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Islamic Culture in Hong Kong

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For many Muslims in Hong Kong, the lunch break on Fridays is even shorter than usual. Every Friday, thousands of Muslims flock to the Kowloon Mosque, or Masjid, for the weekly prayer at 1:30 p.m. and then rush back to their workplaces 15 minutes later.

“Many people sacrifice their lunchtime to be here. We do not want the prayer to take more than 15 minutes,” said Imam (a Muslim religious leader or priest) F. Tufail. “We do not want to make employers unhappy, so it is 1:30 p.m. to 1:45 p.m., Friday Prayer.”

This is just one of the many examples of how Muslims have adapted their religious and cultural life to Hong Kong.

Islam has been in Hong Kong ever since the establishment of the colony in the 1840s. The oldest mosque, Jamia Mosque, was built in 1849. It still stands today, dwarfed by the skyscrapers in Mid-Levels. According to the Home Affairs Bureau, there are 250,000 Muslims in Hong Kong. Half that number are Indonesian migrant domestic helpers and the rest are mainly South Asians, Africans and Chinese.

Despite the long history of the Muslim community in Hong Kong, most local Chinese still know little about their religion and customs.

Perhaps the first thing most people think about is dietary restrictions. They probably know that Muslims do not eat pork or pork products. They may not know that in addition to this, Islamic laws also require Muslims to consume only Halal (meaning permissible in Arabic) food. For example, only healthy animals can be slaughtered and only with a swift cut to the throat to minimise the pain.

That is why Hewie Wong and her family keep coming back to the Islamic canteen in Wan Chai, the only place that serves Halal dim sum in Hong Kong. She does not eat out often as she can never be sure whether lard is used in the food.

With the increase in the number of Indonesian domestic helpers in recent years, more and more Halal food stores have opened, offering a wider range of products. But local Muslims in Hong Kong are suspicious of the Halal food available here.

“We’re not sure if it is really Halal food even it says so,” Wong says, “It’s not required by law.” One of Wong’s friends at the table adds that Muslims have more confidence in pre-packaged Halal food imported from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore because the governments there treat the issue more seriously.

This also makes such destinations a popular holiday choice for local Muslims. Many of them, particularly Chinese Muslims, often prefer to join tours organised by their mosque. Wong says members of tour groups will pray and study the Koran together when travelling.

Apart from making an effort to observe dietary rules, daily worship and observing Islamic festivals can also be quite a challenge in Hong Kong.

The most important of all Islamic festivals, Ramadan (the month during which Muslims fast during the day), follows the Islamic calendar and takes place at a different time each year. It is hardest for Muslim labourers when it falls in summer.

“They are thirsty, because they are not even allowed to drink water,” says Tufail, adding the days are also longer during summer.



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

禮拜時間表 PRAYERS TIME TABLE مواجيد الصلاة

	晨禮 FAJR الفجر	晌禮 ZUHR الظهر	晡禮 ASR العصر	昏禮 MAGHRIB المغرب	宵禮 ISHAA العشاء	主麻 JUMAH الجمعة
宣禮 AZAN الأذان	5:30	1:00PM	4:30	5:48	7:20	12:40PM
成班 IQAMAH الإقامة	5:50	1:15PM	4:30	5:51	7:30	1:20PM
日出 SUN RISE طلوع الشمس	6:22	日正 NOON زوال الشمس	12	日落 SUN SET غروب الشمس		
告示 NOTICE						1:00PM

Also, those who are ill are not allowed to take medicine during daytime so they may have to put up with pain and discomfort. Tufail sees this extra suffering as among the tougher challenges that Allah (the Muslim name for God) has prepared. He believes that believers will earn great blessings if they persist.

Meanwhile, Muslims who live in the New Territories may find it hard to get to a mosque because the city's five major mosques are all located either in Kowloon or on Hong Kong Island.

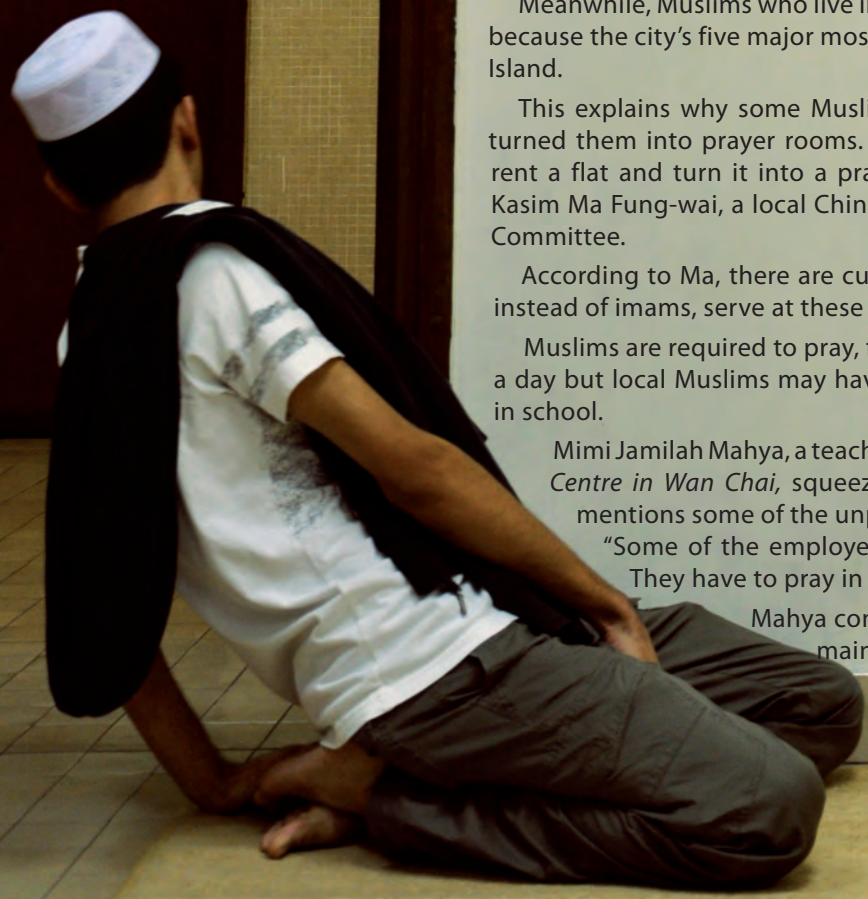
This explains why some Muslims have rented residential flats in some districts and turned them into prayer rooms. "Many Pakistanis, especially those living in Tuen Mun, rent a flat and turn it into a prayer room to serve fellow Muslims living nearby," says Kasim Ma Fung-wai, a local Chinese Muslim and chairman of the Islamic Union Da' Wah Committee.

According to Ma, there are currently a total of eight such flats in Hong Kong. Elders, instead of imams, serve at these flats and teach the Koran to children.

Muslims are required to pray, facing the direction of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, five times a day but local Muslims may have problems finding a suitable place to pray at work or in school.

Mimi Jamilah Mahya, a teacher of the Masjid Ammar and Osman Ramju Sadick *Islamic Centre in Wan Chai*, squeezes her hands together and swallows hard when she mentions some of the unpleasant experiences some female Muslims go through. "Some of the employers do not understand their (female Muslims') religion. They have to pray in the toilet," says Mahya.

Mahya comforts her "sisters" and encourages them not to give up maintaining a good relationship with Allah.







مغرب	5:47	5:50	حزت عثمان ثقی
عشاء	7:40	7:50	نوٹ
جموں الیاء	1:00	1:15	پہنہ کرنا منع ہے نذرت 10
مورخہ			

Madrasah (refers to a certain type of educational institution in Arabic), not tutorial school, is where Muslim children go after school. Every day, they would spend three hours studying Koran and learning Arabic.





In contrast, Mahya brightens up when she mentions some cases of good employers, who may be Muslims themselves, who respect the women and even offer them holidays to go on pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca. If conditions allow, visiting Mecca at least once in their lifetime is a religious duty that every Muslim should fulfill.

In general, Mahya is happy with the government's support for the Muslim community. However, she hopes to see more prayer rooms in Hong Kong. As many Indonesian domestic helpers gather on the streets and parks on Sundays, she suggests the government should consider building a prayer room, especially in Central and Causeway Bay.

"We need only a room for praying and a toilet for ablution," says Mahya. 