HOW WE CROSS

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Photography by Alexander Krivitskiy

Through water, light, veil, colour, and sound, ritual is explored as a language of passage, an architecture of both matter and meaning that carries the body across time's thresholds.

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Across every culture, certain pivotal moments unite humanity in recognition and reverence. Birth, marriage and death (arguably the most universal thresholds) have always called for ceremony. These communions are not merely events, but transformations; crossings through which the body, time and meaning are reshaped. The word itself reveals this: trans-formation - to move through and beyond form, to take new shape in the act of becoming.

Linguistically, this journey resonates in Arabic, where the root '-*b-r* holds a variety of meanings: to cross, to pass through, to interpret, to express. Crossing and meaning belong to the same family: to give meaning is itself to traverse. Rites of passage, then, serve as a way for cultures to make transitions visible, lending shape to what often eludes language.

These transitions are not only experienced through ritual but also through space; the chambers, courtyards and sanctuaries that cradle them. Architecture, in this sense, is the body's first collaborator in ceremony, guiding movement and framing transformation.

The number three recurs across traditions, religions and even natural and scientific phenomena as a structure of balance and completion. In both scripture and cosmology, it marks motion itself: birth, life, death. Past, present, future. Creation, preservation, dissolution. Anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner observed that every rite of passage follows a similar rhythm of three movements: separation, liminality and reincorporation. Each phase traces a key arc along the journey of transformation. This rhythm of three resonates throughout rituals, in the sequence of rooms in a hammam, the triple washing of the deceased and the three crossings that define human life.

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, these passages are articulated less through words than through tangible manifestations of change: water against skin, light through cloth, the rising swell of voice and drum. From city to village, mosque to church to *zawiya*, the gestures differ, but the underlying spirit remains: to cleanse, illuminate, shelter and accompany.

As ritual theorist Catherine Bell poignantly notes, ritual is not merely repetition but "a way of acting in the world." In this context, that way of acting is sensorial, an embodied choreography through which people mark change, cherish their connections, and step across life's thresholds.

The Element of Water

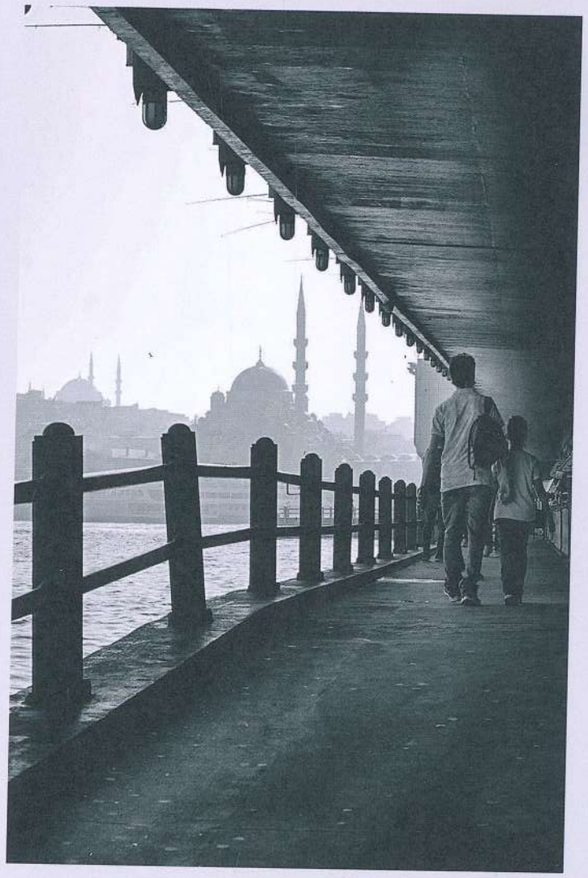
Water is both the beginning and the end. The Qur'an reminds us, "*We made from water every living thing*" (21:30). The first element a newborn encounters, the medium through which life emerges and the last to touch the body before burial; it cleanses, prepares and renews.

In the Maghreb and Levant, the hammam serves as a site of transition. Brides are bathed before marriage and women after childbirth. The hammam acts as a microcosm of the world; warm, humid, womb-like. Its sequence, from warm room to hot chamber to cold plunge, mirrors life's passage from comfort to trial to, finally, release. Inside, women across various generations come together to share brief but earnest moments of intimacy: mothers bathe their daughters, friends scrub each other's backs and strangers exchange secrets and companionship, their conversations blending into the steam. Within this space, time appears to stand still; the body is cared for not just for beauty, but as an act of renewal and continuity

The anthropologist Victor Turner described such spaces as *liminal*, thresholds where identity loosens and the self becomes fluid. In the hammam, that fluidity is experienced in a literal sense: water courses across skin like time, dissolving tension and preparing the self for whatever lies ahead.

Years ago, a friend gave me Bruce Lee's *Be Like Water, My Friend*. I understood, then, that Lee's metaphor for mastery also served as one for healing. "If you pour water into a cup," he wrote, "it becomes the cup." Water adapts to every form yet remains itself. It yields, but never breaks. Lee recalls a story of striking the surface of a river in frustration and realising that water cannot be hit but instead absorbs impact by flowing around it. To be alive, then, is to move. In fact, it is to *remain* in motion. "Running water never grows stale, so you've got to keep on flowing."

This insight revealed what ritual has always understood: that transformation requires movement and adaptability, not resistance. Where a living body is supple, a dead one is stiff. In this sense, ritual restores motion to what has stilled. It carries the choreography of life's small gestures – movement as attention, and attention as care – into the spaces where it might otherwise cease.



Anticlockwise
Photography by Duong Nhân
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In Islamic cultures, this principle is embodied in the *ghusl*, the washing of the body before burial. The act marks not only physical purification, but also serves as a passage for the departing soul. The body is washed three times to restore its sanctity before the final rest. Family members gather in a sequence of care, hands rinsing, pouring and wrapping, as a final tending of the body that binds farewell to touch. Afterwards, the deceased is wrapped in the *kafan*, a plain white cloth that symbolises modesty and the journey of passing. This act of covering and returning resonates through various thresholds.

Art goes beyond merely imitating life and extends its gestures. This philosophy, which shapes the hammam experience through warmth, rhythm and release, is reflected in architecture. In this context, light and space guide the body through both the structure and passages within it. Design, much like ritual, directs movement: walls, openings and shadows create a pathway that allows one to traverse space while fostering a sense of awareness.

In Dubai, Sumaya Dabbagh's *Mosque of Light* translates the act of ablution into architectural space. "Every passage has its own atmosphere," she explains. "Light and shadow are how we mark time." Sunlight filters through intricately carved openings that resemble water flowing over stone, collecting and dispersing throughout the day. The result is not just a visual spectacle but a form of attunement, where light acts as a vessel for purification.

Just as water envelops the body, light nurtures the spirit.

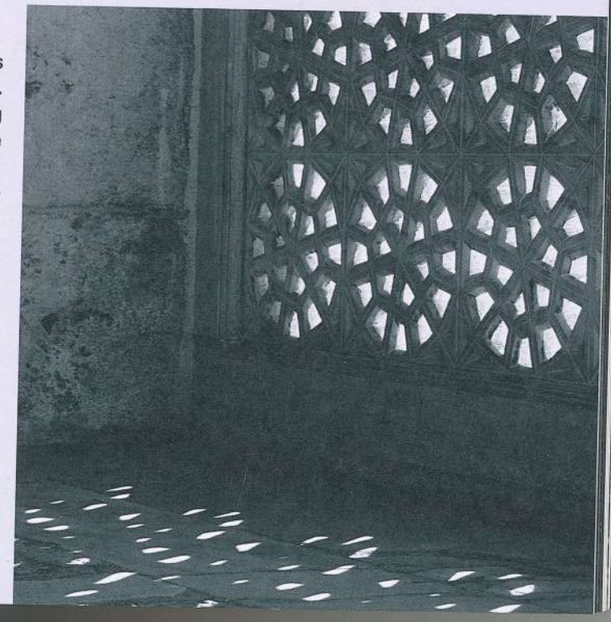
Light, Veil and Colour

In the ritual life of the Middle East, light signifies awakening, unveiling and closeness to the sacred. A newborn is turned toward daylight, the wedding canopy is illuminated with candles, and the dead are buried before noon, while the sun still bears witness. In each of these instances, light determines the significance of time and meaning, measuring where life begins, joins and departs.

Architecture echoes this same cadence of illumination. From the latticed *mashrabiya* that filters sunlight into patterned privacy to the courtyards designed to catch morning rays and cool by dusk, spaces in the region have long mirrored the metaphysics of revelation. Even in modern structures like Abu Dhabi's Al Bahar Towers, light is made to breathe. Its responsive façade opens and closes with the sun, reinterpreting modesty through motion. Here, as in ritual, exposure and concealment are not opposites, but partners in balance.

The veil operates on a fundamental principle: it conceals in order to preserve the sanctity of transition. The swaddling cloth, the bridal veil and the burial shroud all belong to the same lineage of tenderness and protection. They wrap the threshold body in fabric that signals metamorphosis. From the first breath to the last, the act of covering grants both privacy and dignity.

Across various regions, ritual cloth speaks in subtle dialects. In many cultures, brides wear white not necessarily to claim purity, but to signal renewal and the venturing into a new life. In North Africa, red threads are woven into wedding garments, serving as faint but persistent markers of fertility, warding off the evil eye and invoking protection. At death, the unpretentious white *kafan* returns the body to simplicity, mirroring the first swaddle and completing the circle of passage. In Islamic tradition, the shroud is intentionally unadorned, the plainness of the white cloth symbolising equality and the return to the divine.



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Globally, black has become the standard colour of mourning, prevalent in both Western and many non-Western cultures, representing collective grief, respect and solemnity. The sharp contrast between black and white across cultures and ceremonies emphasises how the colours of ritual dress carry profound significance beyond language.

Colour deepens the language of crossing. Across civilisations, white and black have long served as ritual opposites, used not only for what they represent but for how they behave in light. White reflects, black absorbs. One reveals, the other gathers. In ancient Egypt, white limestone signified purification, while black basalt evoked fertility and rebirth. In Christian Europe, white vestments mark baptism and Easter – the rites of entry and resurrection – while black cassocks attend death. Interestingly, in parts of East and Southeast Asia, white rather than black is worn to funerals, its brightness guiding the departed toward renewal, rather than loss. White signifies birth and beginning, but also mourning and return. Black signifies depth, endurance and reflection. Together, they form the visual grammar of transformation: to enter is to brighten, to depart is to darken, and in the space between lies the full spectrum and colour of being.

It's within Sufi ritual that this interplay of light and fabric reaches its most refined expression. During the *sama*, ceremony, the whirling dervish's white skirt, the tennûre, is modelled after the funeral shroud itself. With each turn, the dancer embodies dissolution, becoming a living metaphor for death as the final return, enacting what Ibn 'Arabi described as fana': the annihilation of the self in divine unity. Here, light and fabric merge to signify illumination and concealment, presence and disappearance; intertwining in a single, ceaseless act of devotion.

Sound

Every passage has its resonance. Within the region, *zaghareet* announces (quite sharply) beginnings and festivity, cutting through the air with joy. The same throat that once cried in labour will later cry in celebration. At funerals, the *nawaha*, a professional mourner, leads a chorus of grief; her voice trembling between lament and invocation, transforming sorrow into cadence. Across these rites, sound carries emotion in place of language and binds the living through reverberation.

Where water cleanses and light reveals, sound grounds. It is the element that tethers bodies to the present, reminding both participant and witness that transition is being lived, and not just observed. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "To listen is to be touched by the sonorous, to be opened by it." Ritual sound makes listeners porous, open to presence. The ululation, the drumbeat and the chant all serve as vibrations that draw the community into alignment, ensuring that no one crosses alone.

Photography by Alexander Krivitskiy

There are always those who cross, and those who remain as spectators to the crossing, and sound is the mediator. The cries that accompany birth, the hymns of union, the wails of mourning, all translate transformation into something the spectators can feel. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, wrote that "resonance invites us to inhabit an image." In ritual practice, resonance invites us to inhabit a moment; to dwell in it fully and to feel its weight and air. Sound grants continuity to what might otherwise fracture under emotion, and allows grief and joy alike to find a collective rhythm.

Sound also shapes how space is felt, just as space reveals itself through the way it carries sound. The vaulted ceilings of mosques, enclosed chambers of hammams and the courtyards of old homes all create their own acoustics of presence. Echoes soften thresholds as repetition turns space into memory. In a wedding procession, drums signal the approach before the appearance. In mourning, the *adhan* for the dead ripples outward, marking the passage of a soul across an invisible distance. The design of space, intentional or inherited, amplifies these transitions, turning architecture into an instrument of feeling.

Rumi wrote that the reed flute's wail is the sound of separation, cut from its bed and longing for return. That tone reverberates across the region: the *kawala* in Egypt, the *mizmar* in Yemen, the *ghaita* in Morocco. Played at both weddings and funerals, their distinction lies only in their tempo. Joy and mourning share the same breath; a note held long enough becomes a lament.

Sound, in this way, completes the cycle begun by water and light. It's invisible yet embodied, and transient yet enduring, and in this way a bridge between absence and presence. Turner's *communitas*, that fleeting equality felt when all stand "neither here nor there" – is enacted through resonance rather than doctrine.

The shared bathing and purification, the chorus of *zaghareet* and the circling chant all remind us that passage is both solitary and shared, an echo that grounds the living even as it honours the leaving.

To cross is to remember. Every culture invents its own gestures for the same journey: from womb to world, solitude to union and first breath to final stillness. In Palestine, women scatter salt and rose petals in the water used to wash their dead – salt for preservation, petals for mercy (رحمة).

Photograph by Maisa Borges

In Tunis, brides paint their hands in spirals of henna that echo ancient door carvings. In the Gulf, mirrors are placed on graves so that light may fall upon the departed. Each act is small, tactile and profound: a conversation between the living and that which has left them.

Space itself performs remembrance, too. In Morocco, courtyard fountains reflect the sky into homes, linking heaven and earth. In Beirut, Lina Ghotmeh's *Stone Garden* breathes tenderness into concrete, transforming ruin into continuity. Across these geographies, design becomes devotion, with space itself participating in ritual.

To speak of crossing is to affirm continuity as a concept of permanence. The same hands that bathe a newborn will one day wash a body for burial. The same voice that cries out in joy will later weep in grief. The same light that crowns a wedding will fall gently on a grave, and in each, the body is prepared to meet time.

Perhaps that is the essence of ritual – not performance, but participation in an eternal rhythm. To bathe, veil and sing as acts of remembering that we, too, are transient and permeable, but alive.

Across the region, these traditions endure less with the melancholy of nostalgia and more as living knowledge. They remind us that transformation is not abstract, and that the rites of birth, marriage and death are all just variations of one ceremony: the ceremony of crossing.

And so, the rituals remain, we pour water, light candles, cover faces and sing; crossing through the elements and into one another – momentarily unmade and remade by the world. •