Minority Religious Rituals in the Post Colonial World: Ramadan in France

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Both religion and rituals have received attention from consumer researchers, yet rarely are either studied from a diasporic perspective. Our present study focuses on the observance of Ramadan in France among North African emigres. These Muslims, collectively termed Maghrebis, have dwelled for between one and three generations in France. Their lives in this new country have not always been easy, as prejudice exists on the part of the French government and citizenry. Using depth interviews, we explore how they transfer their religious rituals during Ramdan to this new cultural setting.

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Minority Religious Rituals in the Post-Colonial World: The Case of Ramadan in France
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ABSTRACT

Minority ethnic groups have been extensively studied in the North American context (see e.g., Cui 2001 for a review). Similarly, rituals have been the focus of intensive investigation by consumer researchers, usually within the confines of North America (see e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry 1989; Rook 1986). Yet, as has been well-documented in the past decade, the North American template is not always appropriate for comprehending ethnicity or ritual in other countries or cultures (Erdem and Schmidt 2008). In the present study we investigate a particular minority ethnic group—Muslims from North Africa now living in France. Our focus is upon the ritual manifestations of Islamic religious practices during the holy month of Ramadan in this diasporic setting. Findings suggest that Ramadan in France is focused upon the seeking of self-purification, the reinvigorating of familial and Muslim community bonds, and the activation of a sense of charity and concern for others.

Islamic consumer behavior has recently received attention from a small set of researchers (see e.g., Ger and Sandikci 2001; 2003; 2009; Ustuner and Holt 2007)) who have contributed valuable knowledge to our understanding of this global religious affiliation. Though Islam is the largest of the world’s religions and has adherents on every continent, it has been given markedly less study by Western academics than have Christianity and Judaism. Further, the few studies conducted on Islamic consumer behavior have almost always been conducted in settings in which Islam is the majority religious tradition, for example, Turkey and Tunisia (Ger and Sandikci 2001; 2003; Touzani and Hirschman 2008; Ustuner and Holt 2007). However, there are now significant diasporic Muslim communities in several predominantly Christian countries—for example, Britain, Canada, the United States, and France (Cesari 2002; Sabdikci and Ger 2009; Haddad and Esposito 1998; Roded 2008).

The French context is especially interesting, because many of the Muslim residents of modern-day France are the direct product of French colonial expansion into Africa during the 1800s and 1900s (Cesari 2002; Beji-Becheur, Ozzaglar-Toulouse, Zouaghi 2007). During the colonial period, a substantial portion of North Africa, from Morocco to Tunisia, was brought under French military and cultural control. The French withdrew from Morocco in 1956, from Algeria in 1962, and from Tunisia in 1956. However, as a legacy of the colonial period, citizens of these former colonies may legally immigrate to France. This region of North Africa, termed the Maghreb, has sent 4,000,000 persons to live in France since the 1960s. There are now Muslim émigrés in France from the first, second and even third generations of this in-migration. Approximately half are native born in France and hence hold full-citizenship (Cesari 2002)

In general, these Franco-Maghrebs have not been well received by the French government or French citizenry (Cesari 2002; Gross, McMurray, and Swedenborg 2002). Most of the Islamic population is housed in large high-rise apartment buildings and segregated from the rest of French society (Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002). Currently some of these communities have youth unemployment rates of 70% (Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002). Franco-Maghrebs are regarded by many French as racially, as well as religiously, distinctive and viewed with many of the same prejudices that Americans of African descent experience in the United States (Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002). Upon occasion, this has resulted in social protest on the part of the Franco-Maghrebi community, with riots occurring in 1990 and again in 2005 (Cesari 2002; Beji-Becheur et al. 2007). This social unrest has resulted in acts of ethnic hostility by some in the surrounding French society; for example, during Fall 2008, several French mosques were desecrated with swastikas.

Prior research has indicated that Islamic religious rituals may play varied roles in French-Maghrebi efforts to negotiate their cultural identities as a large, but stigmatized and economically disadvantaged, ethnic population (Beji Becheur et al. 2007; Gross et al. 2002). In the present study we focus on the role which consumption rituals during the most important religious festival in the Islamic calendar—the month of Ramadan—play in Franco-Maghrebi attempts to structure a place for themselves in a predominately Christian, European and affluent society.

RELIGION AS A CULTURAL STRUCTURE

Religious rituals are an important aspect of almost any culture, even those that consider themselves secularized and scientific (Hirschman 1985; Kozinets 2001; O’Guinn and Belk 1989). Religion can provide belief systems that enable individuals to bond with each other, as well as to create, maintain and reinforce interpersonal links in a given community (Durkheim 1912; Haddad and Esposito 1998; Roded 2008). In order to establish and maintain cohesion, immigrant religious groups often bring with them ritual practices from their country-of-origin (Mehta and Belk 1991; Penaloza 1994; Sekhon and Szmigin 2005). However, once in the host country, such religious traditions may be stigmatized and pointed out as an impediment to the immigrants’ integration and well-being in the hosting country (Penaloza 1994; Roded 2008; Sekhon and Szmigin 2005; Gross et al. 2002). For example, in France the speaking of Arabic, wearing of headscarves (hijab) by women, and ritual slaughtering of meat animals (e.g., chickens, goats) have created social problems for Muslim Maghrebi residents (Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002). The objective of this paper is to explore the enactment and evolution of this ethnic group’s Ramadan religious rituals and to highlight the syncretic transformations these rituals may undergo at the consumption level.

RITUALS: DEFINITION, CLASSIFICATION AND ROLE IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

From an academic perspective, rituals can be found everyday and everywhere (Rook 1986). “Society is intrinsically ritualistic” (Lardellier 2003, p.16). In many contexts, e.g., birthday parties, funerals, weddings, and retirement, consumers participate in pre-defined ritual scenarios. These scenarios usually involve artifacts, a specified order of performance and several contributing actors (see e.g., Rook 1986). According to Maisonneuve (1995), rituals may serve three major functions: 1. Mediation with divine, occult or idealized forces and values. This function requires the use of certain symbols or a symbol set that enables a relationship to be made or maintained with the divine. An example would be the case of Muslims’ ritual slaughter in which the meat animal is slain in a specified and painless manner, that is, following halal practice.

Communication and Regulation. Rituals may act to create and consolidate social links and enforce social norms among community members. Typically, this type of ritual requires social visits, meetings, and gatherings that assert the group’s common values; they often promote a “consciousness of kind.” For instance, certain Islamic greetings (e.g., salam alechem), religious feasts, e.g., the Eid, and the care given to certain articles of clothing (e.g., the hijab) perform this function.
Managing Uncertainty and Reassurance Against Threat.
Rituals may allow persons to control emotions such as fear and anxiety, and to feel in control of space and time. This function is illustrated by rituals linked to the individual’s age (such as birthday parties, circumcision at age 13 for Muslim boys), prayers seeking forgiveness of one’s sins and protection from evil, and funeral ceremonies with burial in sanctified ground (see e.g., Caseneuve 1999; Haddad and Esposito 1998). This function is a response to the distress, the indetermination, and the insecurity generated by daily political or social life.

RITUALS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
Acts of consumption are present to some degree in virtually all forms of ritual (Caseneuve 1999; Durkheim 1912). These can consist of buying specific objects to help implement the ritual, for example specific articles of food, clothing or décor (see e.g., Rook 1985). In some cases, for example, gift giving, the consumption act itself is a ritual and has distinguishing features (Sherry and McGrath 1989).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY: RAMADAN IN FRANCE
As already noted, France is the primary Muslim Maghrebi immigrant destination in Europe (Cesari 2002), yet North African Muslims are not the only persons practicing Islam in France. Three primary Islamic minority groups can be found in France: North Africans, Sub-Saharan Africans, and most recently Central Asians (e.g., Turks and Pakistanis). Still, immigrants coming from the Maghreb constitute the largest Muslim population in France, totaling around 6% of the total French population and 40% of all French immigrants. The North African immigrant group is composed of approximately 46% Moroccans, 40% Algerians, and 14% Tunisians.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is a very special period of the year for Muslims all over the world, a period that is supposed to be devoted to spiritual meditation, reverence toward God, and self-discipline (see e.g., Touzani and Hirschman 2008). Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam. It consists of refraining from eating, drinking, smoking and having sexual intercourse from dawn to twilight. But beyond mere abstinence, the essence of Ramadan lies in individuals’ struggling against their own internal desires. Thus, it is aimed toward fulfilling Durkheim’s (1912) sacrificial function of ritual.

Despite this spiritual purpose, however, Ramadan today is often celebrated as a consumption festival, a festival that mobilizes Muslims around the world for an entire month. Thus theologically, although Muslim consumers are supposed to control and master their carnal desires during Ramadan, in practice it is often possible to observe acts of over-consumption, especially of food, clothes, and recreational activities. In predominantly Muslim countries during Ramadan, the commercial and media landscapes are dramatically altered and there is a great effort by marketers to encourage consumption (Sandikci and Omeraki 2007; Touzani and Hirschman 2008). Conversely, in France, Muslims are an ethnic minority group and have to celebrate Ramadan within a surrounding Christian context; they may therefore encounter obstacles because the consumption environment is not adapted to their worshiping practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This research study aims to identify and interpret rituals as they are actually practiced during the month of Ramadan by the North-African Muslim community in France. Because so very few prior studies have examined Islamic behavior in a minority setting, an exploratory study such as the present one seems most appropriate (see e.g., Gross et al. 2002; Beji-Becheur 2007). This choice can be justified by the nature of the data we collected, which is interpretive, and also by our desire to examine the largest number of consumer behavior elements occurring during Ramadan. In-depth interviews were carried out to access behaviors, representations, and interpretations of the observances lived by these Maghrebi consumers in France.

The 29 interviews were conducted by the primary researcher (who is of Maghrebi ethnicity and was educated in France) using methodology drawn from Kaufmann’s (2006) comprehensive interview guide. This approach is based on the theoretical stance that individuals are not simply agents responding to external cultural structures, but rather are active producers of the social system in which they reside, and therefore possess important interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge that the researcher must access (Kaufmann 2006).

Our informants’ demographic characteristics are described in Table 1. The informants were chosen in order to create diversity of their immigration status, e.g., first, second, third generation, and thus provide more varied and rich information (Pires et al. 2003). In order to identify the central meanings of Ramadan for these informants, the interview transcripts were read multiple times and key ideas were identified. Informants’ testimonies were then translated from Arabic or French into English for use in the present paper. When the words or expressions have no equivalent in English or when they have connotations not covered appropriately by an English word or phrase, the original Arabic or French expressions are maintained and approximate translations are inserted between brackets.

FINDINGS
Consistent with prior findings in Muslim-dominant countries (see e.g., Ger and Sandicci 2007; Touzani and Hirschman 2008), our interviewees stated that their lifestyle was significantly altered during Ramadan and most (but not all, especially the younger informants, adopted behaviors more in conformity with the senior members of their family, as well as those of the French Muslim community as a whole, during this time period. Most of our informants reported that they suppressed their individuality during Ramadan and attempted to more closely bind their behavior to the norms of Islamic law and custom. (Again, there were generational differences noted, with younger Maghrebs being somewhat less inclined to observe Ramadan strictly).

In keeping with the findings of other studies (e.g., Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002), consumption patterns during this religious period seemed to be characterized by a stronger perceived ethnicity (Znudz et Arce 1992). For example, the personal pronoun “I” was often replaced by “on” (indefinite French subject pronoun) or “we,” which are more general references and there was also increased usage of verbal expressions such as “the people,” “the community” or “the Muslims of France.” This change in expressive language underlines the communal dimension of Ramadan and its centrality to informants’ behaviors and attitudes. The presence of rituals was clearly mentioned by the interviewees, whether directly by the use of the words “rite” or “ritual,” or indirectly through statements describing them:

Ramadan is a major event for us, and all the Muslims [of France] celebrate together, whether they are French [born] or foreigners [i.e., immigrants], whether they are practicing [Muslims] or not. It is a magical month during which Muslims from the whole world find themselves united by similar behaviors and common traditions.
Below we discuss three distinct kinds of rituals identified in the interview set: the practice of fasting, the social rituals involving individuals’ family and social surroundings, and finally, food preparation and dining rituals specific to the month of Ramadan.

Self-denial as a Ritual

During the entire month of Ramadan, observant individuals are obliged to refrain from drinking, eating, and smoking “from dawn to sunset.” Contrasting with these restricted hours, the arrival of night is welcomed with the breaking of all interdicts and henceforward acquires a festive dimension. As such, all the distinctive attributes of a self-denial ritual can be found in this activity of Ramadan, i.e., the presence of forbidden practices in conjunction with religious beliefs based on the segregation of the sacred and the profane, the presence of strong theological symbols (the sun and the moon) and the juxtaposition of hunger and satiation. The self-denial ritual is believed conducive to increasing one’s faith and bringing participants closer to God and Islam.

Ramadan is a month of spirituality and the regaining of religion. Whether we are in France or elsewhere, everybody listens to more Koran and has the emotion of being more in contact with God. It is also a month of reflection and meditation, and, given the obligations and the duties it involves, we have to confront all our human desires and all the temptations… It is a month of community fervor and solidarity, but also a month of personal self-control.

Additionally, the fasting ritual is intended to serve two main objectives: on one hand, it allows individuals to become self-disciplined and practice self-control; on the other, it helps them to mimic and empathize with poverty-stricken people by living an experience similar to theirs.

Fasting as a purification ritual. This theme emerged consistently among our informants: fasting helps one attain a state of physical purity. The interviewees declared having a stronger feeling of purity, because of the removal of “junk” food, smoking, alcohol, make-up and perfume from their lives. These marketplace products were viewed as contributing to profane feelings and a sense of self-corruption.

It is a month during which I feel healthier and purer. First, fasting helps me move away from all the junk food I am used to gulping down. And beyond this physical purification, the month of Ramadan also liberates me from the burden of my sins.

This idea echoes the ascetic ideal in which all consumption linked to the body is seen as impure, and individuals are believed to be in continuous need of restoring the body’s original purity to achieve spiritual elevation (Jacobsen 1996). Fasting during Ramadan seems to be a unique, annual opportunity to reach this objective; by cleansing one’s body, ones cleanses the soul. As researchers have noted, the house is the “body” of the family, and so efforts are made to purify it, as well.

To welcome Ramadan, all the family launches into a big operation of hygiene and cleanliness. We do a spring cleaning, and then we redecorate the entire house. Every other year, we change the wallpaper. We pull out from the cupboard the most beautiful carpets that we brought from the Bled (country-of-origin).

Additional research could focus on whether the use of ancestral products helps these immigrant consumers achieve a higher state of ritual purity; are the temptations of the marketplace in their new country seen as temptations to turn them away from their faith (e.g., Haddad and Esposito 1998; Mehta and Belk 1991). Several allusions also were made to the fact that one’s behaviors should be re-directed toward honesty, solidarity, generosity, morality and coming closer to God. It is also possible to guess, through the interviewees’ words, that there is also a parallel between the inside/outside dichotomy and the pure/impure one. When returning home each day, all the domestic ritualistic practices seem to converge to liberate individuals from the impurity of the external, profane environment.

Beyond the difficulties related to the observance of worshiping practices, a strong feeling of nostalgia also emerges from the informants’ testimonies:

As French citizens, we are not as lucky as people living in the Arab countries…. My boss lets me have some time to break my fast and to eat something rapidly, and he lets me take a day off to celebrate the end of the month of Ramadan. However, several of my friends do not even have this chance and have to hide in order to nibble something. You know, it’s not always easy!

In the districts in which you find a majority of North Africans or in the mosques, the atmosphere is warm and convivial; once outside, however, you find yourself alone in the streets of Paris, and you can’t but experience isolation. In spite of all the efforts we vainly make, Ramadan cannot have the same taste as in our home-countries.

In order to overcome this difficulty in fulfilling the rituals and achieving the desired frame of mind, the majority of informants asserted that they strive harder than ever to create or recreate Ramadan’s atmosphere at home, through the foods eaten, the TV programs watched, and the decoration of the house.

Ramadan is undoubtedly the period of the year during which we are most connected to our country-of-origin, even if we have never left France. Our daily behaviors are really different. While on the surface nothing seems to be different during the day, by night everything changes: the tv programs we watch, the meals we prepare, the clothes we wear, the friends we see, and the places we go…

This seems to suggest the Maghrebis might see the daylight hours, spent outside the home and community, as “belonging to France,” whereas the evening hours, spent in the home with family, “belong to Islam.” This may also connect to deeper tensions for these diasporic Muslims; they must hide their “true” identities from the surrounding culture; conversely, the French, themselves, may view this shift in night time behavior as a suspicious example of Muslim subterfuge.

Social Rituals

The Ramadan period seems to be an occasion for enhancing social bonds of all kinds. Gatherings with family, friends or colleagues are characterized by conviviality, humor, a strong sense of
community, an aversion to formal authority and a festive atmosphere that gives them the essential attributes of intensification rituals (see e.g., Belk and Costa 1998). We believe that these in-gathering efforts are used to overcome the sense of separation from one’s ethnic origins and subsequent cultural isolation among the French Maghrébís. Examples are described below.

Gatherings with family and friends. In the evening, religious observance is enacted by family gathering and sharing. It becomes essential that everyone meets with each other, shows solidarity, and that all family members, and also friends, have the opportunity to keep close and strengthen the emotions existing between them. Evening relaxation and support is all the more important, because the days are difficult. The informants emphasized the fact that during Ramadan, interpersonal connections inside the community are considered extremely important and reinforced.

Even if it is not always easy to do because we are dispersed in the four corners of Paris, we try to see each other as often as possible. Actually, there’s an ascending movement: the family links strengthen more and more with the passage of Ramadan, with upbeats during week-ends, and the peak is the Eid day where all the family members gather in my elder brother’s house.

Ramadan gatherings can be simple opportunities for reunions or gatherings where verbal exchanges are numerous and discussions are animated (Chouikha 1994). They also have a festive character:

Ramadan is a month of cheerful atmosphere and conviviality. As soon as night falls, several families gather around a royal dinner, with a sentiment of human warmth we hardly achieve during the rest of the year. Respectful of the tradition, women assemble some time before dinner to cook together, and in the evening, it’s really the feast! It is also the opportunity to see other Moroccan friends, Algerian friends, Tunisians, Egyptians, Middle-easterners, but also West Indians, from the Reunion Madagascar, Mauritius, and West Africa. It is rare, but we sometimes also invite non-Muslim friends to make them discover the atmosphere.

Words such as “magic,” “marvelous,” “extraordinary,” “warmth,” “conviviality,” and “love” are frequently mentioned regarding these family gatherings. These associations bring to mind Durkheim’s (1912) “sociability miracle as a source of the sacred;” interpersonal relations contribute to the creation of an aura of spirituality which further reinforces solidarity. A feeling of community and concern for others emerges in such circumstances (Durkheim 1912).

Notable also in the informant’s statement is reference to the gender roles which seem to become more strictly observed during Ramadan. Several social science authors, see for example the edited volumes by Haddad and Esposito (1998) and Roded (2008), have conducted research on the shifting gender roles within Muslim communities, both in Muslim dominant cultures, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and diasporic communities such as the one studied in the present research. A much deeper analysis would be required to discern the complex changes going on within the French Maghrébi community than we are able to accomplish with our set of interviews, and it is our hope that others will pursue this topic.

Oblative Rituals. The whole month of Ramadan in France is marked with a feeling of pronounced generosity (tsadaka). For instance, a sense of hospitality, charity toward people in need and the desire to help others seem to become essential. This generosity reaches its peak at the approach of the Eid-day (the celebration of the end of Ramadan). During this period, gift rituals become numerous and take several different forms. For example, one of the key baking rituals performed by the women of the household is preparing sweet cakes which metaphorically represent the arrival of the Eid. Among the Maghrebi women, this has become an opportunity for both sharing and competing.

In our [Maghrébi] quarter, it became a tradition to offer dishes and pastries [to the neighbors]. Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian specialties being different, we began the habit of making sure everybody tasted the various specialties, each of us claiming that hers are better than the others.

Those who do not know how to prepare these cakes, as well as those who do not have the time, reported being willing to spend a lot of money in order to avoid breaking the tradition by buying them at Maghrébi bakeries. Notably, pastries and cakes from traditional French bakeries were not substituted, as this would have been viewed as inconsistent with the religious solidarity of the occasion.

We found that children actually benefit the most from the Sadaka rituals. The Eid-al-fitr (the original religious designation) is now being called “Eid-Essaghir” which means “the little feast,” in opposition not only to the big feast of the ritual sheep sacrifice, but also in reference to children, i.e., “sighar,” by all the respondents. Everybody tries to pamper children during this time: “We offer them beautiful clothes, beautiful toys and we take them to [French] Disney World … We indulge all their whims.”

In this aspect of Ramadan in France, the celebrants are perhaps better equipped to provide festive events outside the home for their children than Muslims living in the Maghréb, because they are in a country (France) that is oriented toward tourism and modern materialism, though some may see this as leading to an increasingly “inauthentic” Ramadan (see, for example, Sandikci and Ger 2002).

Food Preparation and Dining Rituals

Meals. During Ramadan consumption usually must be very conformist in order to become authentically ritualized. The women of the house (again, following traditional gender roles) prepare exceptional meals made of ingredients typically Arabic: “Noor dates, brooks (traditional fritter ingredient), elben (curdled milk), chorba (traditional pasta) and spices brought from the country [of origin].” As the month goes by expectations of elaborate meal preparation and deliciousness intensify. Ingredients are selected with care and should imperatively be “Hallal.” The preparation must start early and the table be presented with care.

We respect the horary distributed in the mosque or in the Halal butchers. And the fact that we break the fast at exactly the same time with thousands of other people is really a magical act that strengthens our feeling of belonging to the French Muslim community.

Thus, the ritual of dining together, of breaking the fast in the company of family, possesses a communal and very symbolic dimension in which fraternity and solidarity are crucial principles. The consumption act, itself, becomes a privileged way of generating a feeling of collectivity (Holt 1995). It consists of consuming products specific to that religious event and to avoid buying products that are not in conformity with the tradition. Sacrifice and regulation gives potency to the ritual.

Ironically, however, the required emphasis on self-denial creates a corresponding desire to break out of the boundaries. Ramadan is
characterized by the omnipresence of food in peoples’ consciousness. During the day, most of the conversations are directly or indirectly linked to meals. The importance given to food reaches its peak at fast breaking: then, the table is full and constitutes a real festival for the senses:

The most delicious dishes are presented: harira, tagines, poultries and meat served with dried fruits, salads, and traditional pastries.

Just before breaking fast, magical smells bewitch us, so different from the daily ones, the ones from McDonald’s and Company.

The presentation of the table becomes an artistic creation, capable of reviving all the senses. How to resist?

The intensity of this sensory stimulation resonates with the strong emotional feeling of community, the depth of spiritual commitment, and meets at the same time hedonic, obblative, and self-expressive needs. It also resonates with the excessiveness exhibited by several acts during Ramadan. This excessiveness can, on the affective level, be positive or negative. But it is much more the way people live the rituals that determines whether the outcome is positive or negative. Some people use the enhanced reality to create spiritual elevation and joyful times for themselves and for others. Others abuse themselves and feel guilty, envious, and frustrated. Each consumer lives these excesses in his/her own way:

Just recently [French] supermarkets have started taking Ramadan into account. We can now find ingredients to prepare “boreks,” “chorba,” etc. It is also possible to buy Halal raviolis, “Hachis Parmentier” (stew in which the meat is covered with mashed potatoes), quenelles, and even Halal sauerkraut and sausages. As a consequence, and in order to satisfy everyone’s tastes, we sometimes buy and eat these items. French fries and pizzas are also sometimes eaten, because children can’t imagine a whole month without them.

These behaviors are similar to those already highlighted by several researchers dealing with the acculturation and consumption behaviors of ethnic minorities (e.g., Gronhaug et al. 2008; Penaloza 1994). They are also another example of the cultural alternation or culture swapping (Oswald 1999) lived by immigrants (Visconti 2008). They illustrate the syncretic flexibility that characterizes rituals and gives them a stronger role in modern culture, without forcing adherents to abandon their connection to tradition (Segalen 1998).

Disguising rituals. Several of our interviewees revealed that they did not wish to proclaim publicly that they were Muslims observing Ramadan. For some of them, this is a matter of privacy and intimacy, in which outsiders should not interfere. However, other Maghrebis do not want to become the object of curiosity and do not wish to draw attention to themselves or undergo questions about their religion, or have to justify their behaviors. When tackling these questions during the interviews, the testimonies were characterized by several hesitations and pauses revealing the embarrassment experienced. Several reported that they resorted to deceptive strategies:

When it’s time to break the fast, I isolate myself in a corner, out of sight. Then I drink rapidly a mouthful of water and I eat what I have at hand, then, as if nothing happened, I go back to work.

This year, in order to vanish without undergoing questioning, I told my colleagues that my husband was sick and that I had to go and see him at lunch time. During this time, I would go shopping in the mall or read a book in a quiet place.

However, deception could also take another form in which Maghrebis decide not to fast and do not wish their family, neighbors, and the Muslim community to be aware of their nonobservance of Ramadan tradition. Beyond the informants who asserted they did not have sufficient religious faith to observe Ramadan, there were also young children, the elderly, sick people, and pregnant or breast-feeding women who are permitted by tradition to not fast. However, despite the clarity of the rules on this point, some individuals belonging to these special groups revealed that they felt shame or guilt.

It is always a problem to eat or drink something during Ramadan. First, we have to move away from our [ethnic] quarter, find a restaurant that is hidden and where there aren’t other Muslims, and be sure that no one sees you when you go in. And if you eat or smoke inside the house, you have to make sure that the smells do not reach the neighbors’ noses. It is the only way to avoid disagreeable comments and disapproving looks.

During this month, great efforts are made to create no external signs suggesting that someone is not fasting or that he/she is disrespectful of the Ramadan ritual requirements. As a consequence, cosmetics and perfumes are temporarily put aside and conspicuous products are avoided; apparel is also more modest.

Consumption Frames of Reference
Maghrebi Muslims living in France are confronted with a more difficult cultural structure for observing their religion than those living in a Muslim country. Yet, concurrently, the frames of reference used to describe their consumption practices and experiences are more rich and varied than those typical in a Muslim-dominant country, due to greater uniformity in the latter (see e.g., Touzani and Hirschman 2008). For example, our participants made comparisons between Christmas in France and Ramadan observance in Muslim countries, and also Ramadan in the “good old days,” that is earlier time periods in their ancestral homelands.

When a parallel is drawn with Christmas, it was usually in terms of buying toys and games for children to celebrate the end of Ramadan (see Ger and Omeraki 2007). The Christmas analogy was also cited when some other activities were discussed: for example, the decoration of the house, family dinners and the festive character of the month. One informant even talked about the “Ramadan spirit.” Thus we see that a new frame of reference can be invoked by ethnic immigrants.

The discussion of ancestral Ramadan celebrations in the Maghreb usually is accompanied by a certain feeling of nostalgia. Families, and also single persons, make elaborate efforts to recreate an atmosphere close to the one lived (or imagined) in the country-of-origin: the ambiance inside the house, the television programs, the foods prepared—all are aimed toward recreating the past. And in spite of the present obstacles, all the informants seemed to place a crucial importance on Ramadan observance. For the most elderly informants, however, the present celebration was but a mere “ghost” when compared with “yesterday’s Ramadan.” For them, even if today it is possible to buy in France the items needed to fulfill their earlier Ramadan practices, the spirit is not the same. They particularly deplore their family’s dispersal, the younger generation’s breaking away from rituals and traditions, as well as the rapidity of modern culture which makes it harder to live Ramadan serenely.
CONCLUSION

The month of Ramadan primarily is characterized by the increased strength of rituals marking a return to Islamic religious values, as well as the conscious desire to live an exceptional life during this period, a period “set apart” from the rest of the year. French retailers hoping to attract the Maghrebi community during this time period could better meet this goal by creating an appropriate sensorial atmosphere in their stores evoking Ramadan in the Maghreb. This might be accomplished by thematizing stores through music selection and appropriate decoration (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and would help contribute to the Maghrebi’s feeling of belonging within French society.

Ramadan is characterized by the upheaval of French Maghrebi’s daily life—an upheaval largely not supported by the surrounding French commercial and social system. In spite of the obstacles, several rituals characterize this period of the year for North African Muslims in France. Religious rituals are certainly the most marked and the most anchored in the informants’ Muslim subculture. They often are accompanied by acts of faith, efforts of self-purification at the physical and spiritual level, and a revision of consumption habits at the daily-life level. Social interactions also have a ritual dimension during this month: relationships with family and friends acquire an increased importance, transforming them from the familiar into the sacred. Oblative rituals also are numerous during Ramadan, made corporeal by invitations to visit, donations to charity, and multiple gifts to family and friend. Meals and dining habits are other aspects of Islamic ritual that the Ramadan period revives from year to year, as if by magic.

The main limitation of this present research study is due to the presence of taboos, attitudes and behaviors related to religion being considered by several informants as personal and confidential. In particular, we found that informants were very reluctant to speak about discrimination against them within the surrounding culture and the pressures they felt to disguise or hide their Islamic religious observances.

Despite this, however, we believe that this study opens the way to future research endeavors. The findings suggest differences between young and older individuals in the way they engage in their ritual practices. This can lead to the crucial exploration of a possible generational shift which has been noted in other studies of Muslim immigrants (e.g., Beji-Becheur et al. 2007; Cesari 2002; Gross et al. 2002). In particular, the younger generation seems to be much more integrated with external Christian French society and able to navigate comfortably within the sacred/profane dichotomy.

This contrasts with the attitudes and behaviors of newer immigrants and first-generation informants who spoke nostalgically about “yesterday’s Ramadan.” The differences between informants born in the Maghreb and those born in France is, itself, an interesting research area, the latter being torn between the values transmitted by their parents and the ones of the society in which they have always lived (Erden and Schmidt 2008; Gross et al. 2002). Ritual variations characterizing these two French Muslim consumer segments as they seek to enact both their ethnic identity and their religion can provide a fertile ground for future inquiries.

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European Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 9) / 121


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