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Ramadan in Kyrgyzstan

An Ethnographer's Gaze on Fasting

JULIA DROEBER

'Who of you is fasting?', I asked the thirteen students who took my course 'Introduction to Islam'. One single hand at the back of the classroom was raised. This course was part of an exchange programme that sends European teachers to post-Soviet republics, and I had come to Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, in order to teach some courses in social anthropology for one semester. This particular course was attended by students of sociology, political science, and ethnology, who referred to themselves as Muslims. And yet, their formal knowledge of Islam was minimal. I suppose nobody can blame them for this, as they have grown up in a society that has previously been declared 'atheist' and is nowadays considered to be secular. For me, as their teacher – from Europe and a Christian – realizing that I knew a lot more about 'their' religion than they did was extremely awkward.

The strange feeling that accompanied me throughout the teaching of this particular course (I did not experience it in the other courses I was teaching) peaked during the month of Ramadan, when probably the majority of Muslims in the world are fasting from dawn till dusk. My previous experiences of living and travelling in the Middle East¹ seemed to show that Ramadan plays a central role in most Muslims' lives, even if they do not practise their religion otherwise. This was not so in Kyrgyzstan. Although a majority would identify themselves as Muslims² when asked, fasting for most of them did not seem to be an issue. So there I stood in front of my class, expecting similarities to my previous fasting experiences, and had difficulties finding just one who was fasting. Why was this experience so disappointing for me? Could my 'faith' be 'restored' by finding others who took Ramadan seriously? These two questions haunted me throughout the month of Ramadan and beyond, and these questions I attempt to answer here.

I cannot speak for the whole of Kyrgyzstan in terms of fasting practices, let alone religious practices in general. In the six months I have been here so far, I have only occasionally ventured outside Bishkek, and most of my time is spent with people of a certain societal stratum – the highly educated middle class. Very often these people have told me about their families living outside Bishkek and even invite me, but these contacts so far remain limited. After I had realized that hardly anyone was fasting in my immediate environment, I came to the preliminary conclusion that this could have been expected, because of the exposure to high education, 'westernized' norms and values, and possibly the remains of Soviet-style 'scientific atheism' or at least secular ideas in the capital. I tried to convince myself that in other parts of the

country people could potentially be fasting and be faithful to their 'Muslim heritage' that I expected to encounter.

Thus, one of my students, whose family lives in a rural area of Kyrgyzstan, had indeed told me that whereas she herself does not fast, her family does – everyone except the youngest children. And then there was this colleague of mine – Jyldyz, an ethnologist – who enthusiastically helped me to get acquainted with Kyrgyz culture, history, and traditions, who had taken me to her family in a small village, and who was fasting. She

was thrilled when she heard that I was too, and complained about her compatriots, who were not: 'You are fasting!? This is wonderful, Julia, I am glad you are! We must break the fast together some day. There are not very many people who take this seriously, I'm afraid, even though we are a Muslim country. We'll talk later!' And off she went to another appointment. I would have loved to discuss the issue further at that point, but she, like so many others here, has an incredible workload and receives only a small salary in return.

Two male students of mine were also fasting – Bakyt, who shares a flat with five others, who were all fasting, and Samat, who shares a flat with three others, who were not. Samat told me about his experience and expressed his surprise: 'I'm the only one who is fasting in my flat; one of my flatmates is Russian. Of course he doesn't fast. But the other two are Afghans, and I expected them to be rather conservative, but they are not. We are cooking together in the evening, but in the morning for the *suhur* meal, I'm the only one who gets up!'

There are a lot of street vendors in Bishkek, selling anything from single cigarettes to bread, filled pasties, batteries, sweets, or dried apricots. They are still there during Ramadan doing business as usual and people are eating, smoking, and drinking. Consumption during daytime did not seem to decrease during that month, if I can trust my own observations. Whereas in Jordan, where I have been living for two years, during Ramadan shops

would not open until late in the morning, get crowded in the afternoon, and literally nobody would be in the streets after sunset, nothing – on the surface – seemed to distinguish Bishkek's street life during Ramadan from that during the rest of the year. But this was Bishkek, and Bishkek is not the rest of the country.

I remember a conversation with another one of my colleagues, Nazgul, a sociologist, who was not fasting. When I told her about my suspicion (hope?) that in rural areas people would be fasting, she denied this: 'Believe me, nobody is fasting here. My own family is living in a village and none of them has ever done anything like this!' That was three o'clock in the afternoon and still a long way to go till sunset. A third colleague joined us and offered us tea, which I refused. Nazgul accepted, but turned around to tell me: 'This is very embarrassing for me, because I should be the one who is fasting, not you! I feel really bad about it, but I've never fasted in my whole life, and I probably will never do.' Most of the people I spoke to either admired people who fast or were completely non-understanding, and had never really thought about Ramadan. A friend of mine explained that the only time she ever fasted was when she had been to the United States as an exchange student: never before, and never after. Being a Muslim, as Bishkek proves, indeed varies in terms of norms across the globe.

'You are fasting!? This is wonderful, Julia, I am glad you are! We must break the fast together some day. There are not very many people who take this seriously, I'm afraid, even though we are a Muslim country.'

Notes

1. There I started fasting for the first time – not only as a good spiritual exercise, but also as an expression of my solidarity with those Muslims who live under extremely harsh conditions.
2. Of course, this does not apply to the Russian, German, and other minorities that are mainly Christian, and make up about 20 per cent of the entire population of Kyrgyzstan.

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