

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF MUSLIM PRAYER (SALAT)

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ABSTRACT

Salat is the major act of worship in Islam, prescribed as obligatory practice observed five times daily. It involves movements in forms of positions and postures, some of which could be similar to movements and exercises, prescribed in yoga, and physiotherapy for the wellbeing of humans. This research was aimed at analyzing the postures taken at prayers during individual and congregational Salat to identify similarities to the ergonomically and medically prescribed exercises and physiotherapy for the wellbeing of practitioners. The research employed qualitative methods where interviews, surveys and observational studies were carried out. Findings showed that the number of postures observed in five daily prayers was 145. Worshippers made short recitations while standing, but moderate reading of supplications of Ruku' and Sujud. Observations of the congregational Salat showed that 8 to 10 minutes were spent in a prayer of four units, falling within the category of moderate time spent in prayers. Thus, Salat postures and positions have physiological, psychological and therapeutic benefits. They help increase blood circulation in the body, treat certain body pains, and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and depression. Though the health and

physical benefits of *Salat* could be experienced by all worshippers, it is highly likely that worshippers who spent more time in prayers would benefit from the postures and positions more than those who spent short time in them.

KEYWORDS: Health, Physical Benefits, Religious Practices, Muslim Prayer

INTRODUCTION

Religions prescribe practices that aim at achieving spiritual purification and establishing constant bond with the objects of worship. The nature of the practices varies according to religions, including the influences of the practices on the life of practitioners. Every religion prescribes certain acts of worship to its adherents for purposes of spiritual and moral regenerations and as services that must be offered by way of obligation. Thus, the obligation of the services and idea of achieving moral and spiritual improvements keep the adherents in constant observance of the practices thereby turning the acts into habits and or culture. Regular observance of the practices demonstrates the level of adherents' compliance with the rules of religion and obedience to its orders. In every religion, being steadfast in acts of worship is a means of attaining spirituality, morality, and tranquility in life. However, the rediscovery of the connection between religion and science ignited interests in research that explored the benefits of religious practices to the health and physical well-being of individuals and societies. Postures and positions in religious worships have meditative functions, and can physically and mentally benefit the practitioners (Nazish and Kalra 338).

Islam prescribes various acts of worship that aimed at not only depicting religiosity but increasing spirituality and regeneration of morality. Such practices include *Salat* (prayers), *Zakah* (Alms giving), *Siyam* (fasting) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage). *Salat* is the major act of worship in Islam observed five times and in line with the regulations prescribed in the *Qur'an* and demonstrated in practices of the Prophet of Islam. *Salat* is described in the *Qur'an* as a prevention and protection against evil (Q29:45), a source of comfort and tranquility (Q70:19-23). The obligation of performing prayer is prescribed in the *Qur'an* (Q73:20), its observance described as the act of the faithful and the righteous individuals (Q2:3, Q23:2-3). *Salat* is presented as an act of achieving spiritual and moral improvements (Q29:45), the act observed by humble believers, who do not engage in frivolous jokes (Q23:2-3). Beyond its spiritual functions, *Salat* regenerates character, facilitates and promotes interactions in the community, and instills the culture of punctuality and sense of equality.

The social, moral and spiritual values of *Salat* are realized if it is observed, based on the rules governing its practice (al-Tabari 19, al-Alusiy 104, A.H, Ibn.Kathir 168). Spiritually, *Salat* is an avenue for the worshippers to communicate directly with their Lord, standing humbly, bowing, kneeling and prostrating in owe and respect. Morally, it shapes

their minds and conducts, and it socially encourages physical contacts between individuals at least five times in a day. Aside from the spiritual and moral functions, the positions and postures in forms of *Ruku'* and *Sujud* would some benefit to the bodies and minds of the worshippers. In view of the health and physical benefits of *Salat*, this paper empirically analyzes *Salat* postures and positions performed by individuals and in congregation. The aim is to find out how the postures and positions ergonomically and medically benefit the worshippers. The research applied qualitative design and specifically employed the methods of sampling, interview, and observation. Purposive sampling was used in the selections of places of worship and the respondents in the research area. Oral interview was used in interacting with the participants, while both participant and non-participant observations were applied in determining the amount of time spent in prayers.

Existing works on *Salat* and its benefits are mainly theoretical focusing on the spiritual, social, moral, physical and health benefits (Samiul and Kausik 921-928, Jimoh 60-69). Others analyzed the physical and the health benefit by discussing how the different postures and positions stimulate the mind and strengthen human body (Nazish and Kalra 337-345, Sarkingobir, Sahru, Sahabi, and Ashafa 58-70). Studies on the health benefits of *Salat* examined its positive impacts on health and its capacity in reducing risk of illness, (Abdulwahab, Kacanathu, and Oluseye 1565-1568, Ibrahim, Sian, Shanggar and Razack 1087-1091, Osman Imamoglu 302-318, Ghous and Malik 887-888, Kamran 43-53, Chamsi-Pasha and Chamsi-Pasha 91-97). This research posits that by practicing *Salat* assiduously, practitioners can benefit from the various physical, mental and psychological attributes, related to regular observance of prayers.

TIMES AND METHOD OF SALAT

The five daily *Salat* are observed at some appointed times of the day and the night, as prescribed in the *Qur'an* thus, "Prayer has been prescribed on the believers as an obligation to be observed within appointed times" (Q4:103). And also "establish prayers at the two ends of the day and the approach of the night" (11:114), establish prayers at the decline of the sun till the darkness of the night and the recitation of dawn" (Q17:78). The practices of the Prophet of Islam practically demonstrated the time of each prayer. Thus, based on the Prophet's practices and instructions the time of *Zuhr* prayer is when the sun declines from centre of the sky. For *Asr* prayer, is that moment where the shadow of an object equals or is twice its height. The time of *Magrib* prayer is after sunset while the time of *Isha* prayer is night fall, and the appearance of dawn marks the time of *Subh* prayer (al-Zuhayli 551, Ibn Anas 3, al-Bukhari 395).

Prayers are observed standing, and the first action taken is to raise the two hands close to the shoulder, with the palms facing the front as a way of inaugurating the prayer then recitation of verses of the *Qur'an* is done while still standing. Based on the practice of the Prophet, the lengths of recitation in the first two units (*Raka'ah*) are usually longer the

last unit in a prayer of more than two units (Ibn Hajjaj 253). After recitation, bowing (*Ruku'*) is done with palms stick to the knees, reading some words of supplication in this position. After rising from bowing optional supplications are also said, before going for prostration (*Sujud*) (Ibn Hajjaj 332). In the *Sujud* also, certain supplications are recited. In each unit (*Raka'ah*) of prayer two *Sujud* are observed and in between them, optional supplications are also recited. In the last *Raka'ah* of any prayer of four units, the third *Raka'ah* in a prayer of three units, or second *Raka'ah* of the prayer of two units, a long sitting is observed for *Tashahhud* with the two palms in the thighs (Ibn Hajjaj 119).

UNITS AND POSTURES OF SALAT

There are 17 units in the five obligatory prayers, and 15 in the non-Obligatory prayers. Key postures in prayer are the rising of hands to mark the beginning of prayer before making recitation. Then standing for the recitation, bowing for *Ruku'*, then rising from *Ruku*, standing for a moment, then going for *Sujud*. Rising from the *Sujud* and staying for a moment before the next *Sujud*. The sitting of *Tahiyah* is done in the second unit in prayer of two units, or in the second and last unit in prayers of four or three units. The total number of postures in a prayer of two *Raka'at* is 17, 34 in a prayer of four *Raka'at*, and 26 in a prayer of three *Raka'at*. The total number of postures in all the seventeen units of the five obligatory prayers is 145, the postures in the non-Obligatory prayers are 111. Thus, a worshipper who observes the five obligatory prayers and non-Obligatory prayers, in a day, will make a total of 256 postures. The postures in the time of the early morning prayer are 34 including the postures of two units of non-obligatory prayer. In the time of afternoon prayer, if two *Raka'at* are said before the prayer and two after it, the total number of postures will be 68. The number of postures in the late afternoon prayer will be 51 if two *Raka'at* are said before the prayer. In the time of the sunset prayer there are 43 postures if two *Raka'at* are observed after the prayer. There are 59 postures in the time of the night prayer, if three non-obligatory *Raka'at* are said after the *Isha'* prayer.

To understand the length of standing for recitation, and supplications in *Ruku'* and *Sujud*, the research categorized the recitations and the supplication into long, moderate and short. Reciting 30 verses and above was considered long, 20 to 30 verses moderate and 10 to 17 verses short. On the duration of *Ruku'* and *Sujud* reading the supplications 1 to 3 times was considered short, 3 to 5 moderate and 5 to 7 long. The time spent in congregational was considered long if a prayer lasted for 12 minutes and above. Moderate if it was between 8 to 10 minutes and short if it was 5 to 7 minutes. Individual worshippers interviewed stated that they recited 10 to 17 verses. On the duration of *Ruku* and *Sujud* they recited the supplications 3 to 5 times. Early morning prayers (*Subh*) observed in congregation in some mosques showed that the time spent while standing for recitation was 2 minutes in each *Raka'a*. Times spent in *Ruku'* (bowing), 10 seconds, after rising from *Ruku'* 5 seconds, time spent in *Sujud* (prostration) ten seconds, time spent sitting in-between the two *Sujud* 5

seconds, the time used in making *Tashahhud* was 40 seconds. The time spent in the prayer was 5 minutes and 20 seconds. In a *Zuhr* prayer observed, the time spent in recitation was 2 minutes in first unit, 2 minutes in the second unit, 10 seconds in *Ruku'*, 5 seconds after rising from *Ruku'* 10 seconds in *Sujud*, 5 seconds after rising from *Sujud*, 40 seconds in first *Tashahhud* and 70 seconds in the second *Tashahhud*. Time spent in this prayer was 7 minutes 5 seconds.

Observation of *Asr* prayer in congregation showed that the time spent while standing for recitation in the first and second units was 58 and 57 seconds respectively, and 48 and 45 second in the last two units. 10 seconds in *Ruku'*, 4 after rising from *Ruku'*, and 10 in *Sujud*, 3 after rising from *Sujud*, 45 in the first *Tashahhud* and 68 in the second *Tashahhud*. The time spent in this prayer was 5 minutes 12 seconds. Thus, congregational prayers observed in different mosques showed that prayers of four units observed lasted for between 6 to 8 minutes, prayer of three units lasted for 4 to 6 minutes and the prayer of two units lasted for 4 to 5 minutes. The same prayer in other mosques observed lasted for less than five minutes or about eight minutes. The duration in the recitation, and the number of times *Ruku'* and *Sujud* supplications were recited were responsible for the differences. It could be safely stated that a prayer where short recitation was made, its duration would be less than that of same prayer where long recitation and supplications were made.

CONCLUSION

Salat is one of the important religious services in Islam, performed on daily basis and at different periods. It is divided into obligatory and non-obligatory and observed in the same method. *Salat* is made up of postures and positions including standing for recitation, bowing, raising from bowing, prostration, raising from prostration and sitting. These constitute the obligatory aspects of prayer, but the supplications made in the postures are recommendation. Worshippers have the option of reading the supplication of bowing and prostration from one, to seven times. Likewise they have the option of reciting fewer or many verses while standing. This flexibility in the performance of *Salat* allows the worshippers to spend short or longer time in the prayer. Thus, prayers performed in mosques and by individual ends in a short period of time if the worshippers make short recitation and read fewer number of supplications in *Ruku'* and *Sujud*. The same prayer will be performed in a much longer period if the worshippers make long recitation and read the supplications of *Ruku'* and *Sujud* many times.

Researches in modern times explore the physical and health benefits of *Salat*, and come up with positive results on such benefits. It has been established that *Salat* reduces risk of diseases and improves the function of the body by stretching muscles and stimulating blood circulation. It serves as a therapy to back pain and other physiological problems, as well as a source of psychological well-being. This research categorized the recitations and supplications done by worshippers into long, moderate and short. The outcome from the

field showed that majority of individual worshippers made short recitations while standing, but moderate supplications of *Ruku'* and *Sujud*. Prayers observed in the selected mosques showed that the congregations made moderate recitation and probably supplication. Most of the congregational prayers of two units ended in the time between 4 to 6 minutes, and prayers of four units ended in time between 6 to 8 minutes. However, if the health benefits of *Salat* are mainly reaped by the worshippers who spend more time in prayers by making longer recitations and supplications, then many worshippers may not enjoy them.

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