

Ramadan in Morocco

Month of piety and solidarity

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Probably the Moslem religious rite most universally observed, Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar, has a special significance for the Moroccans and for the rest of the Islamic community: billions of people in the four corners of the world.



The appetisers shop in Casablanca.

محل للمخللات في الدار البيضاء.

The fast during this month is one of the five pillars of Islam. Ramadan means more than abstaining from food, drink, cigarettes or sexual relations between sunrise and sunset. It means fighting against inner human desires. It is a time devoted to internal reflection, devotion to God and self-control. Moreover, it is an invitation to gain a better understanding of the life of people who do not always have enough to eat. The majority

of Moroccans like Ramadan because of its sacred nature and the congenial atmosphere it engenders. The old people, spend their days and part of their nights during this month of prayer in the mosques. The young people take part in numerous sporting activities, which have been pursued with increasing passion in recent years. Some merely want to stay in shape; for others it is a way of passing time.

The evening after Maghreb prayers, families and friends break their fast in a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere. Ramadan is the only month when the members of the family meet, every evening, around a table of delicacies. The housewives use this occasion to show off their culinary skills. Dishes include hrrira, the national soup. Typically Moroccan, this soup is very rich in calories and spices, and is generally used to break the fast. It is ➤



The green tea of Morocco.

الشاي الأخضر المغربي.

usually followed by dates or honeycombs chebbakia (wafers coated in honey) or briouates (layers of pastry stuffed with fresh cheese and soaked in honey).

Other delicacies include baghrir (Moroccan pancakes) m'semmen (wafers) coated with honey and butter, harcha (containing semolina), sellou (an almond mixture ground with flour and other ingredients), caâb ghzale (horn of gazelle cake in stuffed layers of ground almonds) briouate stuffed with shrimps or meat and the national drink: typically Moroccan mint tea.

For the Moroccans, Ramadan is a month of piety, meditation and spirituality and also a festive period, especially after Ftour (breakfast). The two national television channels compete to offer Moroccan viewers the best entertainment during this month and the cities organize concerts and spectacles

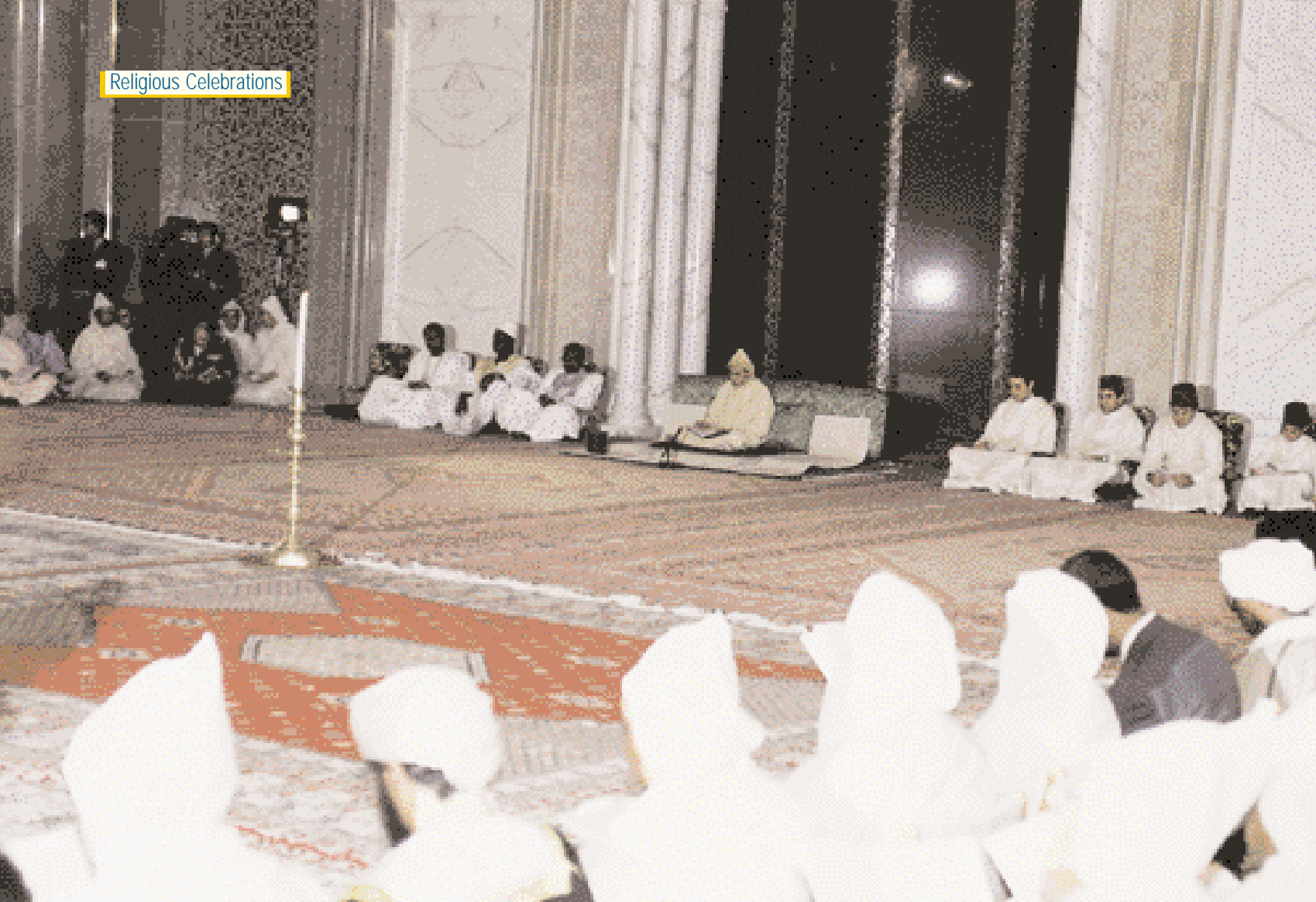
which create a festive atmosphere.

Moroccans regard the last 10 days of Ramadan as highly blessed – especially the 27th night, the night of the destiny, Laylat Al-Qadr, the night when the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Mohammed. This is the night on which children are initiated into fasting. And after the breaking of the fast, the boys and young girls dress in beautiful traditional clothes (kaftan or qmiss for the girls and jabadour or fouqiya for the boys). In one of Morocco's ancestral rituals the girls' hands are painted with henné; this green colored plant of paradise protects against the evil eye and evil spirits.

In the evening after breakfast most people eat dry fruits (fakiya: dry almonds, nuts, grapes, dates bouzekri and feqqass) with tea and dine on the national dish, couscous (with vegetables or tfaya: dry grapes and onion), or chicken and offer to eat with needy in the

neighborhood and in the mosques. For many pious Moroccans, this period is marked by a particular spiritual intensity: they spend their nights reading the Qur'an.

The late King of Morocco, Hassan II, Commander of the Believers (Amir Al Mouminine), invited the most eminent scientists in the Muslim community to enlighten the public about the most relevant religious issues. His successor, Mohammed VI, added a social dimension - the national solidarity campaign centered around assisting the most impoverished sections of society. This benevolent gesture earned him the nickname "King of the poor". The king travels around the country inaugurating development projects such as electrification, the provision of drinking water, opening girls schools in rural areas and ensuring an adequate supply of hospital equipment. ➤



Historical picture of the late King Hassan II in one of his royal Ramadan lectures.

صورة تاريخية للملك الراحل الحسن الثاني في جلساته الرمضانية.

In 2003 he set up the Mohammed V Solidarity Foundation with a budget of 1 billion 732 million dirhams of which 25,9 % was for sustainable development projects and 19 % for food support. A total of 186,79 million dirhams was set aside for the reinforcement of hospital structures, 135,21 million for the handicapped, 105,53 million for student housing 90,04 million for childrens' centres and 60,44 million to improve the health of girls.

Civil society participates fully in the programme of social solidarity. The experience of a young person is very instructive in this regard. Karim Tazi a rich contractor, was deeply touched by the spirit of solidarity shown by his charitable mother, who was the first to offer meals to the poor during Ramadan. He created in January 2002 "The Association of Food Against Hunger", to play the role of intermediary between the needy in the districts where they are living, and food producers.

"We say to them that if they give us their unsaleable products, we will commit ourselves to forwarding them to associations which will

make good use of them This is guaranteed because we always sign a contract, stipulating we will collect the goods ourselves, they will not be resold and they will be consumed by the use-by date. We also draw up a contract with charitable associations who undertake that the goods will be consumed quickly and will not be re-sold", Karim Tazi added.

"The food bank has a rare characteristic: it works as a link between the world of business and that of charity. In addition, it has the skills lacking in charitable associations mainly in the field of logistical marketing: it is not enough to collect gifts, it is also necessary to have the facilities to store and distribute them", he explained. After a difficult beginning, the association managed to gain the support of a large section of the business world, which allowed it to expand its work in supporting rural education for girls".

Good bargains

If Ramadan is the month of spiritual meditation and solidarity, it is also the time of good

bargains. It is obvious that foodstuffs are consumed in large quantities and sales reach record levels. There is also heightened activity in the children's ready-made clothes market. The inhabitants of the popular districts are more sensitive to the connotations of Eid. For them, it is the best occasion to give their children a treat by buying them new clothes. A number of clothing companies make between 15 and 30% of their annual sales during this month. This compensates for the loss of trade in the international market due to strong competition from Asian companies, the Tunisians and the Turks. By cutting their prices by up to 50 percent the clothes stores are packed with customers during the last days of Ramadan.

Finally on the last day of Ramadan, Eid el Fitr (the festival at the end of the fast) the joy of partaking of culinary delights goes hand in hand with the joy of Muslims throughout the world of distributing zakat to the needy so they can celebrate the festive season in style. ■