

## Fasting fellowship

Fasting during Ramadan helps Muslims focus on religion, self-sacrifice

By Kendra Kingsley  
THE BATTALION

On a cool November night in College Station, Texas, Saeahat Gulan and Zaynah Danquah slip robes (called jihbas) over their clothes, secure their head coverings (called hijabs) and leave their apartment to celebrate one of the most important holidays in the Islamic religion: the fast of Ramadan.

Located on a quiet street, the Islamic Center of Bryan-College Station is bustling with devout Muslims who are preparing to recite the words of ancient Arabic prayers.

Two entrances separate the Muslim men and women because the Muslims believe dividing the sexes prevents distractions during the prayers.

Gulan and Danquah enter the foyer designated for women. Here, they remove their shoes to prevent bringing dirt into the mosque, which is supposed to be clean for prayer at all times.

Inside the mosque, a two-way mirror serves as a wall between the Muslim men and women so that the men will not be distracted while they pray. On one side of the mirror, the Muslim preacher (called an imam) begins an Arabic chant, which signals the beginning of the Tarawih, a special prayer recited only during Ramadan.

Soon, the men have lined up side-by-side to recite the Tarawih; the women, who are able to see the men through the glass, follow their words and motions. The men and women fall to their knees and drop their faces to the ground to assume a prostrating position while they pray.

"Your face is the most honorable part of your body," explains Danquah, a 21-year-old biology student at Texas A&M. "When it's on the ground, you're basically telling God he's the highest power - which is what Ramadan is all about."

Muslims follow a specific schedule during the holiday, which requires fasting from sunrise to sunset. The Sunnah (a record of the prophet Muhammed's teachings) urges Muslims to eat a pre-dawn meal (called sahur) to give them strength until their next meal at sunset.

During the day, Muslims are encouraged to morally discipline themselves -- avoiding arguments and impure thoughts. Immediately after sunset, Muslims are allowed to take a meal called iftar, literally meaning, "break the fast."

Currently, Islam is considered a minority religion in the United States - especially in the South. Yet Danquah, whose parents are first-generation Muslims from Jamaica, says growing up in the predominantly Baptist "Bible Belt" was not an alienating experience.

In fact, if anything set her apart from the other students in her Killen, Texas, elementary school, it wasn't her religion.

"My sister and I would constantly fight over clothes," she said. "My mom got so tired of listening to us argue about who was going to wear what that she ordered us clothes from a school uniform company in New York. She made us wear white oxford shirts and light green jumpers to wear to school every day. Since green and white were our school colors, we looked like the most school-spirited kids every day."

As she got older and began wearing hijabs to school, Danquah found that her Muslim roots became an object of fascination to other students.

"I understood that I was different from the other kids, and I got used to answering all of their questions about the Muslim religion," she said. "No one gave me a hard time about it, but it could be difficult during Ramadan when the other kids were eating lunch. I'd usually bring a book to the cafeteria so I could distract myself from the food."

Ahmed Aden, an electrical engineering student who attended first through 12th grade in Virginia, said his memories of Ramadans are more painful.

"During junior high and high school, kids would wave pieces of cake in front of my face because they knew I was fasting," Aden said. "In college, people have outgrown that type of behavior and are typically very understanding when I explain why I'm fasting."

Because Ramadan is scheduled according to the lunar calendar, it begins on a different day each year. This year, Ramadan began on Oct. 27 - which, because it's during daylight savings time, means the fasting day is shorter.

Aden, like most Muslims, began participating in the fast of Ramadan when he hit puberty several years ago - when the holiday began in the sweltering summer months.

"It used to be so difficult for me when I first started fasting because it seemed like the days lasted forever," he said. "Now, because I have more patience and the days are shorter, I don't usually find it too difficult to make it through the daylight hours without food."

When Aden feels tempted to eat throughout the day, however,



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he tries to avoid situations that involve food. "If I know there's going to be pizza at a meeting, I usually won't go," he said. "When I get hungry in between classes, I'll pretend like I've left my wallet at home and can't buy food anyway."

Muslims are allowed to eat before sunrise or after sunset during Ramadan, and Aden says he adjusts his meals accordingly. Yet, a bowl of cereal at 5 a.m. and a sandwich at 7 p.m. is hardly a typical daily diet for the 24-year-old.

"During the fast, I feel like I get a little taste of what it's like to be starving," he said. "Here in the United States, everything's at your fingertips. During the months I'm not fasting, I find myself going through the McDonald's drive-through or snacking on chips even when I'm not hungry. Fasting makes you realize how much you really need to survive."

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we can have a longer Ramadan." Aden, who is not married, confesses that the most difficult part of Ramadan for him is giving up food during the day. Married couples, however, face additional stipulations.

During Ramadan, husbands and wives are required to practice sexual abstinence during the fast. That stipulation, which serves as an additional test of self-control, is something newlywed Sarah Ashraf finds "empowering."

"Knowing you can wait until after the fast gives you discipline and really makes you feel so strong," said the University of Houston student. "It's important to realize that we aren't meant to have everything we want when we want it."

Across the world, more than 4.1 million Muslims recognize the fast of Ramadan. In predominantly Islamic countries, such as Jordan, Syria and Turkey, public life, commerce and government virtually slow to a crawl - especially when Ramadan falls during the summer.

Muhammed Munawar, president of the A&M Muslim Student Association, describes the sacrifices as "lessons in patience." Munawar says he often faces scrutiny from his classmates, who don't understand why Muslims must fast during Ramadan.

"Classmates have asked me why we force ourselves to go hungry," said Munawar, a junior industrial engineering major. "But the essence of Ramadan is not to torture ourselves, but to tame our inner selves and become better people."

Islam is currently the fastest growing religion in the world, and Munawar says he sees the religion growing at A&M - especially during Ramadan, when people take more notice of Muslim practices.

"People are always fascinated by fasting, and we've had a lot of non-Muslims come to our meetings and ask us what Ramadan is all about," Munawar said. "Even if they're part of a different religion, non-Muslims are usually very supportive because they understand we're doing this all for God."

For those who don't understand why fasting is one of Islam's most religious practices, Munawar has a simple answer.

"When you say something nice, other people hear you," he said. "When you give money to charity, other people take notice. But when you fast, no one except God notices. That's why it means so much - because you can fool other people, but you can't fool God."

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