

Salha Fawal

Mr. M. Limbu

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The Culture of Islamic Holidays, Observances, and Tradition

Introduction

Every country has its own traditional beliefs and national holidays. People usually celebrate these national holidays with their family. Holidays and festivals differ from culture to culture and from religion to another. This paper discusses Islamic holidays and festivals for the purpose of informing its readers who do not extensively know about Islamic holidays and festivals. As I come from Islamic country, Saudi Arabia, I want to write about the most important and beautiful holidays for us.

Background Information

I'm from Jeddah city, a beautiful city on the west coast of Saudi Arabia. As an Islamic country, we spend one month every year for extra prayers, fasting, and give charity. That month is called Ramadan. After Ramadan month ends, we celebrate Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of our daily fasting. This essay attempts to introduce Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr for the audience, people who do not know about Muslim holidays and are looking to be informed about these celebrations and the culture that goes with them. Personally, every year my family and I celebrate Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr in Jeddah and we visit

Mecca city and pray in al-Haram mosque. Al-Haram is the largest mosque in the city of Mecca as well as in the entire Saudi Arabia.

Islamic Holidays History

Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. Islamic calendar is quite different from other calendar. We use “Hijra” calendar, which mean, “emigrate” in English. We use Hijra calendar marked its beginning at the day prophet Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina to do his new social order. “Hijri calendar [1]¹(AH) is a lunar calendar consisting of 12 months in a year of 354 or 355 days. It is used to date events in many Muslim countries (concurrently with the Gregorian calendar), and used by Muslims everywhere to determine the proper days on which to observe the annual fast (Ramadan), to attend Hajj, and to celebrate other Islamic holidays and festivals” (“Islamic Calendar”) The term Ramadan literally means scorching in Arabic. It was established as a Holy Month for Muslims after the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in 610 CE on the occasion known as Laylat al-Qadr, frequently translated as "the Night of Power". Ramadan is considered the most important month on the year for all Muslim around the world. According to Wikipedia Eid al-Fitr is “a festival of breaking of the fast. Is an important religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting (sawm)[2].²”

Islam has a few holidays compared to most other religions. Muslims usually celebrate only two festivals Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The religious Eid Al-Fitr is a single day and Muslims are not permitted to fast on that day. The holiday celebrates the conclusion of the 29 or 30 days of

¹ Hijri calendar is the Islamic calendar.

² Sawm is an Arabic word that mean preventing from food and drink for a certain time.

dawn-to-sunset fasting that was done daily during the entire month of Ramadan. The day of Eid, therefore, falls on the first day of the month of Shawwal. An Eid is a day when Muslims around the world show a common goal of unity. The date for the start of any lunar Hijri month varies based on the observation of new moon by local religious authorities, so the exact day of celebration varies by locality. However, most countries are generally celebrated on the same day as Saudi Arabia”(“Eid Al-Fitr”). Eid Al-Fitr is also considered the most important holiday or festival for all Muslim after the end of the Ramadan month, they celebrate what they achieved on the Ramadan month.

What Do We Usually Do In Ramadan Month?

Every year, all Muslims around the world pay attention to the importance of the month of Ramadan. At this time of the year all Muslim work hard to obey God and control themselves from committing any sin. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims show their devotion to God by fasting from foods, drinks, bad habits, smoking, and sexual intercourse while they are fasting in a given day. During the month of Ramadan, most Muslims fast from dawn to sunset with no food or water. However there are some excuse or permission for some people who are unable to fasts in during Ramadan due to some reasons out of their control. However, if they did not fast in Ramadan or missed some days due to whatever reasons, they should make it up later unless they have permanent illness preventing them to be able to fast.

Circumstances Where Muslims Are Allowed to Break Their Fast During Ramadan

There are some circumstances where some people are excused from fasting. The people with permission are travelers, children under the age of puberty, and women during their menstrual cycles are

excused from the fast but must make it up when they are able to fast. However people with mental illness, permanent illness, and sick old-people who cannot fast are excused from fasting and they do not have to make it up later. I am sure now you are asking why God gives only these people permissions. A traveler is given permission because it is hard to travel from one country to another without food or water. Also people at that time used to travel by foot walking from a place to another or in the best scenario riding a camel, horse, or donkey. I cannot fast when I travel because it's really hard for me even nowadays. Ill people were given permission not to fast in the Ramadan because of their illness. For example, it is hard for mental ill to fast because they are not being as coherent and present. Children are encouraged to fast from the age of puberty because it is a good idea to make them aware of the practice of fasting even for few hours at a time. In Islam women who are on menstrual cycles usually are not supposed to pray or fast so every month women have permit to not pray until the menstrual cycle is over.

Getting Closer to God

In Ramadan we usually try really hard to come much more closer to God through devotions and good deeds. For example, “Tarawih” refers to extra prayers performed by Muslims. We usually pray ten to twenty times, however; Tarawih is not required for all Muslims but some Muslims volunteer to pray. Muslims pray these prayers in the evening during Ramadan after breaking their fast. I used to go with my sisters to the mosque to pray Tarawih, sometimes I feel tired and I cannot do it but I tried hard to go. Also during that month, Muslims try to read as much of the holy Qur'an as they can. I compete with my family to read the whole book at least once or twice, I unfortunately only one time I win and I finish the reading before them. “Tahjjud” is a prayer before the breaking of the dawn and before the “Sahur”.

We usually pray between 1-3am. Many Muslims ignore this part of the night, even if they are awake, they would be watching movies or playing games. I tried to pray Tahjjud but some time I cannot because at the end of the day I feel very tired and I cannot pray Tahjjud.

Different Special Dishes In Ramadan

“Iftar” is the word for a meal after sunset. After the long day of fasting we usually break our fast with some special dishes. We are gathering with our family in one table to share the special dishes and it differ from country to other. In Saudi Arabia we usually start with water, milk and dates^[3]³. We break our fast with date because it has many benefits for our body. Dates are high in vitamins such as magnesium and potassium, high in fiber, bone health and strength, remedy for alcoholic intoxication, fight off various, increasing sexual stamina, and reduce the levels of bad cholesterol. Soups and Samosa are important part in Ramadan meals. Soups, it could be chicken, lentil, vegetable or tomato soups are commonly served. Samosa is a small piece of fried or baked pastry with a savory filling, such as beef, chicken, cheese, vegetable or potato. “Fool” is a vegetarian famous dish and it is made from fava beans, onion, tomato and olive oil. “Fattoush” is a salad with different vegetables such as cucumber, tomato and onion topped with toasted pieces of bread and dressing like olive oil, lemon and salt and pepper. Macaroni béchamel is a baked pasta with beef or chicken topped with the béchamel sauce and mozzarella or cheddar cheese. Lamb fried liver is made with olive oil, onion, tomato, lemon juice, salt and pepper. “Suhoor” is a meal before dawn. Usually in this meal we eat “kabsa” is rice made with pound chicken or beef. Or a traditional Saudi main dish (Saleeg), is rice cooked in broth and milk with chicken or meat.

³ Dates are fruit that come from palm trees.



Figure 1: Dates



Figure 2: Saudi Kabsah

My Personal Experience Last Ramadan in East Lansing

Last Ramadan, I was in East Lansing and Ramadan started in first day of August and ended Aug. 29, so at that time fasting was too long, it was nearly between 18-19 hours fasting time. It was very hard for me to attend college while I am fasting; I get very tired and depressed during Ramadan here at school. I usually skip many classes and try to stay home. Then my family gave me some recommendations to help me fasting, they told me to avoid eating too much carbohydrates like rice, potato, bread, noodle, etc. and eat a lot of protein, fruits, especially banana, yogurt, dates and fibers to avoid being thirsty during the day while being fasting. Also, they advised me to drink plenty of fresh water. After that I felt much better than before by eating well and keeping a positive emotion and energy. Then, I attended all classes until the end of the month.

The Goal of Ramadan

The goal of Ramadan fasting is not just to be much closer to God but also is to let people think about

others, who do not have a home (homeless) and to feel the hunger that most poor people feel. In this way all Muslims would think more about others, those who are dealing with a war on their country. Charity is an important part of Ramadan because Muslims give money and food to poor people and help them go through their days. The fasting requires self-control and that the people who fast have to be patient and control their anger. During Ramadan, Muslims work together to help the poor by holding Iftar dinners for them. Non-Muslims are welcome to participate and try to fast and join the Iftar dinners with their friends or family. Many Muslims read the Quran during the month of Ramadan.

Zakaht Al-Fitr

Zakaht Al-Fitr is when Muslims give some of his or her money to poor people in Ramadan and before Eid Al Fitr. It is usually about 2.5% of one's money, which is distributed to the poor people to help them celebrate Eid Al Fitr and enjoy it like everyone else. The main goal of Zakat Al-Fitr is to give the poor some money, food or clothes to eliminate the financial or economical factors preventing them from celebrating the festival.

What is Eid Al-Fitr and How Do Muslims Usually Celebrate It?

Eid Al-Fitr is the day after Ramadan ends, at that day Muslims celebrate the breaking of their fast. Some Muslims sacrifice a sheep or goat in Eid Al-Fitr, and they share the meal with their family, relative, the poor and friends. Eid Al-Fitr includes special prayers in the morning and delicious meals with the loved ones. Also we celebrate Eid al-Fitr by getting gifts from our family and relative such as chocolates and money. In the morning we go together to the mosque for prayer, then we go to our family house to eat breakfast. We celebrate Eid al Fitr by wearing new clothes, we wear Saudi style,

men wear Thobe[4] ⁴(see figure 4) and women wear new dress and Abaya[5] ⁵(see figure 3). Then, we gather with our relatives, friends and exchange gifts and give thoughtful gifts to children. Also, all families take pictures together with new clothes. Money is an important gift in Eid al Fitr. We usually take money from our fathers, mothers, and relatives. I love Eid al Fitr because I become rich in that day for a while. Every year, I usually receive about 3000 or 5000 SR.



Figure 3: Saudi women Abaya



Figure 4: Saudi men style Thobe

Eid Al-Fitr Meals

We celebrate Eid al Fitr with Qahwa[6] ⁶, dates and chocolate. The breakfasts are usually served with different small dishes that contain different types of olives, cheese, honey, jam and bread. A famous Eid dish is the “Debyaza” apricot like pudding with different kind of nuts, Debyaza is made with apricot

⁴ Thobe is Saudi formal men style.

⁵ Abaya is Saudi women style; usually they wear it when they go out.

⁶ Qahwa is an Arabic coffee with cardamom.

paste, dates, raisins and some nuts. Many families display fireworks at their home yards and there are fireworks displays in many locations in the Jeddah city. Many Saudi families go to the places where they can watch fireworks and enjoy the festival.

Conclusion

Ramadan is a very important time for Muslims, taking place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims, who celebrate, fast during the day and pray frequently. It is traditional to give food to the poor during this month, and to abstain from sins. This period of time can be very challenging for us because it requires self-sacrifice and more patient about hangar. Ramadan officially ends when the crescent moon of the 10th month in the Islamic calendar is sighted and nobody knows when it is going to end every year. Eid al-Fitr, is a celebration by all Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan and to thank Allah for health and wellness He gave them to go through this fasting period. Eid al Fitr holiday is only one day, then it became three days celebration, but nowadays the government extends it into six days holiday. This holiday or festival is a time for most family, relative, neighbor, and friend come much closer to each other by good wishes for happiness and good health.

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