INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KWC-6

c/o American Express
15 Sharia Kasr El Nil
Cairo, Egypt
July 28, 1983

Ramadan in Berat

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Dear Peter;

''The entire country goes into a coma for a month.'' An American embassy official told me that after I had asked him what to expect from Ramadan in Egypt.

It was an exaggeration. Trains and buses continued to run, shops were open in the mornings and evenings, although usually shuttered during the middle of the day. And tourist restaurants were unaffected.

But the Cairo streets were less crowded in the afternoons and people seemed to drag themselves around a bit. You would slow down too if you could not eat or drink from dawn to dusk and continued that practice for 30 straight days, in the pitiless Egyptian summer heat, no less.

Ramadan is the fifth month of the Muslim year, which follows the lunar calendar. According to Islamic belief, Mohamed received his first Koranic revelation on the lailat al-qadr (Night of Power), commonly identified with the 27th of Ramadan. The month was already sacred in pre-Islamic times. The Muslims then appropriated it for their own fasting period.

The word ''Ramadan'' itself means ''scorcher,'' apropos for a month that falls in the summer.

During Ramadan, serious Muslims must abstain from food, drink, sexual intercourse and smoking from 3 a.m., when they have their first meal of the new day (and then sleep a few more hours), to 6:45 p.m. At this latter hour, a booming of cannons (in some cities) and blare of Allahu Akhbar (God is Great) on the mosque loadspeakers announces the breaking of the fast.

It all makes for a long day.

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This year, Ramadan lasted from June 11 to July 10. I spent most of it in Berat, a village of about 12,000 people located on the west bank of the Nile across from Luxor.

I arrived in Berat on June 21. On the morning of July 11, I attended the 'Id al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking Fast), the feast following the end of Ramadan. This is one of the two major feasts of the Muslim year, the other being the 'Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). The next morning, I took

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the train back to Cairo.

These three weeks gave me a good look at how Ramadan is practiced in an Upper Egyptian village.

I found a wide variety of responses to the fasting requirements. Some people followed Qur'anic law to the letter. Others observed it partially. For example, they might have a cup of tea during the day, continue smoking cigarettes, or even have a beer at night, while continuing to wait until 7 p.m. before eating.

And some people did not fast at all, for one reason or another.

As far as I could tell, the main ''enforcer'' of Ramadan restrictions in the village was individual conscience fortified by public opinion.

I did hear, from several sources, that policemen stationed at the Nile ferry landing (the ferry is the only connection between Luxor and the west bank villages) had been putting in jail men they found smoking cigarettes during the day.

But I don't think this is a usual activity of the Egyptian constabulary. These were riot police, completely outfitted with shields, helmuts and truncheons, who had been brought across the river to quell fighting between Berat men and men from the neighboring village of Qurna.

Once the fighting was over, they had nothing to do except sit around the ferry landing for several days. The temptation to exercise some authority in the public interest must have been irresistible.

The Prophet himself said, ''Fasting is one half of endurance,'' and ''Endurance is one half of faith.'' I think most villagers who could physically handle the strain did comply with the Ramadan requirements.

In fact, several young men insisted to me that they felt healthier during Ramadan, that it was a way of cleansing the body.

The Qur'an exempts certain classes of people from fasting: the very young (which is why Ramadan is often an important initiation into adulthood), the very old, the sick, pregnant and nursing women, and persons on an extended journey.

This last category, of travelers, is broad enough to drive a truck through. Being both practical and tolerant, the Berat villagers included under this exemption farmers and craftsmen performing hard physical labor.

There seemed to be no stigma attached to these non-fasters. One of my main informants in the village, Hussein, 23, was a faster and serious Muslim. When we visited some farmer or craftsman who was not fasting, he would explain that so and so needed his food to work. Hussein did not indicate the slightest disapproval.

One of his best friends, Badowi, openly smoked cigarettes during the day. Hussein thought it funny that Badowi was unable to suppress his habit. Once, he even suggested to me that I buy his friend a pack of cigarettes, since Badowi was out of money. I did.

One farmer I got to know well was 29 year old Mohamed, who lives in the hamlet of Ezbat Basili (Berat is

made up of 10 distinct hamlets). I spent two mornings with Mohamed helping him to sprinkle <u>kima</u> (chemical fertilizer) on his sugar cane field.

Walking up and down those furrows with a heavy bag of fertilizer under the Egyptian mid-morning sun was definitely energy-draining. I was grateful for the cups of tea a neighbor boy brought from Mohamed's house during the break period.

But it was only after Mohamed's wife Houda had fixed us a hearty lunch of, say, chicken, rice, tomatoes, okra and thick peasant bread that I began to revive.

I am convinced that nobody can do serious field labor, fast, and still survive.

If Mohamed had been in bad odor in the village because of his non-fasting, he would have quickly found out about it. Ezbat Basili's chief religious authority, Sheikh Mahmood, lived right next door.

Sheikh Mahmood, a tall, slender young man in his mid-20s, clean-shaven except for a slight mustache, was not actually a native of Ezbat Basili. His home was a village to the south of Berat. He attended the Al Azhar religious university in Asyut. During his summer vacations, he stayed in a house in Ezbat Basili in order to perform religious functions for that hamlet and another one, Kom Lohlah.

The sheikh* seemed to get along just fine with Mohamed.

A typical morning would find Mohamed and me, and perhaps one or two other villagers, sitting in the shade along a canal bank. By and by, Sheikh Mahmood would appear on his donkey, wearing an immaculate white <u>galabiyah</u> and holding a white umbrella aloft to protect his head from the sun (since there is no rain in Upper Egypt, there is no other use for an umbrella there).

This manner in which he sallied forth from his house in the morning reminded me of a Chinese mandarin setting off to inspect his province.

When he reached us, the Sheikh would dismount, shake hands all around, seat himself on a patch of grass and ask me: ''How are you, Monsieur Kennis?'' Since that was about all the English, and French, that he knew, he would then chat with Mohamed until he remembered the errand that sent him off on the donkey in the first place.

Sheikh Mahmood was a frequent visitor at Mohamed's house. He came by when Mohamed became ill because of a urinary infection.

When the Sheikh held a Koran reading the night Ramadan ended, Mohamed did attend. But he sat off to one side, away from the main gathering of about 15 villagers.

The villagers in Ezbat Basili had perched a

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* The word ''sheikh'' can have a wide variety of meanings in Egypt. It can mean an actual religious official, someone studying religion, like Mahmood, or simply a powerful and respected man. There is a wealthy hotel owner on the west bank named ''Sheikh Ali.''

Sheikh Mahmood (left) with Khalid, a friend

loudspeaker on top one of their houses. Sheikh Mahmood sat on a bench in the courtyard of his house, legs crossed under him. A microphone, its cord leading out the doorway to the loudspeaker, was attached to a stand in front of him.

The Sheikh rocked gently back and forth on the bench, eyes closed, right hand cupped to his right ear, reciting passages from the Qur'an. As is usual in Egypt, where memorization is a key educational tool, particularly at the very early ages, he recited the verses from memory.

The villagers seated in a semi-circle around him punctuated his sermon with their own utterances: el hamdulillah (Praise be to God), assalam aleiykum (peace with you), and aywa (yes).

The loudspeaker sent Sheikh Mahmood's message vibrating throughout the small hamlet (Ezbat Basili has about 400 Muslims and 300 Christians). Not everyone was being attentive. I could hear a television going in the house to which the loudspeaker was attached.

Later that night, the villagers, particularly the children, went to sleep anticipating the festival the next morning.

The 'Id al Fitr was similar to one of our small county fairs. It provided the villagers with a respite from their every-day-is-like-the-next-one toil in the fields.

I found it odd, though, that such a major public event should be so uncertain in its place on the calendar. The people in Berat did not know, until practically the last moment, whether the festival would be on July 11 or July 12. They kept saying: ''We have to wait for the news from Saudia (Saudi Arabia).''

On the night of July 9, they gathered around their radios and televisions to learn from Cairo what Saudia had discovered about the new moon.

What I'd like to know is: with all the resources of modern astronomy available to them, why can't the ecclesiastical authorities in Mecca let the Dar al-Islam

Village women do most of the tomb visiting

(World of Islam) know a little sooner when they are going to have one of their major celebrations? Does anybody there have a farmer's almanac?

The present system is obviously a throwback to medieval times when the tradition was that a ''reliable witness'' was to report the sighting of the new moon. I have read 19th century accounts where people stood on their city ramparts and rooftops waiting for a glimpse of the moon. If they saw it, there was a feast the next day. If not, another day of fasting.

At least nowdays they have an extra day of warning.

The <u>'Id al-Fitr</u> is divided into two rather distinct parts. There is the visit to the ancestral tombs, from about 6 to 7:30 a.m., and then the ''county fair'' part from 7:30 to 10 a.m.

The tomb visiting may or may not be of Pharaonic orgin and unique to Egypt (see Appendix).

Both events take place at the village cemetery in El Kom hamlet, the administrative centre of Berat. The fair is held on a field next to the tombs.

The day began about 5 a.m. when the loudspeakers in all the village hamlets came to life with the <u>Allahu Akhbar</u> invocation. Dawn comes very early in Upper Egypt. At this hour, there is substantial indirect sunlight.

By 5:30, the village paths and roads were crowded with men, women and children, some on donkeys, some in cars, the majority on foot, on their way to El Kom.

The women were swathed in black, as usual, but the young girls were wearing bright, clean dresses. Pink and green were some popular colors. The boys, usually the grubbiest of Berat's inhabitants, were wearing clean <u>galabiyahs</u>, usually white or light blue.

It is a tradition of the <u>'Id al-Fitr</u>, practiced in all Muslim countries, to wear at least one new item of clothing on this day. Most of the villagers I saw were

Village men dancing at the festival

clearly in their Sunday best.

As the man in the family with the car, my taxi driver friend Ali took his wife, mother, sister and brother's wife to the family tomb around 7. Although other men also escorted their women to El Kom, tomb visiting seems to be a predominantly female obligation.

At the tomb, they waited for one of the Qur'an readers. These men, usually sheikhs from the village mosques, stopped by the various tombs to read verses over them. After one had performed this action, the family paid him with oranges, grapes and pastry bread they had brought for the occasion. Ali said some families give a little money too.

By 7:30, Ali had taken the women back home. Many women stayed on for the fair, but others returned home at this time. Ali said the women did not like to be caught out in the heat. Early morning during an Upper Egyptian summer is marvelously cool and fresh. But once the direct sunlight appears over the eastern mountains, around 7:30, the temperature begins to climb fast. By midday it can be 105 degrees Fahrenheit or more.

Ali's next stop was to pick me up. His brown Peugeot station wagon somehow squeezed past the dense crowds of people in the narrow village lanes and we arrived at the cemetery around 7:45.

I don't know how many villagers were present that morning, but I would guess several thousand.

Some of the ''sophisticated'' young men I knew, the ones who spoke some English and worked with tourists, had disdained to go to the festival. They said there was nothing to it, they hadn't been for years, and it was just something for children.

Children were indeed there en masse. But there were many young men too. And more young village women, all looking bright and pretty that morning, turned up than I had expected. It was probably one of their few opportunities to participate in a public event.

Mahmood (left) operating his coin toss game

What was there to do, once you had completed the visit to the ancestral tomb?

You could watch the mock sword fight, two men circling each other while swinging scimitars. This was done in a slow motion, ritualized kind of ballet accompanied by flute, tamborine and bongo music.

Another attraction was the men who lined up in two parallel rows and performed a dance, also to music, by swaying their heads and bodies back and forth while chanting rhythmically and following each other around an oval pattern.

If you smoked cigarettes, you could try your luck pitching piasters for some.

Mahmood, a man whose normal occupation was making mud bricks, had built himself a little booth consisting of poles arranged to form an enclosed square. In the center of the square, on a small table, he had placed packs of Cleopatra cigarettes arranged in three circles. If you could successfully toss your five piaster coin into one of the circles, you won yourself a 35 piasters pack of cigarettes.

Mahmood was doing well. I stood at his booth for about 15 minutes and did not see one person win a pack of cigarettes. When somebody missed, Mahmood scooped up the coin from the ground like a predator bird swooping down on its prey. Easy pickings.

If you had a sweet tooth, there were vendors selling cookies, pastries, candy, soft drinks, and heavily sugared Egyptian hot tea. If you wanted other kinds of snacks, there were salted peanuts and cucumbers for sale.

And to keep the children enthralled, there were piles of plastic geegaws for sale: pistols and popguns, dolls, miniature lions that moved by remote control devices, toy trucks and cars, and so on.

The atmosphere was distinctly commercial rather than religious, like Christmas at an American shopping mall.

Ali didn't seem to approve of this.

The festival: a commercial rather than religious atmosphere

I had asked him if the 'Id al-Fitr had changed at all since he was a boy.

''Before was better,'' he said. ''Before, make parties, make something special, like religion party. Everything too expensive now.''

The festival ended around 10. The villagers spent the rest of the afternoon visiting relatives and friends, a practice that would continue for the next two days.

Some bad modern habits are creeping into this visiting custom.

When I was at Ali's house eating lunch with him, some friends of his dropped by. After the initial introductions and pleasantries, we watched television.

The same thing happened at his brother's house: very brief conversation, then all eyes are fixed to the magic screen to watch an Egyptian musical variety show.

There was an Egyptian disco group on. They were terrible. There was also an Egyptian rock group that was dynamite.

It's becoming a global village for sure.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Appendix

At Sheikh Mahmood's Qur'an recitation the night before the _'Id al-Fitr_, I met a young Berat native named Hassan. The villagers referred to him as ''Doctor Hassan'' because he was working on his doctorate in Egyptology in Montpelier, France. He was then home for the holidays.

Hassan told me that Egypt is the only country in the Muslim world where people visit the tombs of their ancestors the morning after Ramadan. He said the practice was a relic of Pharaonic times.

After doing some research in the American University in Cairo library, I was able to confirm only partially Hassan's statement.

As far as the ancient Egyptians are concerned, they did have funerary cults, conducted by special priests, which looked after the needs of the entombed dead. But I found no mention of family visits to the tombs.

Piecing together comments by two Egyptologists, C.J. Bleeker and Adolph Erman, I found that the ancient Egyptians had various festivals throughout the year, to commemorate a certain position of the sun, phase of the moon or particular diety. At some of these festivals, special honor was accorded the dead

This honoring of the dead, involving offerings and incense burnings by the cult priests, was known as the ''festival of the dead.'' But unlike other ''festivals,'' it did not have a regular date on the calendar.

Returning to modern times, I found an ambiguous article on Ramadan by one Ch. E. von Grunebaum. This man said that both the _'Id al-Fitr_ and the _'Id al-Adha_ are connected with something he called the ''festival of the dead'' (anything to do with the ancient one?). His prose is unclear, but the implication is that this festival, involving family tomb visits and Qur'anic recitations over the tombs by professional readers -- as I saw in Berat -- takes place over the entire Muslim world.

The trouble is that the example of this given by von Grunebaum comes from Egypt. He quotes a 19th century traveler, an E.W. Lane.

Lane's account of a festival at a Cairo cemetery reminds me of the ''county fair'' in El Kom: '' ... many swings and whirligigs are erected, and several large tents; in some of which, dancers, reciters (of popular romances), and other performers, amuse a dense crowd of spectators.''

But do families in other Muslim countries visit the tombs after Ramadan, as they do in Egypt?

If anyone can answer this question, I would appreciate receiving their comments care of the Institute of Current World Affairs.

Received in Hanover 8/8/83