



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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Religious Practices: Religious Commemorations: Argentina

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“Practices, Interpretations and Representations”

By Sofia Martos

This entry examines the participation of women and the role of gender in religious commemorations in Argentina in the twentieth century. It is based on the findings from oral histories obtained through interviews, records, and minutes from Muslim associations, and published works by scholars and community leaders.

The first Muslim immigrants in Argentina arrived largely from Syria and Lebanon after 1890. Roughly 15 percent of the Middle Eastern immigrant community in Argentina was Muslim, while Christians and Jews respectively made up 80 and 5 percent. For that reason, and because Argentina was an officially Catholic nation, it took the Muslim community slightly longer than the Christian immigrant communities to establish formal religious associations and mutual aid societies. Muslim immigrants participated in pan-Syrian or pan-Arab associations in the first decades of the twentieth century, and after the 1920s, a number of Islamic centers and mutual aid societies were founded in the cities of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Mendoza, Tucumán, and Rosario. Prayers and religious commemorations were conducted within private homes until organizations were able to build centers. Due to the added cost, and perhaps external discrimination, the first mosques in Argentina were not built until the 1980s. Still, Islamic religious life was maintained through the persistence and cooperative efforts of immigrants and their families. Men greatly outnumbered women in early twentieth-century formal associations, both because Muslim men were more likely to immigrate than women and they sometimes married non-Muslim women, and because women often participated in ways other than attending meetings. Interviews with second-generation women suggest that religious or ethnic associational activity was one way in which women could be active and empowered in a manner that was supported by conservative family members, though their activities were often different from those of their male counterparts.

When religious festivities were near, the responsibility for the feast rested on women. According to oral histories, women would gather in the communal kitchens of centers such as the Arab Muslim Society of Córdoba for days at a time in order to offer their community a traditional bounty. Lest this contribution be considered minor, it is important to note that this cooperative effort by women helped them maintain homeland customs and flavors for their families and provided them with a space of sociability and support. Moreover, on these occasions, girls of younger generations listened to the stories and learned the recipes of their elders, an exchange that allowed for the continuity of their cultural traditions. Communal cooking also gave women a space in which to joke, discuss problems, and find support – essentially strengthening the ties among ethnic women. Lastly, the women's preparation of traditional and *ḥalāl* meals for large community feasts gathered sometimes-scattered individuals and helped reinforce religious ties.

Such gatherings happened at least twice a year, for the Eid al-Adha (Arabic, *ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā*, feast of sacrifice) and the Eid al-Fitr (Arabic, *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*, feast of breaking the fast at the end of Ramadan), and sometimes for an additional celebration of the founding anniversary of the local Islamic organization. Though many Muslims settled near each other in the cities, a great number also tended to reside in more remote areas of the countryside where their work as merchants or in agriculture had a competitive advantage. The dispersal of the Muslim community gave the Eid commemorations an added importance since they tended to be the only times when the entire community, even those living far away, came together. Women played a fundamental role in these gatherings, as they organized their households either for an extended visit to the city or for the arrival of distant family members.

By the 1930s and 1940s, women began to organize semi-formal women's societies, called *Sociedades de Damas*, which were subgroups of their local Islamic centers. These women's societies helped plan for religious festivities and local celebrations, fundraised and volunteered for their respective centers, and coordinated charitable efforts. Charity and

mutual aid were central to the activities of immigrant men and women of all backgrounds in Argentina in the early twentieth century, as these social networks offered assistance and support when mainstream or local government aid was lacking. In the Muslim community, however, the efforts of women in these formal and informal groups also helped them fulfill the Islamic principle of zakāt (Arabic, almsgiving).

By the 1950s, most of the young women active in the Muslim community were second-generation women born and raised in Argentina. These young women lived with two cultures, and looked for ways to negotiate their dual Argentine and Islamic customs and norms. One of the most fascinating expressions of this hybrid sensibility was the emergence of beauty and character pageants. During this time period beauty pageants were extremely popular in Argentina. Reports of such pageants would often take up the first page of major local newspapers. Many Syrian and Lebanese organizations began holding their own association or ethnic pageants, and Islamic centers did the same. Oral histories and photographs document the pageants for the “Queen of the Muslim Youth Center” in Córdoba, and others also emerged across the country. The pageants would normally coincide with an Eid festivity, as a major event at a large reception or celebration. The “queen” would be crowned for the year and her runners-up became “princesses.” More than a beauty contest, the young women chosen as Miss Muslim Youth stood as examples of second-generation women who remained connected to their ethnic and religious identity just as they displayed that they were contemporary Argentine women. The pageants were also used to raise money for their center, either for improvements for the center or savings toward a mosque. Though an outside observer today might question whether such pageants were in conflict with Islamic values concerned with women's modesty, witnesses and participants state that they were a source of pride for the community. At a minimum, the pageants allowed Muslims to take part in a popular Argentine trend and activity in a way that also expressed commitment to their religious community, and these activities occasionally take place to this day.

After the 1950s young women began to participate more in youth groups of their local Islamic centers. These youth groups tended to gather second-generation Argentine Muslims and also tended to be co-educational. Exclusively women's groups still remained, but youth groups brought together both women and men in leadership and participation. The minutes and notes from one such youth group show that these groups organized additional receptions and meetings for the Islamic community, and therefore contributed to its overall cohesion. Further, these documents show how second-generation women worked side by side with their male peers to preserve their religious customs through activities such as prayer groups and Arabic language lessons.

By the 1970s, youth groups organized gatherings that allowed interaction across provinces; for example, young Muslims in Tucumán or Mendoza would have a meeting with another youth group in Córdoba. The convergence of youth groups from across Argentina and the extensive participation of young women within these groups illuminate how women's activity within Islamic centers in Argentina has continued and remained dynamic with time. These gatherings had multiple objectives: they fostered communication among youth across various regions, offered mutual understanding and support, reinforced religious beliefs, and simply provided a social network.

Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence of activity within Islamic centers. Recent immigrants, funding from abroad, and an increase in religious conversions to Islam from the majority society have added a new vibrancy to the Muslim community. Women who are now third- or fourth-generation immigrants work, plan, and pray alongside new additions to their associations, including young adults whose families have lost touch with Islam over the generations and new converts. New members are often welcomed through informational meetings, Arabic language classes, and within religious commemorations.

Gender roles have shifted slightly across generations in Argentina to allow for more active roles in leadership for women in the Muslim community. Women's formal participation and cooperation with male peers is more visible in today's religious commemorations. Yet, women in the past played an integral, if perhaps more subtle, role in the organization of religious gatherings and in the continuity of ties within the home and across the community.

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