



THE ART OF MAKING BEADS OF FAITH
WITH REFERENCE TO BUDDHISM,
CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: HISTORIC
EVOLUTION AND SUGGESTIVE
SIGNIFICANCE

BY

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ABSTRACT

This research has made a comparative study of the art of making beads of different faiths with particular reference to Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. They have been considered within the elements of their history, origins and evolution, the variations in types of materials used and possible symbolic influences of those choices, the usage of additional pendants, the association with a leading figure within each of the religions, colour, the use within chanting and recitation, and the etymology of the words used to describe them within each of the relevant languages. The demographics of the populations who use the rosaries have also been investigated to determine any possible correlations between rosary usage and the economic status of the countries of abode of the devotees. Each religion did not develop the idea of a rosary independently and then implement it as part of their prayer ritual. The preferences for any given design and the various types of materials used are based upon two main parameters, the traditions of the particular religion, and the societal cultures that often predate those religious traditions. One of the important goals of this research was to determine where these two factors impacted upon the rosary design within each of the chosen religions. This was then used during the comparative analysis to determine where any possible acculturation may have taken place between the different civilizations, or where prior primitive forms of religious practices display commonalities. During this process the research has also brought to light certain differences within the methodologies of how the different faith systems use natural phenomena as a vehicle for the devotees to understand their own particular faith system better.

ملخص البحث

هذه دراسة مقارنة تتناول استخدام السيِّح وآثاره الاعتقادية لدى مجموعة من الأديان، وخاصة لدى الديانات البوذية والمسيحية والإسلامية ، وقد تمَّ التطرق إلى هذا الموضوع وفقاً لمجموعة من العناصر التاريخية، والنشأة والتطور، واختلافات أنواع المواد المستخدمة، والتأثيرات الرمزية المحتملة من هذه الخيارات، واستخدام التماثم الإضافية، وذلك بالتعاون مع أحد رجال الدين البارزين في كل دين من هذه الأديان الثلاثة على حدة، حيث يتم استخدامها مصحوبة بترانيم وتلاوات مخصصة، مع التعرف على أصل كل كلمة من الكلمات المستخدمة وتوصيفها وفقاً لكل لغة من اللغات ذات الصلة. كما تمَّ الكشف عن التركيبة السكانية للمجتمعات التي تستخدم هذه السيِّح في محاولة لتحديد أيَّة ارتباطات محتملة بين مستخدمي هذه الوُزود أو الصلوات وبين الحالة الاقتصادية للبلدان التي يعيش فيها هؤلاء المريدون. إنَّ كل دين من هذه الديانات لم تتطور فيه فكرة هذه التسايح بشكل مستقل ومن ثمَّ فقد تمَّ تنفيذها باعتبارها جزءاً من طقوس صلاتهم. إنَّ الأولوية لأيِّ تصميم سيتم تقديمه أو لأيِّ نوع من المواد المستخدمة باختلاف أنواعها سوف يستند على عاملين أساسيين: أولهما التقاليد الخاصة بهذا الدين، وآخرها الثقافات المجتمعية التي غالباً ما تكون سابقة لتلك التقاليد الدينية، ولقد كان أهم أهداف هذا البحث يتمثل في تحديد مدى تأثير هذين العاملين على صياغة تلك الوُزود أو الترانيم داخل كل الديانات المختارة، وقد تمَّ الاعتماد على منهج التحليل المقارن في هذا البحث لتحديد مظاهر التأثير والتأثر التي قد تكون قد نشأت نتيجة للاحتكاك المحتمل بين تلك الحضارات المختلفة، أو ربما قد نشأت نتيجة القواسم المشتركة الناتجة عن ما توارثوه من طرق شعائرية بدائية كانت متواجدة قبل تحول المجتمع إلى هذه الأديان. وخلال هذه الدراسة ألقى هذا البحث أيضاً الضوء على بعض الأمور الخلافية بين هذه العقائد والمتعلقة بنظرتهم للظواهر الطبيعية المختلفة وتحليلهم إياها، باعتبارها وسيلة لهؤلاء المريدين لفهم نظام دياناتهم بصورة أفضل.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (History and Civilization).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
B.C.	Before Christ
e.g.	(<i>exempligratia</i>) : For example
etc.	(<i>et cetera</i>): And so forth
saw	Arabic words “Ṣallallāh-u Ḍalayhi Wa Sallam” (may God’s blessings and peace be on him)
swt	Arabic words “Subhānahū Wa Ta’ālā” (Glory to Him, the Exalted)
as	Alaihi salam
Vol.	Volume

TRANSLITERATIONS

In this research the transliteration rules of IIUM for Arabic entries are presented in the following table and all Arabic characters have been transliterated according to this standard.

ء		ج	Kh	ش	Sh	غ	Gh	ن	N
ب	B	د	D	ص	ṣ	ف	F	ه	H
ت	T	ذ	dh	ض	ḍ	ق	Q	و	W
ث	Th	ر	r	ط	ṭ	ك	K	ي	Y
ج	J	ز	z	ظ	ẓ	ل	L		
ح	ḥ	س	s	ع	c	م	M		

Short Vowels.		Long Vowels.	
اَ	a	اَ + اَ	ā
اِ	i	اِ + اِ	ī
اُ	u	اُ + اُ	ū

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Prayer beads or rosary usage is significant in many of the major world faith systems. Aside from the Holy Books, they are perhaps one of the most frequently used physical paraphernalia that many seekers utilize to assist them in the consolidation of their beliefs. Generally, the role of these various ‘rosaries’ when used within the confines of the context for which they were originally intended is to assist the respective seekers, through a means of repetitive prayer, to focus upon the God whom they worship within the parameters of their own faith. The word ‘rosary’ is used here to collectively label the various forms of prayer beads from whatever background they hail.

All rosaries are based upon a simple design of beads or knots placed along a string or thread which allows the user to employ a method of the undertaking of counting repetitive prayers or keeping track of ones position during the recitation of the names or attributes of a particular God or deity of choice. No definitive statement can be made as to the original origin of the rosary but the earliest recorded finds today come from the Asian region.

As many as two thirds of the world’s population make use of rosaries in their various forms. Added to this, approximately 52% of the world’s population as of 2007 is composed of members taken from two out of the three religions that constitute the Abrahamic monotheistic faith systems. Both originated from West Asia, namely Christianity and Islam.¹ The vast majority of the other rosary users are adherents of

¹ Britannica , Encyclopedia. *World wide Adherants of world religions by Six continental areas*. March 12,2007 12, 2007.

Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which are also predominantly found in the Asian region.

The rosaries used by the various faiths have a very similar physical format. They consist of a specific number of beads, apportioned into sections and placed upon a thread. Generally, the two thread ends are then clasped together to form a circlet. The total number and the apportioning of the beads may differ from religion to religion but the basic pattern of design is consistent.

The outsiders of any given religious denomination tend to view those of other faith systems as being very homogenous as to their practices and value systems even though these same outsiders may recognize that their own particular religion is diverse in many aspects. A blanket pre-conceived idea is then assumed as to practices and preferences for particular religious denominations that ignore how cultural values have moved to blur the lines of distinction between the various civilizations. Aside from the Holy Scriptures of the various faiths, the simple prayer beads or rosary is perhaps one of the few symbols of religious piety that may be observed to be a common visual feature representing those who seek to please their creator or preferred deity.

There are many excellent works written with regard to rosaries from the various faith systems, especially that of Christianity and Islam. Of these, the International Islamic University Malaysia has contributed some very authoritative works in various languages, especially those of Arabic and Malay. Yet it may be observed that most of these take an individualized approach to the topic of discussion. This study proposes to address an observed gap and consider the rosary in a comparative setting with a view to the ancestry, art and how the religious preferences may have impacted the evolution of rosary usage.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.

As has already been mentioned above, there are many outstanding works available relating to rosary usage and their relevance within each particular religion that they are associated with. Significantly the rosaries do vary from religion to religion with regard to the number of threaded beads they contain but the overall format of prayer bead design is similar. This variation in number is due primarily to each particular religion's own requirements for its usage.

Unfortunately the problem with rosary usage is that, if due care is not taken on the part of the devotees, it's recitation may tend to descend towards a purely mechanical action. Many of the different religious groups also consider that their own mode of usage for the device is entirely comprehensive. This may place a limiting value on the success of its usage for the devotee. By taking cognizance of the understanding that each religion did not individually develop its own idea for a rosary form and then implement it as part of their prayer ritual possible ideas may be gleaned to an enhanced philosophy of rosary usage by the devotee without compromising his own beliefs.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to determine if consideration of the similarities and differences of the different rosaries in each religious group with regard to the aspects of history, art form, aesthetics, functions, ritual, and suggestive nature may broach ways in which it's usage may be enhanced for each of the respective faith systems chosen. In this research the rosaries from the religions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam will be considered to search for these similarities and differences

The preferences for the design and then the subsequent various types of materials used in rosary construction came under two influences; one based upon the traditions of their particular religion and the second based upon societal cultures which have built up over time and in some cases pre-date the particular religious tradition. The study also looks into the various materials used and their aesthetic appearances in relation to their form, function, religious and historical significance and the suggestive representation based upon these criteria within the different chosen communities and civilizations in order to search for the commonalities and the differences in the value systems.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A significant body of studies has been carried out with regard to the various facets of the rosary, each in relation to their own particular history, art form, function and ritualistic usage relating only to their own religious setting. Very little is written with regard to the overall picture of the artefact and how its aesthetic form is a physical linkage from one religious community to the next.

Through history the traditional values that were found to be present within the community of any one faith system would have had an impact upon people of other civilizations and communities with whom they came into contact. This would inevitably lead to a cross communication of information and personal values. Therefore the materials used and the design criteria behind the different rosaries, although their users perhaps may not consider it to be so, would have incorporated specific elements within them which stem back to both shared traditional practices and also to cultural values that have passed down through societies. M. Gaster wrote on this topic in 1914 that:

Before entering upon the discussion of the problem, it is necessary to point out that beads are often worn as ornaments, especially those of rare stone or of special metal. It is now an acknowledged fact that ornaments are often the decayed survivals of more ancient religious practices. More over to this very day, the character of a stone so used determines the value of such strings as amulets against the evil eye, or for averting some dreaded evil, or for some medicinal purpose. The wearer of certain stones is expected to be immune from this or that disease. It might be argued that the primitive use of the rosary was a similar protective character.²

By focusing on the different types of form and function of the various rosaries this study traces the roots of this significance through the avenues of art, aesthetic appeal, material usage and symbolism.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The following questions are the main concerns of this study:

1. What are the function and history of beads in each of the chosen religions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam?
2. What are the materials considered the most appropriate choice for prayer beads by the different communities and what are their reasons, cultural or traditional behind that choice?
3. What are the various forms, aesthetic appeal, functions, religious and historical significance and suggestive references behind their choices?
4. What are the similarities and differences in form, aesthetic appeal, functions, religious and historical significance and symbolism of the rosaries between the various religions focused upon?

² M.Gaster 'Beads and Knots,' *Folklore* (Taylor and Francis Ltd) 25, no 2 (6 1914): 254 -258.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DOCUMENTATION

Before a comparative analysis may be undertaken, a detailed understanding of the historical and artistic evolution of the rosary beads, each within their own context is required. Therefore the three chosen religions have initially been analysed separately in a sequence that follows the emergence of the religions chronologically. Certain historical evidence suggests that perhaps the approximate date of the emergence of the prayer beads within each of the religions does not follow chronologically in line with the appearance of the religion itself. This implies that in order of appearance the three religions should be listed in the order of Buddhism, Islam and then Christianity. However, there are two schools of thought within the Christian theological circles, one of which maintains that the Christian rosary has Islamic roots and the other, which believes that the rosary came from Christian roots. This thesis has followed the chronological order of appearance of the religion based on the soundness of the historical evidence.

The framework below has been used to cover all of the areas of comparison so that a final tabulation based upon the highlighted significance in each design may be reviewed against its counterparts to distinguish how closely or otherwise cultural and traditional preferences may be significant in the rosary's design and usage. The areas of consideration are:

- The population demographics in relation to the status of the particular religion. Buddhism has been split into the principle countries of devotion since this provides a natural demarcation for styles.
- The origins and historical evolution and variations of the rosaries within their own faith system.

- The variations of the rosary for each of the three faith systems in terms of the material influence, symbology associated with the specific material choices, the influence of colour and the significance of additional pendants.
- The traditions relating the rosary to the principle leader within each of the faith systems, and to its use as a devotional object within the context of the directed devotion.
- Rosary usage for purposes of chanting and recitation.
- The etymology of the words used to describe the rosary.

The inclusion of population demographics associated within each of the three faith systems is required to determine if a pattern may be ascertained as to any possible links between the economic status of a particular religious group or country and rosary usage. This is relevant to Christianity where not all sects use a rosary.

Material choices play a significant role when any devotee chooses a device such as a rosary. His level of comfort, either through the symbology of the material chosen, or because of subconscious preferences due to his past cultural programming will be represented within that choice and this will later assist him in his feeling of ease during his recitation.

Colour plays a very significant role in decision making when acquiring a rosary. In a similar manner to the choice of material of construction, many of the reasons behind certain colour preferences come from the cultural lore of the different civilizations. The earliest expressions with regard to colour often hold in them elements of mysticism and therefore its use went beyond the aesthetics of sensuous delight towards the supernatural element. These then became entwined with religious practices.

The affixing of pendants to these rosaries also hold within them important connections to the belief systems of the devotees. They often add a symbolic element that acts as a reminder of various main stays of belief within the religious system of choice. The attachment of the etymology associated with the named pendant may also bring some significance. The use of a crucifix on the Christian rosary would be an example of this.

The relevance of the discussion on the material choices may not be overstated. It is through this medium of investigation that certain major differences in doctrinal philosophies within these various faith systems show either a thread of consistence or a point of divergence.

Language plays a very significant role in the process of transmission of religious practices and knowledge. Certain material elements built into nature are designed to perform a symbolical as well as an aesthetic function and these become signs for mankind to know their Lord. A religion that cherishes and preserves the root language of transmission of its scriptures will have a base of linguistics to assist in the assurance of a correct framework within its knowledge foundation. A religion that is dissociated from that foundation may run the risk of divergence as the translation of the scriptures from language to language loses some of its depth and richness. It is for this reason that the etymology of the names used to describe the rosaries from the various religions and countries has been considered.

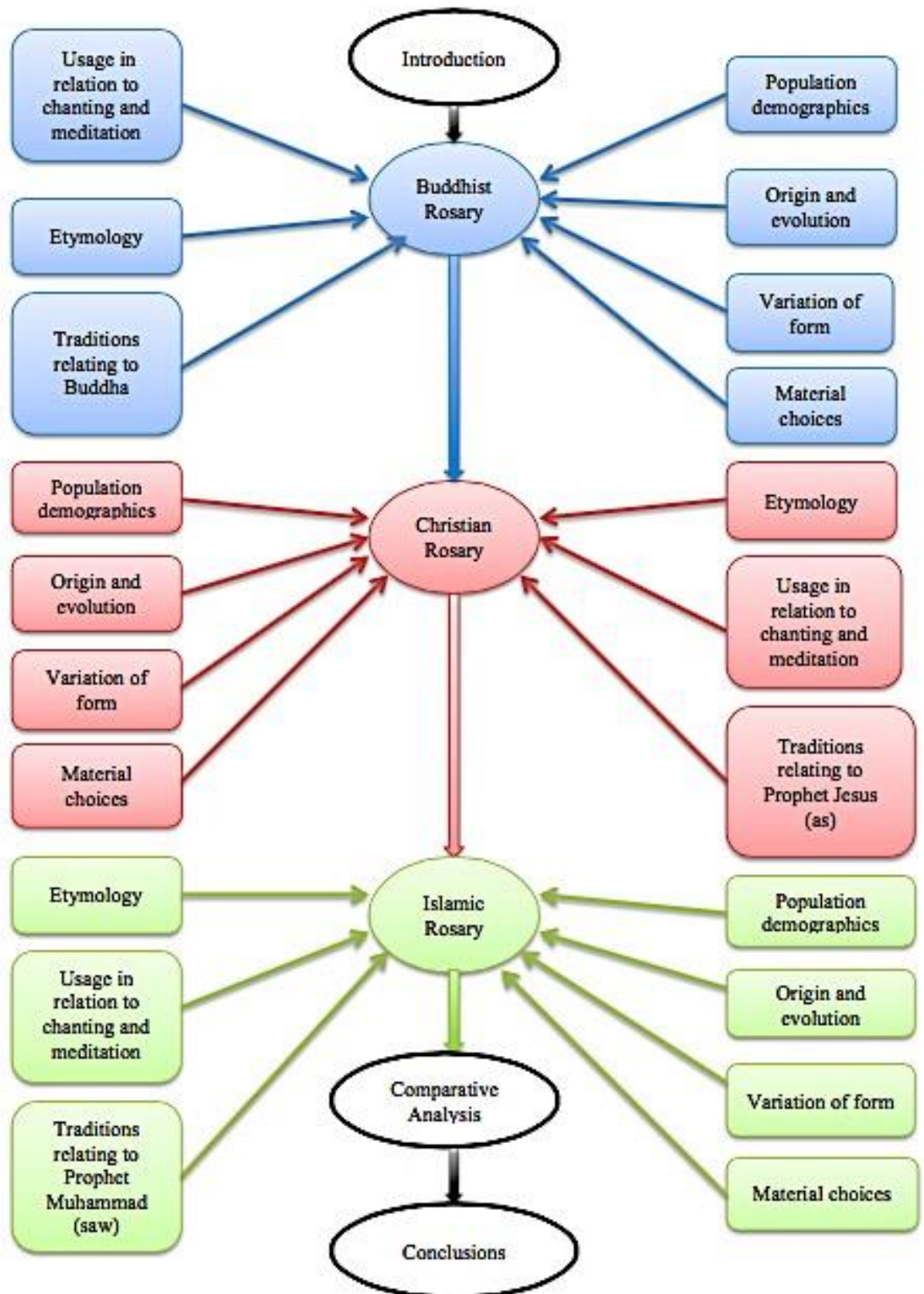


Figure 1.1 Thesis Flow chart.