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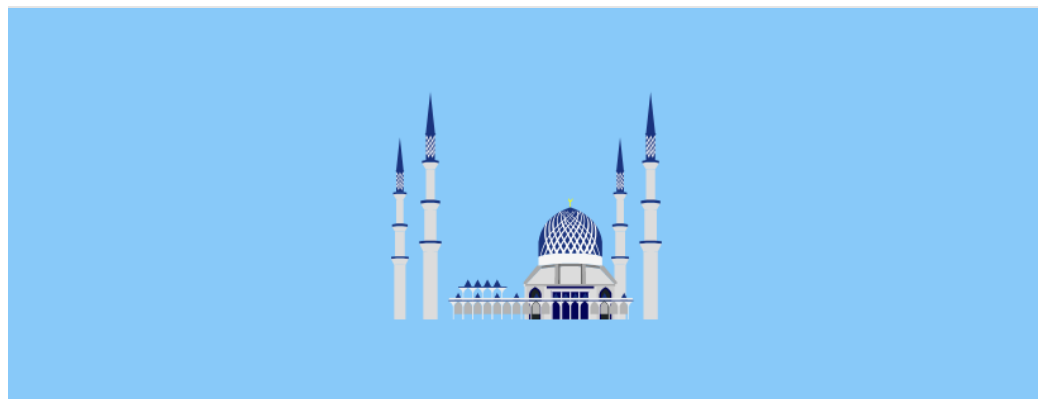
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The Spiritual, Educational and Social Functions of Mosques during COVID-19 Pandemic

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By: Dr Shukran Abdul Rahman

We welcome Ramadhan this year in a slightly different way for many of us are observing stay-at-home measure due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The collective aspects of Ramadhan, which were experienced in our yesteryears, have to be substituted with other activities. The break-of-fast or iftar session with our fellow brothers and sisters, as well as congregational prayers including the *tarawih* at mosques are replaced with in-house iftar and congregational prayers at home. Generally, mosques in most countries are being closed to the public, making it impossible for us to enliven our mosque the way we used to. Nevertheless, many mosques throughout the world have assumed new roles during the lockdown time hence making the functions of mosques continuously alive, albeit in different ways. The altered roles do not only keep the mosque institution functional but also depict its actual functions as enshrined in the teaching of Islam. This is important to provide appropriate portrayal of the mosque functions.

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The functions of mosque as central spine for community development have been historically proven. The mosque institution played significant functions in changing the society during and after the Prophet's time, being the centre to discuss and launch activities that improve the life of community members, develop their capacity to become good individuals in the society and change their socio-economic condition to be of a better state. Mosque institution has been playing a uniting and harmonizing agent for many people, including between Muslims and people of other faiths. In the present pandemic context, these roles have been augmented, encompassing spiritual, educational and social domains, to the benefit of various groups in the society.

History has reported that religious authorities in the past have altered certain spiritual-religious practices during epidemics or pandemics. Similarly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in effect, the lockdown, there have been practical decisions on religious practices. Despite the social distancing measures that require the closure of mosques, the function of mosques in many communities have not been dampen. Several interventions have been implemented to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the community. Muslim scholars have come up with guidelines for ritual activities at mosques by taking into account the importance of protecting good health, practising personal hygiene; and making necessary behavioural changes to reduce the transmission of COVID19. If in normal circumstances Muslims are required to perform their obligatory prayers in congregation, during the movement control order period, mosques have been prohibited to hold five daily congregational prayers, conduct weekly Jum'ah (Friday) prayers, or most probably the forthcoming Eid prayer; and many other activities.

Though many mosques have closed their doors for mass activities, the roles of mosques in guiding the community on spiritual aspects are being kept active. In Kuwait, for instance, mosques continue to call people to prayers by substituting the phrase "come to pray"; with "pray in your homes" in their azan (or call to prayer). In Turkey, mosques continue to provide religious guidance to the community. Speech by imams are made on loud speakers from mosques so that people in the vicinity could hear the message. In Iraq, Friday sermon and prayers are broadcast on local radio channel. In some places, the congregational prayers are still being allowed, with the adjustment on the manner they are conducted, such as by imposing strict social distancing measures among mosque-goers. These are sample of activities that keep the mosques connected with the community, and for the community to feel engaged with their place of worship.

Despite the closure, mosques continue to provide religious education, helping the community to meet their religious and spiritual needs, being aware of the essentiality of religious teaching and values in nurturing positive behaviours during pandemic time. Instead of having in person physical classes, many mosques provide religious lesson for mosque-goers and general public to watch via FB Live, radio or other platforms of livestreaming. In Singapore, mosques officials develop various programmes on videos to be broadcast or shared with

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the community. In Australia, mosques provide livestreaming supplication and lectures, while in Malaysia, mosques conduct livestreaming tadarrus (group recitation of Quran), as well as religious talks and supplication on Youtube. Like teachers in schools or academics in universities, officials and teachers at mosques have also adopted new mode of conducting religious classes or guidance session, Many of them have adapted the digital skills in order to take up new approaches in educating the community. Religious classes instructors (ustaz and ustazah) adopt new mode of conducting religious classes or guidance session, and have quickly acquired digital skills in order to take up the new approach of educating the community.

In many societies, mosque officials keep continue to engage people by using alternative approaches to play their social roles (Yuko, 2020). For instance, a mosque in Philadelphia, USA continues to feed children who used to getting food from the mosque before the lockdown, aimed at ensuring that nobody would suffer from hunger during the lockdown (Griswold, 2020). There are mosques which provide grab-and-go meal or deliver fresh food to needy families in their community. In Malaysia, a mosque distributes food to surrounding residents including non-Muslims. This service is supported by strong collaboration between mosques and government agencies or non-governmental organisations. Good synergy between them have led to continuous and adequate services to the community, such as food provision, groceries, cash money, and education programmes.

Many mosques are also at the forefront in dealing with the community members who are affected by the lockdown, or need supports to deal with the COVID-19 scenario. They come forward to provide psychological, spiritual, and social inputs to help ease the society in dealing with the impact of movement restriction; or minimise psychological issues. In Kenya, psychologists work with Muslim community leaders to provide psychosocial education on COVID-19 amongst mosque goers. They even conduct workshop to set action plans during and after pandemic, encompassing spiritual, socio-economic, cultural, medical and psychological perspectives of the community members (Amin, 2020).

It is worth to note that research has found that there is positive significant relationship between religious involvement and greater happiness, life satisfaction, morale, and other types of positive experience. In this regard, many have reported that being in the mosques is not only spiritually rewarding but also socially satisfying. This promotes well-being of the individuals, and in turn, their families, as well as the community (Fagan, 2006). In fact, this is a solution to help people who are psychologically affected by either the pandemic or the movement control order. Hence, during the pandemic time, mosque activities should continue to take place .

In conclusion, despite the absence of regular roles, many mosques have come up with new activities. They have created new capacity that enable themselves to continue playing their spiritual, educational and social functions. They too have

created suitable ecosystem that attracts people to stay connected with mosque or see mosque as a centre that they could refer to, or seek help from. In addition to operating as a worship centre, mosques in many places have been functioning as centre for social activities. Mosques with strong financial resource do not only provide free food but could also conduct or coordinate economic and welfare activities, to be benefited by many groups of people during and after the pandemic. In ensuring its effective functions, mosques should retain their good engagement with the surrounding communities, taking their spiritual, social, or economic expectations into account of. Mosques also should keep the good work of their techno-savvy committee members or volunteers, and continue to equip mosque officials with the right skills in dealing with any untoward scenarios like the lockdown. Mosques hence should continue to have good level of readiness to deal with any crisis situation.

Note:

There will be an online forum to discuss The Roles of Mosques in Ramadhan during Covid-19. You will be enlightened by representatives from New Zealand, Brunei, Thailand, and Italy who will be talking about their mosques' roles in Ramadhan during lockdown. This forum is organised by the Mosque in the Post-Materialistic Era Flagship Project. Get more information [here \(https://flagship.iium.edu.my/eps/the-role-of-mosques-in-ramadhan-during-covid-19/\)](https://flagship.iium.edu.my/eps/the-role-of-mosques-in-ramadhan-during-covid-19/).

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