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Ramadan in Djibouti

Daily Life & Popular Religion

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One of the joys of spending some time in a city not one's own is to pick up some of its rhythms and to share the daily routines of the people one comes to know. I spent Ramadan 2007 in Djibouti, the capital of the small Republic of the same name on the flat and torrid coast of the Red Sea. Climate is a dominant factor of life in Djibouti and only the small minority with money can temper its debilitating impact. Even in September, when the worst heat and humidity of the summer months is over, the heat is overwhelming. No wonder that, in the summer season, those who have an opportunity and resources to leave the city do so at this time, so much so that *xagaa-bax*¹ or "leaving for the summer" is a respectable institution with a long history.

As it happened, I came to share work- and living space in the city centre or *guudka* (uptown), the heart of the old colonial town. The ten or so city blocks that make up this quarter include picturesque squares (still known to locals by their old colonial names such as Place Menelik and Place LaGarde), graced by trees and surrounded by the multi-storey stone buildings with the large windows, arches, and porticos of the French colonial style. Uptown is separated on the landside by the central market place, still called Place Rimbaud in popular speech, and Suuq Duqsileh (the "Market with the Flies"), now a crowded warren of small shops, from the residential areas of the common people, the *quartiers*. During the colonial period, uptown was largely out of bounds for the local people. Now it is largely a business district, which forms a buffer between the rich and the poor: the *quartiers* on the one side and the really fancy neighbourhoods nestled in the peninsula on the other. Here the sea is never far away, either on the side of the port in the west or on the side of the beachfront hotels and residences to the north and east.

During the morning hours the city centre is very busy, as many people have business at the banks, stores, and offices that are located here, but from about 1:00 to 4:30 PM, the sun-baked streets empty out. The radios that blast from the three or so tourist stores that open onto the sidewalks and never seem to close their doors

Qaat vendors in Djibouti



PHOTO BY ALEXANDER JOE / © AFP, 1997

All over the world Muslims observe and celebrate Ramadan, but how they do so varies greatly. This article describes everyday life in Djibouti during the recent month of Ramadan and brings into focus the differences between rich and poor, men and women, local Muslims and foreign soldiers, as well as the government's support for Sufi Islam to counter the influence of fundamentalist Islam.

are almost invariably tuned to the local RTD (Radio and Television Djibouti) and so determine the mood of this part of town during these siesta hours: the serious mood of *tafsir* and Quran recitation, the light airs of love songs, the staccato of the news programmes in Arabic, Somali, Afar, and French, and so forth.

Popular devotion

Ramadan in Djibouti is a total experience, a month-long special event, or better, special timetable that rules practically everything and everyone. Many government offices and big business establishments open later than usual and close early (shortly after noon), often not to open up again. From about mid-day until just before *affur* (the breaking of the fast) the streets are empty, while in kitchens everywhere women are preparing the labour intensive traditional fried dough and sambusis. And, at least when the electricity does not fail, everybody everywhere, it seems, is listening to the *nabi ammaan*—praise songs for the Prophet—on the radio. These joyful, often didactic, songs—many specially adapted from older versions for this year's Ramadan by Djibouti's artists—mark the time before and after the breaking of the fast. They remind the believers of the reward or punishment they will receive on the Day of Reckoning, congratulate them with successfully accomplishing their religious duty that day and encourage them to now thank God and indulge: *Affuraay, affuraay, affuraay, ummadda Muslimaay affuraay!* (Eat now, Muslim people, and break the fast!).

Sufi devotional practices have always been popular in Djibouti's *quartiers*, but in 1989, when I had attended *sittaat* sessions at which older Somali women sang praise songs to the women who had been central to the life of the Prophet, younger people had looked upon this kind of Sufi religious devotion as something of the past and the more fundamentalist-inclined had actively discouraged me from attending what they regarded as superfluous and perhaps even superstitious practices. Now the government, through the national radio and television and by supporting the artists who produced modernized versions of such Sufi poems and songs, actively encouraged this form of religious devotion in the mother tongue.

"A nation that does not protect its mother tongue cannot make progress," is one of the slogans of Djibouti's president, Ismail Omar Geelle. However, there is another reason for the government's support, for the inclusive and ecstatic Sufi Islam of the *nabi ammaan* also competes with the more sober and narrower approaches of the fundamentalists, who, through small madrasas run with the help of powerful patrons in richer neighbouring countries, also reach out to the poor.

Sunset in Djibouti is always a magical moment, but in Ramadan this moment is even more special and marked by a hushed flurry of activities. One is supposed to break the fast exactly when the muezzin calls for the sunset prayer, first with dates, then with water, juice, and other *affur* food. If you are the woman in charge, you cannot fry the *sambusis* too early as they may get cold or soggy; you should not be late with the charcoal for the incense to be burned, at least in our house, exactly at the moment of *affur*. You must get the "breakfast" for the doorkeepers and the poor gathering at the mosque ready to be picked up. All preparations must come to their fruitful end exactly at sunset. As every household tries to share its Ramadan breakfast food with those who are worse off, the movement of food on plates during Ramadan makes the gap between rich and poor even more visible, even as it temporarily tempers it.

Those who do not have families with whom to break the fast, seat themselves well in advance on the plastic chairs of the small, street-side diners, expecting to be served exactly on time! And of course, because this is Djibouti, the big question that is on everyone's mind at *affur* time is whether the *qaat*² has yet "come in" and, if not, when it will. Ramadan does rule the time when *qaat* becomes available in the city streets—around *affur* time, not lunch time as is usual—but *qaat* will be chewed in Djibouti, whether it is Ramadan or not. Not everybody chews, of course, but chewing *qaat* is a dominant feature of life in Djibouti. In my uptown neighbourhood, you can see people chew at street corners, next to their taxis or the wares they sell, on the thresholds of, or inside stores, and so forth. In the *quartiers*, people chew both in their houses, especially in the relatively cool of a court yard or verandah, and in public *qaat*-cafés or *mabrazes*, where one finds pillows on the ground and everything that goes with chewing *qaat*: the water, the soft drinks, and weak, sugary tea that compensate for the bitterness of the *qaat*, cigarettes, perhaps perfume, cologne, and incense, and always a radio to listen to the BBC Somali service, which broadcasts three times a day.

The same scene plays itself out in the lavishly appointed *diwans* or reception rooms of ministers and other well-off citizens, except that here the *qaat* stalks are longer, their leaves more tender, the pillows thicker and of better quality, and the sound systems more elaborate, while generators kick in to keep the air-conditioning going when the electricity fails. For those who can afford to sleep during the day or decide to drastically cut down on their sleep, Ramadan only means chewing more *qaat* for longer hours than at other times of the year. After hurrying through *affur*, the sunset prayer, and dinner without a pause, the most inveterate chewers sit down to chew until just before the muezzin calls for the morning prayer. After a quick *suxuur*—the special Ramadan meal people eat before sunrise—they go to work at best for a few hours and then sleep until late in the afternoon when *affur* time is near and fresh *qaat* becomes available. Thus, while *qaat*, on the one hand, appears to be Djibouti's great equalizer, how, where and when it is chewed becomes, at the same time, also an emphatic marker of class.

Foreign soldiers

During Ramadan, Djibouti hardly goes to sleep. In the early evening, Djiboutians of all ages and both sexes fill the many mosques of the city for the *taraawiix* or extra Ramadan prayers, which last from about 7:30 to 9:30 PM. During the last ten days of Ramadan, many people also return to the mosque for the *salaat al-layl* (night prayer) from about 11:30 PM to 1:30 AM. This is common practice almost everywhere where there are Muslim communities. What is exceptional in Djibouti is that, during Ramadan, the mosque goers walk the evening streets together with those who frequent the many discos and night clubs, especially the French and American soldiers stationed in Djibouti's outskirts.

If you mostly visit the city centre during the day, you will hardly recognize it during the evening, when loud and cheery neon signs mark the locations of the many night clubs and night "restaurants"—a euphemism in this context—that were invisible during the day. The Shams Restaurant, the Scotch Club, the Oasis—there are dozens of night clubs like these, frequented by French and American soldiers. If the American soldiers—out of uniform—are recognizable mostly because they move in groups, the French soldiers of the Foreign Legion, who are not allowed to shed their super-short shorts and colonial képis, stick out like sore fingers. They come to drink and "close-dance" with available women and, even though religious objections have been (and are) continuously made, the Djibouti government is dependent on French and American military and economic support, while the local middle class needs the soldiers' hard currency. The fate of Djibouti's nightclubs is a good barometer for Western influence over its government. Whether they will survive the increasing economic presence and financial influence of Dubai will be interesting to watch.

Normally, after ten in the evening, the nightclub goers really own the uptown streets, which are now specially patrolled by the motorized, French military police. However, during Ramadan, the disco- and mosque-goers cross paths and the sound of people praying mingles with the relentless and all-penetrating base of French and American rap and disco. This cacophony barely dies down, when the call for the morning prayer and Djibouti's noisy and omnipresent crows mark the beginning of a new day.

Ciid

Everywhere in the Islamic world, it is always a guess when Ramadan will end, as the new moon must be sighted by the relevant religious authorities. On Thursday evening, October 11, all ears were tuned in to radio or TV to find out whether it would be *Ciid* the next day or the day after. When the announcement came that the fast had ended, both via radio and TV and from cars with loudspeakers, the city exploded into frantic activity, not unlike the last evening before Christmas at American malls. Housewives rushed to the market to get the missing ingredients for special foods and sweets; fathers and mothers who had not yet bought new clothes for their children or still needed to get a new and fancy *macaawiis* (a man's sarong) for the communal *Ciid* prayer next day poured into Suuq Duqsileh. Those who had not yet paid the zakaat tax to the poor—a duty that must be performed before the formal prayer, now made last-minute arrangements. And everywhere women cooked and cleaned and prepared for the holiday. It seemed as if no one slept that night.

On the first day of the Feast of Fast breaking, Djiboutians pray the *Ciid* prayer in three large open spaces in different parts of the city. The ritual of endlessly repeated *Allahu akbars* (God is Great), which precede this special *Ciid* prayer, cannot be heard in uptown but many people spoke of this special ritual with awe. Apart from the formal *Ciid* prayer and the President's public "state of the nation" speech, this holiday is a family occasion, with relatives and friends sharing time and food in each other's houses. Children get sweets, toys, and new clothes and go from house to house to receive *Ciid* gifts from relatives and family friends. Radio and TV broadcast special Ramadan programs, with live reports on the *Ciid* celebrations in Mecca and Medina and rebroadcasts of famous Somali singers in concert. Moreover, on the evenings of the first and second days of this particular *Ciid*, there was a life performance as well: a concert by Djibouti's most famous diva, Nimco Jaamac, in the open-air theater called Les Salines, just out of the city center.

The second day of the *Ciid* is a very special day, for it is one of the very few days of the year that its many domestic servants have off. These girls are mostly young and unmarried, often work twelve or fourteen-hour days (or even sleep over), and do most of the cooking and cleaning in all quarters of the town. Aware that they are stuck in dead-end jobs, many of them attempt, sooner or later, by legal or illegal means, to obtain work in the Gulf States, where wages are higher, or refugee status in Europe and the USA, to their minds beacons of endless possibility. Or, like the friend of the domestic who worked in my host family, they take even bigger risks by opting for *tahrib* or being smuggled to Yemen in open boats, as the many news stories of Somali bodies washing up on Yemen shores testify. However, this holiday was their moment of glory: their day to dress up, to visit friends and relatives, and, as I found out when I showed up in Les Salines, to attend a concert. The open-air theatre, with stadium-like seating, is one of the most affordable venues for such events and, although there were some young men present as well, that evening, they filled it to the brim. They knew by heart and moved their lips along with every song sung that evening. Whether dressed in the typical colourful and often gold and silver-spangled Djiboutian *diric*³ and *garbasaar* (shoulder wrap), or in a combination of modest but fashionable head scarf and provocatively tight jeans and shirts, they were here to celebrate and to be seen. They took turns in flocking onto the small stage to kiss the singers, empty bags of colorfully wrapped sweets out over their heads, and dance around them for a while. There was nothing plain or understated about them that evening! *Ciid* in Djibouti could not have ended more festively.

Notes

1. Note that in the Somali orthography long vowels are doubled, the "x" stands for the aspirated "h" and the "c" for the Arabic letter 'ayn. For example, 'ld (as in feast or holiday) in Somali orthography becomes Ciid.
2. The leaf stimulant called *Catha edulis*.
3. The *diric* is a loose, straight-cut, extra long dress of fine, transparent cotton voile.

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All preparations
must come to their
fruitful end exactly
at sunset.