [41, 42]. Nevertheless, Swedish law has developed a compromise to accommodate cultural and religious circumcision. The law stipulates: (1) Circumcision cannot be performed without the child’s consent. If the child is too young to consent, both legal guardians must agree. (2) Parents must receive information about the child’s rights, the procedure, legal requirements, the practitioners involved, and the risks. (3) For children under two months, a qualified person may receive special permission from the *Inspektionen för vård och omsorg* (Health and Social Care Inspectorate) to perform the circumcision with a doctor or nurse present [43]. For older children, only licensed physicians may conduct the procedure. (4) Appropriate anesthesia is mandatory, local for infants and general for older children [39]. Tindberg further insists that any circumcision performed outside the established legal framework must be reported immediately to the police and the Health and Social Care Inspectorate [40]. Any complications should be referred to pediatric medical or surgical specialists. Additionally, any known cases of unauthorized circumcision must be reported to the appropriate authorities.

In contrast to Sweden, male circumcision in the UK is less stringently regulated. According to the BMA (2019), “Male infant circumcision does not require a medical professional and, indeed, is often done by special practitioners within religious groups who are not medically qualified” [44]. Nonetheless, there are numerous private clinics in the UK that specialize in circumcision, many of which cater specifically to the Muslim population.

Brusa and Barilan offer several arguments in favor of permitting circumcision within Western contexts [35]. First, if aesthetic or corrective surgeries for infants are allowed, then circumcision, considered by some to involve pathological or unwanted tissue, may also be permissible. Second, circumcision is not limited to Muslim or Jewish communities; it is also widely practiced in democratic nations. For instance, the Boston Children’s Hospital reports that approximately 64% of

American newborn boys are circumcised [45]. Third, circumcision can be a critical component of personal and communal identity. Fourth, by refusing circumcision, there is a risk of that non-medical peoples may perform the procedure outside of the health system. Lastly, preventing circumcision can lead to cultural alienation and stigmatization within families and communities. Overall, while male circumcision remains a contentious issue in Western societies, particularly in Sweden, it continues to be viewed by most Muslims as an indispensable religious and cultural practice. The challenge for liberal democracies is to balance child protection and bodily autonomy with the rights of religious minorities to maintain their traditions.

6. Marriage

Within Islamic tradition, there are five essential requirements for the preservation of humanity: life, faith, intellect, property, and lineage. To ensure the protection and continuation of lineage, Muslim jurists have made rulings within *shari'ah* regarding marriage [46]. Unlike the Christian understanding of marriage as a sacrament, Islam views it as a “fundamental moral value incumbent of every Muslim man and woman” [47]. This section will explore Islamic marriage practices in contrast with religio-cultural maintenance contexts alongside Sweden and UK requirements.

While there are no prescribed wedding rites in Islamic tradition, there are several elements required for a valid marriage. Jurists define marriage as “a witnessed contract between a consenting male and a consenting female that renders sexual intercourse between them licit and bestows upon the husband the paternity of any children born from such union” [47]. Even though marriage could be seen as a contractual union it is not considered a point of sale, but the right of a husband to engage with his wife sexually and to ensure reproduction. Several conditions are essential for a valid Islamic marriage contract. These include an offer and acceptance, typically initiated by the groom and accepted by the bride in the presence of a male guardian (*wali*), usually the bride's father, to oversee the agreement [48]. In Islam the dowry, *mahr*, is paid by the groom's family directly to the bride and for an amount agreed upon by the *wali*. The dowry is seen as establishing financial security for the bride for future contingencies and protect her rights as an individual [49]. However, for Muslims in India, and Pakistan the situation may be reversed, due to the influence of pervading Hindu culture, the families of the bride may have to pay a dowry to the father of the groom. Regardless, once the terms of the contract are agreed upon, signed in front of witness, the marriage is in effect.

In Sweden, prospective spouses must obtain a “Certificate of No Impediment to Marriage” from the Skatteverket (Swedish Tax Agency), which verifies their eligibility based on age, civil status, and degree of kinship [50]. Foreign nationals must also provide documentation proving their right to marry under their country of origin's laws [51]. Both Sweden and the UK

permit civil and religious marriage ceremonies. In the UK, couples must give at least twenty-nine days' notice at the local registry office. If the religious officiant is not authorized to solemnize marriages legally, a registrar must be present. After the ceremony, the marriage license must be signed by the couple, officiant, and witnesses, rendering the union legally binding [52].

The issue of marriageable age is contentious in Islamic jurisprudence. Traditionally, girls were deemed marriageable at the onset of puberty, which could occur as early as nine years of age, while boys reached marriageable age at their first ejaculation or by age fifteen. Nonetheless, many Islamic countries now impose legal minimum ages for marriage, often ranging from 15 to 18, depending on the legal school followed [46]. Societal and familial pressures may also pressure for girls to marry at young age [46].

According to Swedish law, “Anyone under the age of 18 may not enter into marriage” [53]. This means it is illegal to force or trick into marriage, to live together in marriage type of relationship, or to travel to marry in another country for anyone younger than 18. This prohibition also applies regardless of whether the marriage occurred abroad. If a child under 18 arrives in Sweden with a spouse, the minor is classified as an unaccompanied minor and assigned a legal guardian [54].

There are similar age restrictions in the UK, which changed from 16, (with parental consent), to 18 in February 2023 in England and Wales. “It is now an offence to cause a child under the age of 18 to enter a marriage in any circumstances, without the need to prove that a form of coercion was used. This includes non-legally binding ‘traditional’ ceremonies which would still be viewed as marriages by the parties and their families” [54]. While the legal age remains 16 in Northern Ireland and Scotland, England and Wales will not recognize marriages of residents under 18, regardless of where or how the marriage was conducted.

As far as laws in Sweden regarding the relationship of those getting married, there are few stipulations. Persons in the same bloodline, directly ascending or descending, are forbidden to marry, for example: a father and daughter, or a son and mother. Nor may full-blooded siblings marry. It is possible for half-brothers and sisters to marry with county administrative permission. Anyone presently married or has a registered partner may not marry another person. Additionally, one cannot marry someone who they have adopted. However, an adopted sibling may marry the natural born child of the adoptive parent provided authorisation has been granted by the county administrative board [51].

Islamic jurisprudence likewise prohibits marriage between close relatives, including ascendants and descendants, as well as full and half-siblings. Additionally, a man may not marry a woman who nursed him or who shared a nursemaid with him in infancy, due to the *raḍa'a* (milk kinship) doctrine. Furthermore, polygamy constitutes a point of divergence between Islamic and Western marriage norms. While polygamy is

strictly prohibited in Sweden and the UK, certain interpretations of *sharī‘ah* permit a Muslim man to marry up to four wives, with the stipulation that he cannot marry sisters or a mother and daughter concurrently. A woman is restricted to one husband, and must marry a Muslim man; if the husband renounces Islam, the marriage is rendered void. A woman must also observe an ‘*iddah*’ waiting period, which is three lunar months after divorce or four after widowhood, before remarrying. No one is permitted to get married during the time of ritual purity for the *hajj* [56].

Among second- and third-generation Muslim immigrants in Europe, expectations toward marriage have altered. Younger Muslims increasingly seek to have a say in choosing their spouses and prioritize emotional compatibility. In order to circumvent the marriage regulations in the Western countries, it may be easier for the first generation to return to the homeland where marriage customs are clearly understood by all involved. However, this is not the case after the first generation, where the children/grandchildren may consider those traditions thrust upon them and not representative of Islam as they understand it.

7. Death

Experiencing the death of a family member is a profound and personal event, often shaped by religio-cultural traditions which offer comfort and reassurance to the bereaved. Within the Muslim community, burial practices are traditionally guided by *sharī‘ah* law, which prescribes specific rites and procedures to honour the deceased and support the living. While this section focuses on traditional Islamic burial following a natural death, it is important to note that juridical rulings have addressed a range of other contexts, including cases involving:

miscarriages, still-births, drownings, a rotten corpse or skeleton, burned remains and charred bodies, traffic accident fatalities, lack of a body, people lost at sea, mixed Muslim and non-Muslim body parts, burial of a pregnant non-Muslim wife of a Muslim, unknown corpses, cases where a body is buried without following ritual requirements, suicides, burial of body parts and treatment of parts separated from a living body, and burial of criminals [57].

According to Cha īna Ahaddour, Stef Van den Branden, and Bert Broeckert, preparing for one’s death is considered a sacred responsibility within the Islamic tradition [58]. As death approaches, individuals are encouraged to seek forgiveness and reconciliation to purify themselves. Drafting a will is also viewed as a religious obligation, enabling the distribution of wealth, with a recommended one-third allocated to charitable causes. If possible, the dying person is turned to face Mecca, while the *shahādah* is recited. Ideally, the dying individual raises the right index finger to affirm the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) one final time. It is also customary to offer the dying person a sweet drink or *zamzam* water, believed to ease the soul’s departure and cleanse the individual

of sin [58, 59]. Immediately after death, those considered ritually impure under *sharī‘ah* are expected to leave the room [56]. The deceased’s eyes and mouth are closed, the legs straightened, and the big toes tied together [55, 56]. Islamic burial ideally occurs as soon as possible, typically within 36 hours, and the body should remain intact, with autopsies discouraged [60, 61]. The five central components of a traditional Muslim burial include the ritual washing (*ghusl*), shrouding (*takfīn*), funeral prayer (*Ṣalāt al-janāzah*), burial (*dafn*), and mourning (*ḥidād*) [57].

The preparation of the body follows gender-based guidelines. Typically, men prepare men, and women prepare women. Exceptions are made for the death of spouses or children [56]. While Muslims are preferred for conducting the burial preparations, non-Muslims may do so if no Muslims are available [60]. In Sweden, Muslim funeral directors now commonly oversee these rites, alleviating the family’s responsibilities and often prioritizing the family’s wishes over theological conventions [60, 63].

Ghusl is required unless the body is unfit for washing, in which case sprinkling soil or sand over the corpse is possible [57, 60]. The process begins by gently pressing the abdomen to expel any remaining impurities. The body is then washed an odd number of times, starting with the right side, from head to toe. Fragranced water is sometimes used, followed by drying and perfuming [58, 59]. Shrouding (*takfīn*) practices vary slightly by gender and legal school. The cloths (*kafan*) are ideally purchased by family members or previously worn during the *hajj*. Men are typically wrapped in three cloths, while women require five, including a headscarf, while the face is usually left uncovered for final viewing [56]. The shroud is secured with ropes tied above the head and below the feet [59]. Funeral prayers are ideally performed at sunset. Four prayers are recited to seek forgiveness and divine reward for the deceased [58, 59]. The *imām* leading the prayers stands at the head of a man or the waist of a woman. Attendees stand in three rows: men in front, children in the middle, and women at the back. Each prayer begins with the declaration “Allāhu Akbar,” followed by additional prayers at the gravesite [59].

All of the Islamic juridical schools generally prohibit burial in non-Muslim cemeteries. Despite that it is not always possible for Muslims living in the West, where they may have to settle for a Muslim section in a public cemetery, including Sweden. Practical constraints such as regulations and distance often necessitate transporting the body to the cemetery by hearse [62]. Traditionally, at least four men carry the body in silence [57, 59]. Women and children are not permitted at the gravesite, and the use of incense or candles is prohibited. The body is buried without a coffin, placed into the grave after being raised and lowered three times, lying on the right side, facing Mecca [59, 60]. Grave markers are to be minimalist, reflecting Islamic ideals of simplicity and dignity. While wooden or stone markers are permitted, epitaphs and decorative elements are discouraged [57-59]. Nonetheless, in Sweden it is common for Muslim graves to resemble Christian

ones, often adorned with flowers, candles, or lanterns. Additionally, a linguistic shift is taking place, where many second- and third-generation Muslims prefer using the local language rather than Arabic or their ancestral language, of which they may find alienating [60].

In Sweden, it is required for "...administrative district or within a nearby administrative district, to provide special graves for people who are not members of a Christian faith community" [64]. These authorities are also responsible for providing transportation to the burial site. Some municipalities mandate the use of a coffin, and even if a coffin is not used a wooden frame is employed [63, 65]. Similar constraints exist in the UK, where public health concerns, such as the risk of disease, may preclude coffinless burials. To support religious compliance, many UK boroughs publish guidelines specific to Islamic funerary practices [66].

Islamic mourning rituals are also governed by *sharī'ah*, which emphasizes dignity, restraint, and simplicity. Mourning should not be marked by excessive displays of emotion, ritual slaughter, festive gatherings, or veneration of the grave, such as kissing the tomb [56, 58]. However, actual mourning practices often vary according to familial and cultural norms. These may include, "wailing, breast beating, singing lamentation songs, tearing garments, slapping and scratching the face, breaking bangles, and leaving their hair disheveled. Some may besmear themselves with mud" [57].

Traditionally, mourning is limited to three days following the funeral, during which the community may visit and provide food for the bereaved family [58]. Yet, in contemporary settings, especially in the West, it has become increasingly common for families to gather at restaurants rather than at home [59]. The financial burden of funerals is often mitigated by institutions such as the Muslim Funeral Society in the UK, which offers payment plans adapted from a Western context (Muslim Funeral Society). Upon completion of the mourning period is complete the mourners perform *ghusl*, change clothes, and cleanse their homes. Commemorative practices may follow on the seventh and fortieth days after death, as well as on the one-year anniversary [67].

Despite the traditional *sharī'ah* aspects of funeral practices, actual implementation can vary significantly across national and familial lines. Both Sweden and the UK attempt to accommodate Islamic burial requirements, but national regulations and logistical considerations often result in modifications. As such, it can be difficult to determine whether deviations from tradition arise from localised, familial customs or from influences to living in a Western environment.

8. Concluding Remarks

For immigrant Muslims, the desire for cultural maintenance lies in tension alongside a desire to become a part of a new social reality of living in non-Muslim Western societies. This tension is clearly observable in rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death among Muslim communi-

ties in Sweden and the UK. As these communities become more established, traditional Islamic practices are reshaped by new contexts, leading to a religio-cultural realignment that reflects both continuity and change.

Three principal factors influence how cultural maintenance is negotiated within Muslim diasporas. First is the cultural influence of the host society, which often carries with it an implicit sense of normative "correctness." Immigrant communities may respond by clinging more firmly to their cultural heritage or by bending to the pressure of dominant cultural expectations so not to be potentially embarrassed or ostracised. Second are the legal structures of the host countries, which create practical limitations and consequences for nonconformity. For example, circumcision regulations in Sweden or marriage laws in both nations reflect societal values, which may conflict with the religious or cultural values of Muslim immigrants. Adherence to such laws is not optional and shapes how religious obligations are interpreted or performed. Third is the internal, personal drive for adaptation, especially among second- and third-generation Muslims. These individuals often engage in a natural process of cultural synthesis, navigating both their inherited and the dominant society's religio-cultural norms. This generational shift highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of diasporic Muslim identity.

While this study does not exhaust all variables, Sweden and the UK have had varying approaches to immigrant Muslims. The UK has a longer history of Muslim presence, resulting in multigenerational communities with greater cultural fluency in British society. Sweden's more recent and increasingly diverse Muslim populations, initially Balkan and now more Middle Eastern, bring distinct cultural and religious expressions that challenge prevailing norms. Additionally, each country's post-colonial legacy influences both state policies and public perceptions of Muslim communities, affecting how inclusion and integration are managed.

Finally, the ethnographic diversity within each country contributes to varied legislative responses aimed at fostering equitable integration. Multicultural societies like Sweden and the UK must foster environments of mutual understanding and respect. Policies that recognize and protect religious identities can help ease tensions between majority and minority populations, enabling space for traditional practices to be retained, or adapted, in ways that remain meaningful within a new religio-cultural landscape.

Abbreviations

BMA	British Medical Association
UK	United Kingdom

Author Contributions

Matthew Reifsnider is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Matthew Reifsnider is a post-doctoral researcher through a research grant provided by Wenner-Gren Stiftelserna. Whose project is a comparative study between Sweden and the UK concerning Muslim cultural maintenance and ideas related to integration in majority society. Sweden and the UK have rather different policies on integration and maintenance. His doctoral thesis from Middlesex University, *Integration and Minority Fiqh*, concerns how minority fiqh, (fiqh al-‘aqliyyāt), has been theorised to assist minority Muslims, in a Western setting, in order to integrate in society. The discussion involves how a Muslim community interprets sharī‘ah, and its purposes (maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah), as well as a comparison to the traditional/taqlīd approach to fiqh al-‘aqliyyāt in relationship to respondents’ answers to questions on integration.

Research Field

Matthew Reifsnider: Cultural Maintenance, Muslims from Sweden and UK, Minority fiqh, Muslim diaspora to the West, Integration issues.