



BURT WOLF
TASTE OF FREEDOM
RAMADAN

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and it is during this month that Muslims observe the fast of Ramadan. They fast during the day. At night they eat small meals and visit with friends and family. It is a month of worship and contemplation. A time to strengthen family and community ties.

The first Muslim to arrive in the Americas that we know about was a Spanish explorer who showed up in 1527. He was part of a commission sent by the King of Spain with instructions to colonize Florida. He traveled throughout the southern part of the United States and was probably the first European to see the territory that is now the state of New Mexico.

Today Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States. There are over twelve hundred mosques in the U.S. and more than half of them were built in the last twenty years. Over five million Americans worship in these mosques.

THE MOSQUE

During Ramadan, the entire Koran is read, one-thirtieth each night. Mosques are designed to produce an environment that is conducive to reading, prayer, introspection and learning. Very often, you will find people sitting in quiet spots and just reading. At the Islamic Center in Washington D.C., over sixty-five different nationalities come to pray.



DR. ABDULLAH KHOUJ
 Executive Director
 Islamic Center, Washington D.C.:

It took ten years to complete all the architecture. All the tiles were handmade in Turkey. The gentleman who made them, came here and installed them. The chandelier

weighs a ton and half. It came from Egypt and is made out of copper.

All the calligraphy is Arabic. They are verses from the Koran. "God is the light of heaven and earth, the example of His light is like a candle in a chandelier, to light over the world."

A mosque should be plain, so you can concentrate on prayer and your relationship with God. This is why it's prohibited to have any kind of pictures of animals or human beings, no statues, in the mosque.



THE FAST OF RAMADAN

The fast of Ramadan is a time of worship and contemplation when Muslims say "no" to the desires of the flesh and "yes" to the word of God. It is a time to learn about self control, not unlike the opportunities offered during the Christian period of lent or the Jewish holiday of Passover.

IMAM SHAMSI ALI
 Islamic Cultural Center, New York:

According to Islam, human desires are natural, and they are not supposed to be killed. But they are supposed to be controlled so we are the masters of our own desires. We are supposed to have control over them. So we use our desire in a way that God is pleased with. We have desire to eat, to drink and to have relationship with our opposite sex, with our wives or husbands. But Islam teaches that you have to have control over these desires, so that's why for one full month, Muslims are training themselves not to eat, not to drink, not to



have that relationship during the day time. Fasting also teaches the Muslim to be more kind to others, because by abstaining from food you can feel what unfortunate people feel. The Prophet Muhammad called this month, the month of charity.

The daily fast is usually broken by eating three dates and taking a sip of water, which is how Muhammad broke his fast during the time he retreated to meditate.



The date may be the world's oldest cultivated fruit. There are seven-thousand-year-old sculptures that clearly show the date palm. The date's been a basic part of Middle Eastern agriculture for centuries. The Arabs brought the date to Spain and the Spanish missionaries brought them to California. As a matter of fact, the first date planted in California, was planted in a town called Mecca. Dates are often called nature's candy because of their sweet taste and caramel flavor.

During Ramadan breakfast must be eaten before the day begins. The ancient test for that is your ability to

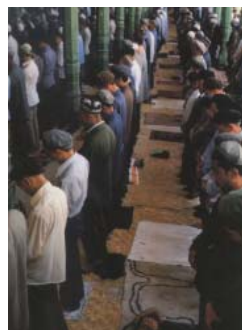


distinguish between a white thread and a black thread using only natural light. If you can tell the difference the day has begun and so has your fast.

Dedicated Muslims come to prayer five times a day.

SHAMSI ALI:

Why do Muslim pray five times a day? Why is it not only three times, or two times or let's say once in a week? We start our day by praying to God, and connecting with Him. Noon prayer is considered to be the busiest time for people. But still you have to find some time to pray to God. Afternoon prayer is needed to end your daily activities. Sunset prayer is considered to be the end of your day, so you need to have a spiritual connection with God. And the last one is before bedtime prayer, as we started our day with a prayer, we end our day with a prayer before we go to bed. In other words, Islam wants us to have our feet on the earth, but our head in heaven.



THE ANCIENT ART OF HENNA

The 27th day of Ramadan has a special evening known as "The Night of the Decree." It marks the night when Muhammad received the first revelation of the Koran. Tradition says that on that night any prayer or good deed will be rewarded many times over. It's also used to mark the passage of young girls into adulthood. The passage is also often marked with henna.



STEPHANIE RUDLOE

Mehndi Artist:

Henna is a natural dye, and it comes from the henna plant, which grows in very hot dry climates. It is believed to originate in India, in Persia and Egypt. It has been used for centuries as a dye for skin, hair and cloth.



People paint themselves with henna for adornment and for celebration, and in particular in Morocco because they believe that henna contains a quality called botika, which has magical healing properties and positive energy. This presence of botika is believed to infuse the henna plant. Women in Morocco who are henna artists, also bring that energy and its benefits to the person they're painting.

When I paint someone with henna, I begin by cleansing their skin with orange blossom water, which is a traditional act of greeting and blessing your guests. I approach the henna as jewelry. Traditionally in Morocco, henna is always done up to the wrist bone, covering the entire surface of the whole hand. When I paint people here in America, I work in a much more minimalistic motif, maybe doing something in the center of the palm or the top of the hand or rings on the finger, or some kind of a diagonal.



There are several very common motifs that you see in Moroccan henna patterns. Most of the marks are repeat geometrical patterns that are based on protection from the evil eye. A very typical Moroccan design is a diamond motif with a literal eye in the center of it.

FOODS OF RAMADAN

What you eat each night to break the fast of Ramadan depends on where you come from. Muslims from the Middle East serve spicy pastries filled with vegetables or meat or a loaf of flat bread sprinkled with black cumin seeds. North African Muslims tend to eat a protein-enriched soup in order to energize their bodies after the long fast.



Hamid Idrissi was born in Morocco. Today he is the co-owner and chef of Tagine, a Moroccan restaurant in New York City. As a middle child, he was assigned the task of helping the family cook. He spent hours watching and learning the delicate and complex techniques of the Moroccan kitchen. Quite often his family would host meals for more than a hundred relatives, friends and neighbors.



The dish that is most commonly served at Ramadan in Moroccan homes is harrira. It's a soup made from chick-peas, caramelized onions, lentils, and an assortment of vegetables, tomatoes and spices.

Along with the soup, Moroccans break the fast with dried fruits, coffee, tea, salads of roasted peppers, spinach, spicy carrots and eggplant, Morocco's national dish, couscous, and a variety of sweets including Shebekia. Shebekia is made from semolina flour, sesame seeds, rolled and cut to look like a little nest.

The meal also includes tagine. The word tagine refers to both a recipe and a pot for making it, like the word casserole. The dish is a savory stew native to North Africa.



HAMID IDRISSE

Tagine Restaurant, New York:

In the morning, before the fast began we eat melwi, a semolina bread, which is pan-fried and served with honey and butter.

At Hamid's restaurant, you can get a taste of true Moroccan food and experience Moroccan culture.

ISLAM AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS

One of the fastest growing segments of the Islamic community in the United States is made up of African-Americans. Yusuf Saleem is the Imam at mosque Muhammad in Washington D.C. He believes that African-Americans are attracted to Islam because within Islamic tradition the black community is fully accepted.



IMAM YUSUF SALEEM

Masjid Muhammad, Washington D.C.:

I'm not going to say racism is prevalent, but we cannot doubt the subtlety and existence of racism. And I think in coming into Islam, your identity is equal. The Koran says that God has honored all the children of Adam. So that means you're on equal par with everybody. And the exterior has no meaning, no importance, except to identify. So you look a certain way because if you looked just like me, I wouldn't know you. And I look a certain way. But this is just a shell. Just a vessel to carry the real spirit and nature of me. I think that is attractive to many African Americans. We feel a certain sense of equality. That we're human beings of self worth. And we can achieve just like any other ethnic group.



Every evening at sunset during Ramadan mosques throughout the world serve meals to the hungry. They are following a commandment from god to give to the needy.

ENDING THE FAST

The Night of the Decree celebrates the moment when Muhammad received the first revelation of the Koran. Joyous festivities begin that night and build for three days until the last night of the month. The next day, which is the first day of the new month, is known as Eid. It is a time to wear new clothes, eat big meals with lots of sweets, and pass the day with your family and friends. It's also a day when you're asked to donate a portion of your wealth to the needy.



SHAMSI ALI:

Our nature is to know our God, to be more close to God, to be a more righteous person. This is natural, this is the human nature, you know, to be kind to God, to be kind to other people, to be kind to our fellow human beings. So, the Eid Al Fitr actually is the day of victory for the Muslims, because they consider this to be a victorious day over their human desires.



the dictates of the Islamic Society of North America in Plainfield, Indiana. Four officials confirm the sighting and its scientific base and they must do this within four hours after sunset on the East Coast. One result of this approach is that you are not sure when Ramadan will begin or end until one or two days before the event. If nothing else, the process reminds you that life is controlled by nature, flexibility and faith are essential.



CELEBRATING RAMADAN IN THE UNITED STATES

Because the Koran has not changed since the time of the prophet, much of Ramadan's celebration has remained the same. But it is almost impossible to come to the United States and not be influenced by America's popular culture. The giant fairs that are held to celebrate the end of Ramadan often illustrate that point.



FAWAZ A. GERGES, Ph.D.
Professor of Middle Eastern Studies,
Sarah Lawrence College:

Like other people all over the world, I think Muslims immigrate to America to improve, to seek a better life for themselves and their children. America in the eyes of many Muslims and many people in the world including myself, provides an economic opportunity, you might say, an access to climb the social ladder. But also, I would argue that unlike many other people in the world,



Muslims come to America to seek freedom.

There is political oppression in many Muslim countries and contrary to the conventional wisdom, the majority of Muslims are attracted to and fascinated with the American idea, the American dream, the notion of freedom, of an open society.

Ramadan begins with the sighting of the new moon. In the United States, most Muslim communities follow

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