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Ramadan in Iceland

A spiritual and social process

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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In this article I discuss the meaning of the month of Ramadan for Muslims and my own experience from participating in fasting and religious rituals in two Muslim congregations in Reykjavík, during Ramadan of 2012. I discuss some important theological aspects of Islam and Ramadan to facilitate the understanding of the religious practices of Muslims, especially during this month. I introduce the concepts of *iman*, *islam* and *taqwa*, as central to these practices, and frame them, respectively, in practice theory terms as *doxa*, *praxis* and *agency* (Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 2006). When studying a religion like Islam, it is necessary to study Muslims, since religion mostly becomes manifest in practices and rituals. In this article I describe religious practices of Muslims in Iceland during the month of Ramadan, from their own perspective and from having participated in these rituals. I see the religious practices of Ramadan as a ritual and spiritual process of alternating between sacred and profane spaces/states (El Guindi, 2008; Turner, 1995; van Gennep, 1960) and Ramadan itself as formation of *communitas* (Turner, 1995), a close-knit spiritual/ideological and regenerative community (*ummah*) of one and a half billion Muslims worldwide. I also show that despite the communal energy of Ramadan, there are divisions and differences among Muslims in Iceland that become apparent during this month. Maybe the realisation of *doxa* through *praxis* is not that easy.

The meaning of Ramadan

The holy month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It begins when the crescent of the a new moon is sighted by reliable viewers, and it ends similarly at the sighting of the next new moon. Theologically, its significance derives from it being the month in which the revelations of the Qur'an began, when the archangel Gabriel (*Jibril* in Arabic) brought the Word of God to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Chapter (*sura*) 96 of the Qur'an, verses 1-5, is regarded as the initial revelatory message to Muhammad from God and it commands:

READ in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created, (2) created man out of a germ-cell, (3) Read - for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One, (4) who has taught [man] the use of the pen, (5) taught man what he did not know! (Asad, 2003).

The Arabic word Qur'an means "the recitation", and there is strong emphasis on the Prophet not being able to read or write and therefore the impossibility of him having written the Qur'an himself, being further proof of the Holy Book as the direct Word of God. In *sura* 2:183-186, there are some commands concerning Ramadan and some of the codes to be upheld by the believers during this month:

2:183 - O YOU who have attained to faith! Fasting is ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you, so that you might remain conscious of God: 2:184 - [fasting] during a certain number of days. But whoever of you is ill, or on a journey, [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days; and [in such cases] it is incumbent upon those who can afford it to make sacrifice by feeding a needy person. 2:185 - It was the month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was [first] bestowed from on high as a guidance unto man and a self-evident proof of that guidance, and as the standard by which to discern the true from the false. Hence, whoever of you lives to see this month shall fast throughout it; but he that is ill, or on a journey, [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days. God wills that you shall have ease, and does not will you to suffer hardship; but [He desires] that you complete the number [of days required], and that you extol God for His having guided you aright, and that you render your thanks [unto Him]. 2:186 - AND IF My servants ask thee about Me - behold, I am near; I respond to the call of him who calls, whenever he calls unto Me: let them, then, respond unto Me, and believe in Me, so that they might follow the right way (Asad, 2003).

In these few verses of sura 2 (*Al Baqara/The Cow*), some of the more important aspects of Ramadan are outlined; revelation, fasting and prayer. The month of Ramadan has a special relationship with the Qur'an, due to its revelation and during this month Muslims are encouraged to practice the so called *tarawih* prayers (which are not obligatory), where the whole Qur'an is recited aloud for the duration of the Holy month. It is recorded in *hadiths* (the sayings and actions of the Prophet) that Mohammad stood in prayer and recited the Qur'an (remembering it with the archangel Gabriel) during this month. Therefore, the Qur'an is recited from beginning to end during the 29-30 days of Ramadan, where the book is divided into 30 equal sections (*juʿz*), each read during one night's *tarawih* prayers.

The Ramadan fast is from the sunset prayers (*maghrib*) the evening before the official start of the fasting month until the same prayers the evening before *Eid-al-fitr*, which is the holiday celebrating the breaking of the fast. The Islamic prayer times are determined by the relative positions of the sun. The fasting is from dawn to dusk, when (healthy) people abstain from food, drink and sex, i.e. from all basic physical needs and desires. The meaning of Ramadan fasting is manifold, both physically and spiritually. Physically it is supposed to enhance people's awareness of their bodily needs and desires and to discipline these in the process. Also, and importantly, the fasting is meant to strengthen empathy towards the poor and hungry, by becoming aware of what it feels like to go without food and water. The fasting is also important for cleansing the body of toxic waste. Thus, the awareness of what is physical necessity and what is not comes into focus.

Three concepts

The spiritual aspects of Ramadan are of utter importance to Muslims. It is said that during this month, the gates of Heaven are open, the gates of Hell are closed and all demons are tied down, meaning that if people strive to get closer to God through prayer and contemplations, they will reap only good things. But the effort has to be made, with the right intensions. This spiritual effort is in some respect what is meant by the term *jihad*, which is to strive to conquer oneself and become a better human being. When considering the spiritual side of Ramadan, there are especially three ethical concepts that have to be considered: *iman*, *islam* and *taqwa*, the last one being central to the spiritual *jihad* of Ramadan (Rahman, 1983). The etymology of these terms is important for understanding their meaning. The term *iman* can be translated as "belief" or "to believe", from the Arabic root *a-m-n*, ("to be at peace with oneself"), thus the main meaning of this term is "peace" and "safety". *Iman* can also be understood as *doxa* (common belief, opinion). The term *islam* is from the Arabic root

s-l-m (“to be safe”, “whole”, and “integral”). The word *salam* (“peace”) is from this same root. Whereas *iman* is a subjective term (“inner faith”), *islam* is an objective term, indicating agency and objectification of *iman*. *Islam* connotes the active realisation of faith (*doxa*) and is to be understood as *praxis*. In this sense, *islam* is the reification of the *iman* (faith), whether seen as an individual spiritual project or a political one, e.g. by building a polity on the Islamic *doxa*, through a community of believers, the *ummah* (Rahman, 1983). One of the most important and central ethical concepts relating to Ramadan (and Islam) is *taqwa*, which is from the Arabic root *w-q-y* (“to protect”, “to preserve”). It is commonly translated as “God-fearingness” or “piety”. When the basic meanings of these three concepts are compared, a strong semantic kinship can be seen: “peace”, “safety” and “protection” is the common etymological connection. *Taqwa* is also frequently understood as “righteousness”, both in intent and action, thus combining the other two terms to some degree. The positive and protective function of *taqwa* makes it vital for avoiding errors and “staying on the straight path” (cf. sura 1, “The Opening”). *Taqwa* entails the faith, the piety and the agency required to realise the *din* (“religion”), which can be understood as “the way” or “the path”. *Taqwa* is consequently most important in connection with the “The Day of Accounting”, or Judgement Day, since ones righteousness, intents and deeds (good and bad) will be examined and judged. This is why the Qur’an constantly reminds the believers of the Last Day, for people to be aware of the fact that each moment can be their last and therefore the importance of *taqwa* as righteousness, protecting them from straying off the right path. Thus the essence of *taqwa* is the moral energy and strength required for spiritual progress (Rahman, 1983).

One important aspect of Ramadan is the so called “Night of Power” (*Laylat-al-Qadr*), also called “Night of Destiny” or “Night of Decree”. This is the night when the first message of the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel in a cave close to Mecca. The common consensus is that this night was one of the last ten nights of Ramadan, most likely one of the odd numbered at the end of the month. Even if it is not certain, many believe it to be the 27th night of Ramadan, and Muslims spend more time in the mosque and more energy at praying during these nights because the prayers offered are much stronger and more beneficial than otherwise. Some even stay in the mosque for these ten days and nights (this seclusion is called *itikaaf*) in intense prayer and reading the whole Qur’an. This is accounted for in the Qur’an by sura 97:1-5:

BEHOLD, from on high have We bestowed this [divine writ] on Night of Destiny. (2) And what could make thee conceive what it is, that Night of Destiny? (3) The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months (4) in hosts descend in it the angels, bearing divine inspiration by their Sustainer's leave; from all [evil] that may happen (5) does it make secure, until the rise of dawn (Asad, 2003).

These main ethical concepts discussed above have been presented as to better understand what follows, i.e. the ethnography of Muslims in Iceland engaged in the month of Ramadan. As I am not an Islamic scholar, nor a theologian, and because this account is merely to underline the importance of these concepts for the religious practices of Muslims, especially during Ramadan, it has been done only by scratching the surface of the immense complexity of Islamic theology.

Practice of Ramadan

This year, 2012, Ramadan was from the 20th of July to the 19th of August. During that time, I did fieldwork using participant observation in the two mosques in Reykjavík as well as conducting a few interviews with Muslims. I did fast for the whole duration of Ramadan and took part in the prayers and other religious activities. A Muslim friend of mine, originally from Syria, taught me how to ritually clean myself before prayer (perform *wudu*) and to pray and I was very welcome in both mosques, despite the fact that I am not a Muslim, a fact known to most of the two congregations. I decided to divide my time evenly between the two mosques, one week at a time in each. There have been some tensions between the two associations for different reasons (mainly political) but as I had declared myself neutral in these disputes, everybody accepted my stand and my bi-weekly presence as a participatory praying anthropologist.

Muslim prayer is quite physical as it entails routine, ritualised body movements, accompanied by particular short prayers, which are uttered quietly but intensely while performing the various movements. When a large group of practitioners stand in line, and bow in harmony, the unifying effect can be quite impressive and strong, even though each individual practitioner is intensely focused on his or her prayer. I quickly managed to incorporate the basic body movements themselves, but not all of the many short prayers (in Arabic) that accompany the movements. I was forgiven as a non-Muslim novice.

Before praying, one has to make oneself ritually pure. This begins with ritual washing (ablution, called *wudu*) of the hands, arms, face, mouth, nose, ears, the hair and the feet; in a special sequence (which is important to maintain in right order). When this ritual washing is done, the practitioner turns towards Mecca and says: “*bismillabi*” (in the name of God). Having performed the *wudu*, the practitioner enters the prayer room and before the praying starts, he/she is required to perform two *rakabs*, intended for the mosque and those therein. A *rakah* is one prayer-cycle with five different bodily positions and prayers. The number of *rakabs* differs according to different praying times (dawn, noon, sunset, etc.), sometimes they take only a few minutes, while other times they take over an hour, as in the *taranib* prayer-cycle in Ramadan, when the Qur’an is recited out loud. One prayer-cycle always concludes by turning the head first to the right, then to the left, uttering “*salam-alaikum-rahmadullahi*” (peace be upon you and God’s blessing), thus addressing the next man/woman as well as all humanity. As before the praying proper, two *rakabs* are performed, and the practitioner exits the purified sacred space/state. In this way, a practicing Muslim alternates regularly and rhythmically between sacred space/state and profane space/state (Durkheim, 1955/1912; El Guindi, 2008). As I participated in these rituals every day and often during nights, I could not avoid being touched by the emotionally charged spirituality experienced and acted out by my fellow practitioners, while realising the religious/spiritual sincerity and gravity expressed by these men (there is close physical contact during the performance of the ritual) and the importance of their religion (*din*) to them (these late night prayers were mostly attended by men). By being involved in the praying in this way, my access to the men became more open, which facilitated discussions about various topics concerning Islam and being a Muslim, as well as creating positive bonds of fellowship, even though it was known that I was not a Muslim.

It makes good sense to conceptualise the Muslim ritual prayer-cycle in similar terms as van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1995) do concerning the ritual process as divisible into three phases/states. van Gennep (1960) divided most rituals of status change into three phases/states, those of separation, transition (*liminality*) and

incorporation. Turner (1995) elaborated on van Gennep's insights in his analysis of the ritual process and, in so doing formulated the concept of *communitas*, which can roughly be seen as a liminal community, more or less secluded from the main society and based (bonded) on strong unitary ideology, often temporary. Using this approach, the Islamic ritual prayer-cycle can be conceptualised as a three-fold ritual process, where the practitioners separate from the everyday profane world and enter the sacred world of spirituality, and then back to the quotidian world again, using purification rituals at both ends (entering and exiting purified sacred space/state). As El Guindi (2008) shows, every practicing Muslims goes through this alternating process five times every day.

It is not only the regular prayer-cycle that can be conceptualised from according to the notions of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1995), but also the ritual participation during the month of Ramadan, which fits perfectly into this processual model. Before the fasting begins, most Muslims have already prepared themselves spiritually for Ramadan, as they look enthusiastically forward to the four weeks of fasting and intense praying. The first *fajr* (dawn) prayer of the month, ritually marking the beginning of Ramadan, symbolises the separation from the rhythms of ordinary life as practitioners look forward to submerging themselves in intense religious practice, the reading and recitation of the Qur'an, which for that purpose takes place in three phases. During the four weeks of fasting and communal breaking of the fast (*iftar*) every evening, social and spiritual bonds become strengthened and the feeling of *communitas* becomes deeper. What is in fact amazing is that this spiritual process is taking place among almost one quarter of humanity at the same time, with common aims and goals, so the meta-national community of believing Muslims, the *ummah*, is strongly energised during this month (not least with digital communication). For me, as a non-Muslim, to experience this unitary emotion, was not only educational, but also very positive.

How Muslims experience and conceptualise Ramadan

While Muslims generally and presumably experience Ramadan each in his or her individual way, there are certain common themes which are being expressed. Most Muslims see the month of Ramadan as a blessing, a gift from God, and as a chance to become a better person and a better Muslim. It presents new opportunities to deepen and develop one's "God-consciousness" (*taqwa*), internalise all that is good and do good deeds. During Ramadan, the believers seek to attain clearer consciousness of mind and body, as well as becoming aware of the needs of those who suffer in one way or another. This month is important for purifying body and soul, enhance the positive aspects of social relationships and get closer to God. Everyone should strive to improve individually, socially and spiritually and meditate on the meaning of the relationship between the person and society, between the one and the all. One important thing is the sincerity of intentions, and the importance of honesty and integrity. An example is the obligatory giving of alms, the *zakat*, one of the five pillars of Islam, since the giver must have pure intentions for offering the alms to the poor, because God will know if he or she is insincere. Most Muslims express the importance of opening the heart and of clearing the mind to be able to receive God's message. To live in the moment (which could always be the last) and keep to the "straight path" is a common theme and is linked to the concept of *taqwa*, discussed earlier.

Some younger Muslims compared Ramadan to "rebooting" a computer, and one pointed to the meaning of the word, Ramadan, meaning dry, scorching heat (fire), and that Ramadan was a fire that destroyed the old and useless and facilitated a new start. Everybody agreed on Ramadan being a time of regeneration and revaluation of all

aspects of life, helped by devotion to God, expressed through prayer and righteous conduct. Many Muslims emphasised that Islam is not only scriptures and norms, but not the least a way of being and acting (cf. the discussion about *iman/islam/taqwa* earlier), and that praying was useless if the heart was not involved. Generally, even though fasting for 17-20 hours can be taxing, most of the Muslims talked of it as something healthy, physically and spiritually, and I personally did not find it so difficult, I just had to drink enough water before fasting and use more sugar than at other times to maintain the blood sugar level. Some of the Muslims fasted longer than others and that brings us to the differences between the two Muslim associations.

Two Muslim associations – two times

The two Muslim associations in Reykjavík, the Muslim Association of Iceland and the Islamic Cultural Centre of Iceland have had their differences since the latter was founded as a result of a (political) split about three years ago. I will not discuss these differences here, other than what emerged this Ramadan in connection to prayer times for extreme latitudes. One association used times that correlated more or less with the position of the sun, relative to earth, in Reykjavík, i.e. “real” sunrise and sunset. This was according to a *fatwa* (legal advice) from the Muslim World League’s Islamic Fiqh Academy and confirmed by the European Council for Fatwa and Research (I have a copy of this *fatwa*). The *fatwa* was based on some technical measurements, which I will not discuss here, and was considered to be authoritative (the strength of *fatwas* can vary widely). Thus, the prayer (and fasting) times were according to this. The other association used different prayer times, according to the same *fatwa*, but using different interpretations. Thus, the two associations agreed to disagree about the length of time of fasting during the day and this caused some confusion in the beginning.

Since I had decided to divide my time bi-weekly between the two mosques, I fasted alternatively for 20 and 17 hours, with the period of abstention decreasing as the month progressed because of the sun lowering in the sky and the days slowly getting shorter. While alternating my fasting in this way, I found out that there was actually not much difference between the two approaches and that fasting is mostly a matter of mental strength and discipline, which after all is central to the Ramadan fast. The “dispute” can be seen as reflective of the different approaches of the two associations. The older one has recently chosen a “native” Icelander as leader and another Icelander regularly conducts the Friday sermons, using Icelandic as one of the languages. Also, there is no “professional” or learned *imam* or religious leader, but several men leading the prayers and a few take turns reciting the Qur’an during *tarawih* prayers in Ramadan. This contrasts with the other association, which has a learned Islamic scholar and *imam* from Egypt. He is an uncontested religious leader in that mosque and the only one who leads prayers and conducts sermons. This shows that the two associations, or mosques, have not only used different prayer times, but they also have different political structures and leadership styles, one more egalitarian than the other. The religious approaches are also different in some ways, which may stem from the level of religious scholarship and/or cultural background of the religious leaders. Most of the time this does not bother lay Muslims, for whom a mosque is a mosque, a place of worship, and many use both mosques for prayer, while there are core groups who frequent each place exclusively, both for praying and for general socialisation. This example should be instructive of the fact that Islam and Muslims are not a monolithic, reified mass, but groups of people with different views on many things and different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Conclusions

In this article I have described the process of religious practises and rituals among Muslims in Iceland during the month of Ramadan 2012. I have presented theoretical and theological concepts central to Islamic religious practice and used the experience of my interlocutors as well as my own experience as a demonstration. This month is the most important period in the Islamic calendar, where most fundamental aspects of the religion of Islam come to expression. Practicing Muslims alternate rhythmically from sacred to profane every day of the year and similarly the month of Ramadan is an extended image of that transitional process. I have tried to show how Muslims strive, or should strive (*jihad*) towards improving positive personal and social spirituality and communal sentiments during this month, with the goal being personal regeneration and the unity of the Muslim *ummah* as well as closeness to God. This is a very noble project, but as the example about the different prayer times in Reykjavík shows, ideologies and practices sometimes tend to get in each other's way and, as Malinowski said long ago, anthropologists have to study what people do as well as what they say (Malinowski, 1984/1922).

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