

# Ramadan in Egypt

## Stories, Spirituality, Festivities and fellowship

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القاهرة  
Cairo.

Muslims in Egypt always celebrated the coming of the holy month of Ramadan with light and decorations. They followed in the footsteps of Omar bin al-Khatab the first caliph to increase light in the mosque during this month, so that Muslims could perform their religious obligations and prayers in the mosque at night. Imam Ali went by a mosque one night and when he saw the light inside and outside, said: "May Allah shine the light in Omar's grave for he is the one who shone the light in our mosques".

'Ramadan' is derived from the word 'Ramada' a hot stone. It is meant to burn sins. Fasting became obligatory for Muslims during the second year of the Islamic Calendar, the month in which the Quran was revealed.

Ramadan, for the Egyptians, is a month of stories, traditions and festivities. They start to gather around radios and televisions to hear the news of the sighting of the crescent moon and shout for joy at the coming of the month when the crescent is first sighted. Radio and television broadcast many songs to welcome the month: "Ramadan has come" by M. Abdul-Mutalib, "Wahawi o Wahawi" by A. Abdul-Qader, "The crescent of Ramadan has shone" by the Three Happy Group etc. ➔



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### Ramadan Lamp

The lamp is normally used as a light source but children found a new use for it: they carry it around through the alleyways and streets asking for gifts and sweets after Iftar (the end of the fast for the day) and sing:

Give us the usual                      May God save you  
Coat and chain                      May God save you  
The tradition of the lamp dates back to the era of the Fatimids in Egypt, when lamps were elaborately decorated with geometrical designs.

In the Lamps Market, during the eighth and ninth centuries, when the candle shops stayed open until midnight, people used to celebrate the coming of the month of Ramadan by putting different types of candles on their shops and carriages. Silversmiths used to get busy in Shaban (the month before Ramadan) to make lamps with different designs and tinted glass. But now all this has been replaced with lamps operated by a single battery. The innovative spirit and original designs have been sacrificed on the altar of modernization.

### Al-Mesaharaty

One of the most important figures in Ramadan is the Mesaharaty (who announces the last meal of the night). This practise started during the Fatimid period (around 238 A. H./ 852 A. D). He wakes up the people for their last meal before dawn with the sound of his drum and song: "Get up you who is asleep, get up and worship God". The first Mesaharaty was 'Aba Nafta' with a unique song on a special metre called 'al-Qawma', which he sang for the Abbasid caliph al- Nasir I-Din Allah for a fixed annual salary. Towards the end of Ramadan, the Mesaharaty used to mourn the month by shouting: "May Allah not take away the month of fasting. May Allah not take you away. May Allah not take you away, month of meals. May Allah not take you away, month of invitations. May Allah not take you away, month of generosity"

### Ramadan puzzles and games

There are different games and competitions during Ramadan in Egypt including spiritual competitions, such as reading the complete Quran several times and praying Tarawih (a special nightly prayer). Muslims also try not to commit sins or do anything unacceptable to God. Young people play football and other sports. Television and radio broadcast special programs for Ramadan. Families gather together and Egyptian women excel in preparing Ramadan delicacies: dates, meat, birds, soups, sweets such as kanafa, qatife, baqlawah, basbosah and the 'dish of the judge' (zilabiah).

### The Gun of Iftar

The story of the gun of Ramadan dates back to the time of the Viceroy of Cairo who received a gun as a present. He ordered his assistants to try it. The experiment took place about sun set during the first day of the fast. The people took it as a sign for the beginning of Iftar. Next day many dignitaries gathered around the viceroy's house to thank him. Since then the viceroy

ordered that the gun should be fired at sun set and this became a constant feature of Ramadan. The gun is still fired today.

### Charitable Meals

During this month, kind people prepare 'Meals from God the Merciful'. They put up tents in front of their houses and shops in the main streets and squares to feed travellers and poor people.

The residents of Cairo love to stay up all night during the fasting month. There are many festivals after the last prayers and Tarawih, especially in areas such as the Hussein quarter. People come to visit the shrine of Hussein, pray, and ask God for forgiveness. They also buy all sorts of food and drink from this popular quarter and sit in the famous coffee shops of The Khalili bazaar.

### El-Fishawy

One coffee shop that sits proudly between al-Khalili market, al-Hussein and al-Azhar mosques is El-Fishawy, the most famous and oldest coffee shop in Egypt. Built by the great El-Fishawy in 1772, it became the meeting place for writers, artists and politicians. It ➤



الملك فاروق في مقهى الفيشاوي.  
King Farouq in El-Fishawy coffee shop.



Inside the shrine of Imam Hussein.

صورة من الداخل لمسجد سيدنا الحسين.

is here that Nagib Mahfuz, the Nobel Prize winner, got the inspiration for his Trilogy and other novels and it is here that the poets Ahmad Rami and Beram al-Tunisi wrote their lyrics to Um Kalthom, the great singer. The coffee shop was also visited by politicians, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghany, Saad Zaghlul, Mohammad Abdah and Aziz al-Misri, kings, including King Farouq, presidents and foreign and local ministers. El-Fishawy was the only coffee shop that was used as a meeting place for families. The shop has many antiques, such as great Czech mirrors and chandeliers that the great Fishawy bought from auctions of royal furniture, which initially came from Europe.

As one drinks green tea (al-Fishawi'y speciality) or Turkish coffee one is taken back to the nights of the old orient and spends an evening in the era of the Fatimids and Mamlukes.

### In the words of one poet:

*"In every beautiful corner  
Politics with the Zanjabil  
Poetry with Yansoon  
Art with coffee  
Lovely chat  
Covering literature and art"*

Towards the end of Ramadan, Egyptian radio and other media used to play an emotional song by the singer Sharifah Fadhil:

*"It is early.. early..early  
the days are running fast  
by God it is still early, by God  
O month of fasting"*

The Egyptians overcome their sadness at the end of Ramadan by busying themselves with preparations for Eid al-Fitr. They make Eid cakes, gharibah and all kinds of biscuits. Ramadan finishes with the happiness of Eid and the warm heartedness and goodwill the Egyptians feel towards one another. Once the three days of Eid festivities are over they start the count down once again, with love and eagerness, for the coming of the next Ramadan. ■