The Month of Bounty

by James Wamba

The sun is about to set over Dar es Salaam. In a scene that could be taking place at any mosque during the Holy Month of Ramadhan, worshippers arrive in greater numbers than usual, taking off their shoes at the threshold to join other worshippers already seated or standing, in prayer or just silent anticipation of the Muezzin's call. The call they await will announce the conclusion of the current day of fasting. Eventually, the Muezzin clears his throat and as he proceeds to proclaim the greatness of Allah in an arresting melodic tone, the congregation bursts into noiseless activity outside, around the mosque as members break their fast with the symbolic first morsel of food or sip of drink. The mood is a quietly cheerful one of sharing and of congratulations on another day's fast completed. After observance of the evening prayer many of them will head to domestic gatherings where they will join to share food in the spirit of togetherness. Others may choose one of many locations where one can dine out on a Ramadhan evening. Even the young man breaking his fast alone at a roadside stall is not excluded from the warmth of a strong sense of communal unity that characterizes the Holy Month.

These activities are rooted in a deeply rich tradition some 14 centuries old. Since the infancy of Islam, Ramadhan has been a uniquely sacred month to Muslims. The ninth of twelve cycles in the Arabian lunar year, it is celebrated as the best time of the year whatever season it falls on. According to Islamic tradition, it was during the month of Ramadhan that Muhammad, a 40-year-old man recognized by his contemporaries for possessing an exceptionally noble character, had withdrawn from his community in the Arabian city of Mecca. He had retreated to spend some time on neighboring mount Hira alone in profound reflection on the concept of a higher being. There, in an occurrence that welcomed a most significant turning point in the course of human history, he experienced an unexpected encounter as the stillness of his solitude was visited by an awesome and terrifying presence. It was an unearthly visitor, an angel named Gabriel who, alone, surrounded him and commanded him to read:

> *"Read! (or "Recite!"),*
> *In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher…"* Qur'an 96:1

It was then, in the later part of Ramadhan, when the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) received the first revelations of his mission. God had chosen him to deliver the message of Islam, to free the tortured soul of humanity from the dungeon of her ignorance and guide her from the darkness into the light with beautifully worded divine poetry – the words of God, the verses of the Holy Qur'an. Later, verses were revealed calling for Muslims to fast during the daylight hours of this special month.

Today, countless Muslims from different countries and cultures join in observance of this period of fasting and spiritual dedication, culminating in the feast of Eid-el-Fitr, a two-day holiday celebrating the completion of this rite and the blessings received.

As it happens in Dar, Ramadhan is marked by a few small changes. The evening tide of rush hour traffic flows to a slightly altered rhythm as commuters, not all of them Muslim, endeavor to arrive at their intended venues in time for Iftar (the meal to break the day's fast). Popular nightspots that ordinarily draw an impressive attendance often experience a significant decline in the number of their patrons. Some establishments designate the Holy Month a time to do renovations. In the markets the prices of produce are up two-fold. When asked to justify this, a young vendor laughs knowingly and says, "Huu ni mwezi wa kuchuma, braza", ("this is the month for earning bounty, my brother") referring to an oft-quoted Islamic tradition. The bounty he is referring to is probably not the bounty of spiritual blessings referred to in the tradition. Easily the busiest part of town, Kariakoo comes to life after sunset with

renewed energy and excitement. Food is a dominant theme. The aroma of coffee and Swahili cuisine mingle in the night air with the haunting tones of Qur'anic recitation audible from a nearby mosque. A number of businesses will remain open after midnight offering deals to people gift shopping in anticipation of Eid-el-Fitr.

Majid, a Zanzibari student of computer science, talks about his experience of Ramadhan. "Ramadhan is a time for family. People we don't see often, we meet during Ramadhan (where we might expect to share such foods as) plantains cooked in coconut sauce, a lot of rice, chapati, ketlesi, mkate wa maji (Swahili style pancakes) and something we call "pohpoh" which is balls made from wheat flour with coconut." For Thuraiya, a medical school student of Yemeni/Omani heritage, Ramadhan time staples include: "the usual…dates, fried plantains, samosas, shurbah (an Arabian culinary import, a beef broth thickened with oats and chunks of meat)." In the home of Mwanaidi, a domestic worker from Kondoa in central Tanzania, Iftar will often be, "boiled sweet potatoes with pumpkin, sweet noodles, yellow peas or yams and cassava in coconut sauce." And describing the experience of Ramadhan from her background, Sajida, a member of the Khoja Shiite community says, "at family level (when) we have Iftar (it is mainly) dates, porridge, tea, cassava or bananas and Indian bites like kachori, kababs, bhajia, samosas, gulabjambu (similar to donuts soaked in syrup), daiwara and kalimati…After Iftar we go to the mosque for Du'a (supplication) and lecture. .. After mosque we have Daku (a pre-dawn meal to) prepare for the next day's fast…At the community level we have sports activities every weekend..."

Asked what the essence of Ramadhan is to him, Majid says, "It's about spiritual self-purification for the individual and the community." To Mwanaidi, Ramadhan is, "worship, good food, repentance, renewal and thanks to Allah." As Muslims and non-Muslims, we can certainly all share in the enjoyment of the good food, perhaps we can also share in this month, the spirit of renewal and thanks for a wonderful tradition.