Health Practice in Islam -The Cultural Dependence of the Lifestyle Formation-

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Abstract

Islam is a religion that was established in the 7th century by the Prophet Muhammad who was commissioned as a Messenger of God. It is also the modern or latest version of the message sent by God through some prophets, e.g. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Not only is it associated with the mental aspect, however, it also impacts every part of life, from eating and sleeping to working and playing. It can be, therefore, considered a way of life.

Meanwhile, one's lifestyle has recently come to have great meaning especially in the developed countries. Methods to assess lifestyle are suggested by some authorities such as Breslow and Morimoto. Accordingly, we have tried to investigate whether Muslims, the followers of Islam, have a desirable lifestyle as defined in today's terms, i.e. the cultural dependence of the lifestyle formation.

As a result, Muslims seeking to live in accordance with the doctrine of Islam may have a relatively good lifestyle. Islam may also be associated with the relief from the mental stress and give Muslims a guideline to live a happier life.

Key words: Islam, lifestyle, cultural dependence, health, Middle East

Introduction

Islam is a religion that began in the 7th century when the Prophet Muhammad received the revelation of God. However, it is not only associated with the mental aspect, and, in this point, it is different from many other religions. In Islam, there is a concept that the human is originally weak and easy to commit faults when tempted by the devil. Therefore, the doctrine is associated with every part of life to give a guideline for life and society¹⁾. That is to say, Islam may be considered as a religion which regulates one's lifestyle.

Recently, especially in the developed countries, one's lifestyle has attracted great notice in its relationship with various diseases. The methods to assess one's lifestyle are suggested by such authorities as Breslow^{2, 3)} and Morimoto^{4, 5)}. Also in the developing world including the Islamic World, it has been strongly predicted that one's lifestyle will have greater meaning in the near future.

Therefore, in this paper, we focused especially on the Middle East Islamic World where Islam is the state religion in most

countries and tried to investigate medically and ethnologically whether Muslims have the desirable lifestyle that is defined by these methods, i.e. the cultural dependence of the lifestyle formation.

1. Dietary habits

The dietary habits of the Islamic World are affected by the socio-cultural and economic factors, and the nutritional problems therefore also vary⁶⁾. For example, in the Gulf countries, the dietary habits have dramatically changed by the sudden increase of income from oil revenues. As a result, obesity has become one of the major public health problems especially among adult women. In fact, it has been reported that the obesity prevalence rate of adult women in Bahrain and Kuwait is 31.4% and 42.0% respectively^{7, 8)}. In this region, there is a tendency for old and middle-aged men to prefer overweight women, and such a cultural factor is also related to the high obesity prevalence rates⁹⁾.

In the Islamic World, there are traditionally extended families in which the father is the head of the household. Nuclear families have increased in number recently by industrialization and urbanization¹⁰⁾, however, and the consequent participation of women in the labor force has caused a prevalence of the consumption of convenience foods and the habit of eating outside the home⁶⁾. Additionally, as well as the habit of eating between meals, the prevalence of undesirable dietary habits such

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as skipping breakfast and replacing dinner with snacks have been found among young people^{11, 12)}.

The prohibition of pork in Islam is well known. Although the reason for it is not clear, it seems that it was based on hygienic considerations because pork easily goes bad and harbors infectious diseases and parasites. That is to say, under the severe conditions of the Arabian Peninsula where the temperature is over 40 degrees centigrade in the summer, if people don't pay attention to their food, they won't be able to maintain their health. In the Qur'an, the people are allowed to eat the meat of sheep, cattle, camel, etc. In cases in which these animals have died of disease, in accidents, were killed by fierce animals, and so on, however, it is forbidden to eat them. With regard to this it also seems that there are hygienic considerations^{13, 14)}.

In addition, there is the fasting month of Ramadan as a peculiar dietary custom in Islam. Although the observance of the Ramadan fast is unlikely to have much effect on healthy individuals, it may produce some ill-effects in patients with disease¹⁵⁾.

2. Alcohol drinking and tobacco smoking

In Islam, alcohol drinking is forbidden. When researching the reasons for this, political and economic backgrounds must be considered. That is to say, in Arabia in former days, the curse of alcohol drinking was terrible, and alcohol drinking led to the profits of the Judean merchants that monopolized wine imports to Arabia¹³⁾.

Meanwhile, the cultivation and drinking habit of coffee began in Arabia around the 11th century, and it began to be popular among Muslims who abstained from alcohol in principle¹⁶⁾. This Arabic coffee is different from Western and other Oriental types of coffee, however, and it is prepared by milling two ingredients, the roasted coffee beans and spices, roughly and then boiling them¹⁷⁾. Although the Arabic coffee plays an important role at present, too, as a means of social intercourse and ceremony¹⁶⁾, Ali and Felimban¹⁷⁾ have found a positive correlation between total serum cholesterol levels and the intake of it.

In the Qur'an, there is no obvious description about smoking. This is because tobacco didn't exist in this region in former days^{10, 13)}, therefore the propriety of it was decided afterwards in a conference of theologians of high rank. At present, there are few sects that forbid tobacco, and the Sunni sect, which comprises 90% of Muslims, has allowed it¹³⁾. Thus smoking is common in the Islamic World, too, and the high prevalence of smoking among male university students (37.0-54.3%) or male physicians (38.0-45.3%) is a cause of concern¹⁸⁻²³⁾.

The acquirement of the smoking habit is associated with such factors as having fathers, siblings or friends that smoke, having a low educational level, and having fathers that have low educational level¹⁸⁻²⁰⁾. It should be noted, however, that religious consideration is an important motive for not smoking among non-smokers (42.0-48.9%) and for attempting to quit smoking among present smokers (34.0%)²⁰⁻²²⁾. That is to say, the recognition that smoking contradicts the teachings of Islam has become pervasive among Muslims, and this factor must be taken into account in any health education programs.

Meanwhile, in the developing world, the Governments are less determined in dealing with powerful multinational tobacco companies²³⁾. Additionally, in Saudi Arabia, the price of the tobacco is very cheap compared with income^{20, 21)}. It seems that

these factors promote the prevalence of smoking.

3. Physical exercise and sleeping hours

In Islam, the obligatory prayers are performed five times a day, at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. Also, there are strict rules concerning the way the prayers are conducted. That is to say, the prayer consists of the basic unit including four movements; standing upright, bending down, prostration, and sitting upright, and this unit is repeated 2 times at the dawn prayer, 3 times at the sunset prayer and 4 times at the noon, mid-afternoon and nightfall prayer respectively^{1, 14)}. The prayer not only contributes to the relief of the lack of exercise, but also determines the rhythm of the entire day of the Muslims, above all¹⁾.

In addition, purity of the whole body is required before the prayer. Without it, the prayer is invalid, and also, there is a rule in the way it is conducted. That is to say, the wrists, mouth, nose, face, elbows, head, ears and feet are washed in that order with pure running water. Muslims have acquired this habit in their childhood. Therefore prayer also greatly contributes to the permeation of their concepts of hygiene^{1, 13)}.

Regarding sleeping hours, Afifi²⁴⁾ has found that the number of hours per day is 8.0 ± 1.2 (Mean $\pm$ SD) generally and 7.8 ± 1.7 hours during the fasting month of Ramadan. Both of them are up to the standard, 7 to 8 hours of sleep. Thus it seems that Muslims have relatively good sleep habits.

4. Working hours and mental stress

In the life of Muslims, there are 3 kinds of hours: the working hours, the playing hours and the relaxation hours¹⁾.

The working hours are considered a necessary evil by Muslims and they don't attach very much importance to it. This is mainly due to the recognition in Islam as well as in Judaism and Christianity that labor is a punishment given by God. However, it is also associated with the traditions and climate of this region. That is to say, in this region which is primarily desert, nomadism has been the main occupation. Unlike agriculture, however, it is not an occupation which results in success in terms of industry and effort. Therefore, in a nomadic society, the recognition that their work is a virtue is difficult to obtain. In addition, no value is placed on "being busy" and "hurrying" which are qualities applied mainly to industry^{1, 13)}.

Meanwhile, the playing hours, also, have no importance attached to them because of the recognition that playing is what children do and not what sensible adults do¹⁾.

Most important for Muslims are the relaxation hours. This time period includes being with the family, visiting others, praying, sleeping, travelling, acquiring knowledge, composing poems, meditating, etc. and to have a sufficient number of hours is considered a good way of life¹⁾. It seems that the relaxation hours also contribute to relief from mental stress.

Conclusion

At present, Islam has spread almost worldwide regardless of race, ethnicity or nationality, and it's said that the total number of Muslims is over 1 billion. In fact, many more Muslims live in Southeast Asia than in Arabia, which is the birthplace of Islam. Also, in the Western World, Islam has become the second most popular religion¹⁾. Therefore, among many Muslims, there is often more than one cultural background except for the Islamic

culture, and this factor produces a diversity of lifestyles.

In this paper, we focused especially on the Middle East Islamic World that was the birthplace of Islam. Also in this region, however, there are various countries, e.g. those in which Sharia (the laws of Islam) has become the basis of the law of the land as well as those in which the separation of religion and politics has been carried out. Additionally, the wave of westernization and anti-Western culture phenomena are mixed in confusion. On the other hand, there are naturally individual variations in the religious beliefs of Muslims, and actually, there are also many Muslims that drink alcohol and/or don't pray.

Therefore, the matter described in this paper is not always universal. In addition, it should be mentioned that the lifestyle described in this paper is not completely comprehensive and it is

not possible to disregard the possibility that lifestyle results from the local culture itself. However, it is clear that our description has grasped one aspect of the diverse lifestyles of Muslims.

In general, there are many cases where Islam is poorly understood or receives prejudice. In Islam, however, there is certainly another way of life that cannot be measured by Western criteria.

In conclusion, although there are some problems concerning dietary and smoking habits, Islam may greatly contribute to the realization of the desirable lifestyle that is defined today. Additionally, Islam may not only contribute to the relief from mental stress but also give Muslims a guideline to live happier lives.

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