Ramadan in Djibouti

Daily Life & Popular Religion

LIDWIEN KAPTEIJNS

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 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 common people, the 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 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.

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 afuur (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 amman—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: Afuraay, afuraay, ummadadda Muslimmaay afuraay! (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 sitaat 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.

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.

Popular devotion

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“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 amman 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 as the muezzin calls for the sunset prayer, first with dates, then with water, juice, and other afuur 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 afuur. 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 fruitfull 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 temporar-ily 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, streetside 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 aflur time is whether the qaat² has yet “come in” and, if not, when it will. Ramadan does rule the time when qaat becomes available in the city streets—around aflur 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 diwars or reception rooms of ministers and other well-off citizens, except that here the qaat stalls are longer, their leaves more tender, the pillows thicker and of better quality, and the sound systems more elaborate, while the maezeqing—made 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 aflur, the sunset prayer, and dinner without a pause, the most invertebrate chewers sit down to chew until just before the muezzin calls for the morning prayer. After a quick suuxu—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 aflur 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 tarawiiwis 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 the relics of the relentless and all-penetrating base of 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 soldiery. 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 nightlife clubs 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.

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 “qun. For example, ‘Id (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.

Email: lkapteij@wellesley.edu