Cultural Syncretism and Ramadan Observance: Consumer Research Visits Islam

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13141/volumes/v35/NA-35

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ABSTRACT

With the exception of work done by Ger, Sandikci and their collaborators, consumer behavior within Islamic cultures has been little investigated. The present study focuses on the Muslim holy month of fasting, Ramadan, as observed in contemporary Tunisia. We propose that current ritual practices and consumer understandings of this Islamic tradition represent a syncretic blending of Western and Oriental values amidst culturally-constructed mélange of kinship, capitalism, materialism, ascetism and hedonism (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989).

PRIOR RESEARCH ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

The present study builds upon research conducted by Ger, Sandikci and their colleagues from 2000-2005. These consumer researchers are largely responsible for introducing consumer research to issues and realities in Islamic societies. In the paper (“Flying Carpets”, 2000), Ger and Csaba examined how traditional artifact production processes in Turkey came to be associated with the ‘authentic’ and ‘exotic’. Others of the Orient among Western consumers, resulting in sometimes staged production processes meant for tourist consumption. They discussed, as well, the reclaiming of authenticity by local Turkish carpet producers by recasting their work as personal aesthetic expression or as a revitalization of an ancient indigenous craft, practiced largely by women.

Another study (Ustuner, Ger, Holt 2000) examined the re-emergence of the traditional Islamic henna-night ceremony for an engaged woman as a new urban ritual, again within a Turkish context. In that study, discussion focused upon the transformation of a religious, patriarchal-empowering practice into a secular women-empowering activity that had been relocated from past to present and from rural to urban. As before, these researchers were careful to situate their interpretation within the politico-cultural transformation of Turkey from the Islamic Ottoman Empire to a modern-day secular republic. The repositioning of the henna-night event from the fiancée’s home to a commercial supper club was one semiotic device used to achieve this transformation of meaning.

Sandikci and Ger (2001) addressed the issue of Islamic consumption styles in Turkey by investigating the apparel worn by observant women. In particular, female headcoverings were read as an example of fusion “at the intersection of the local and the global (p.1 online version)” and of intra-gender conflict over the roles of women in contemporary Islamic society. Islamic objects could be made into marketplace offerings—creating an interpenetration of the sacred and the secular (Hirschman 1988; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1986).

In a later study (Sandikci and Ger 2002), they put forward a more comprehensive theoretical statement stressing the subtleties and syncretism typical of modernizing Islamic societies. Noting that culture change is neither universal nor unidirectional, they argued for the recognition of modern consumer behaviors that are “never singular, but always relational and contextual…[and which] cross-fertilize each other (p. 9 online version)”. In the present study, these threads of thought will be used to weave an interpretation of the Islamic ritual of Ramadan in contemporary Tunisia.

RITUAL FOCUS OF STUDY: RAMADAN

Ramadan, the fourth pillar of Islam, is observed during the ninth month of the Muslim (Hijri) calendar and dates from 638 CE (Esposito 1999). Ramadan commemorates the revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammed. It is characterized by prayers, fasting, charity and self-accountability. All adult Muslims, who are not ill or infirm, are expected to observe fasting (Arabic: ‘sawm’) during daylight hours for the entire lunar month (Lapidus 1996). To properly observe Ramadan, the faithful must abstain from all forms of sensory pleasure between dawn (fajr) and sunset (maghrib); these include the activities of eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse. One is also proscribed from expressing anger, envy, greed, lust and verbal assaults on others, e.g., vicious gossip, sarcasm, insults. The faithful are expected to read and meditate upon the teachings of the Qur’an, and to avoid coming into contact with profane or sacrilegious objects or experiences.

Ramadan is ended by the sighting of the next new moon; the close of Ramadan is celebrated by a period of feasting: eid al-Fitr. During this time, food is given to the poor (zaka al-Fitr), each person bathes and puts on his/her best apparel, communal prayers are offered at daybreak, and the rest of the day is spent feasting and visiting friends and family (Esposito 1999, Lapidus 1996).

Despite these religious traditions, current Ramadan observance is most accurately characterized as a consumption festival, a communal experience that rallies all Moslems for a whole month (see e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Although, theoretically, the individuals are commanded by God and the prophet to curb their desires, conspicuous over-consumption has become a noticeable occurrence in all aspects of daily life, especially in the purchase of foodstuffs, apparel and leisure activities. During this month, the commercial and media landscapes are transformed and directed toward urging individuals towards worldly and profane experiences. Resisting this cultural pressure becomes difficult, household spending rises dramatically, and hedonic desires are felt more strongly than ever. This modern Ramadan paradox, described by some authors as Ramadan Christianization (Armbrust, 2002; Attia, 2001), makes this period so unusual that it has become a key research area for better understanding the importance of ritual syncretism—the fusion of oppositions—in the context of consumer behavior (O’Guinn and Belk 1989).

SETTING OF THE STUDY: TUNIS, TUNISIA

Tunisia is situated on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa; it borders Algeria, Libya and Egypt. Because of its strategic location at the nexus of Mediterranean and Levant shipping lanes, Tunisia’s history and culture have been subjected to many diverse religious, political and economic cross-currents. Tunisia’s written history began in 814 BCE with the founding of Carthage, a city-state with an international trading and military network stretching from the British Isles in the West to Crete and Greece in the East. Greek military and trade interests frequently competed with those of Carthage in the ancient world, leading to repeated wars through 309 BCE. With the rise of the Roman Republic (300 BCE), a series of Punic wars ensued, lasting until 117 CE with the conquest of Tunisia. Its population was sold into slavery by the conquering Romans (Esposito 1999).
Subsequently, the Romans resettled the country, rebuilding Carthage as a Roman colony and establishing several new municipalities. When Rome, itself, fell to the pagan Vandals, Tunisia fell, as well, and later was conquered by the Byzantines of Central Asia. With each new conquest, novel aspects of religious and material culture were introduced.

In 670 CE, a Muslim army entered Tunisia from the Arabian Peninsula, bringing Islam to North Africa and founding the city of Kairouan. By 797 CE, the Muslim Aghlabid Dynasty had emerged, ruling the eastern portion of North Africa from 800–909 CE. The dynasty was cosmopolitan and multi-cultural with positions of influence being held not only by Arabs, but also by Berbers, Persians, Black Africans, Christians and Jews. Trade routes included not only the Mediterranean, but also the Sahara and Sudan (Esposito 1999).

By the 900’s, the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt had expanded to include much of the territory of North Africa, including Tunisia. In 1057, yet another conquest occurred when the Benni Hilali Bedouins sacked Kairouan and took control of Tunisia. Over the course of the Holy Land Crusades (1100-1300) Tunisia again changed hands repeatedly between European Christians and the Almohad Muslims of Morocco. Concurrently, alternative forms of Islamic theology flourished with its borders; among these were the philosophies of the Maliki jurists, the cults of Sufi holy men, and the neo-Platonic philosophies of Averroes. By 1492, Tunisia had been flooded by refugee Moors and Sephardic Jews ousted from the Iberian Peninsula by the Christian Reconquista. And in 1574 the country was incorporated into the expanding Ottoman Turkish Empire (Lapidus 1996).

The Ottomans sent not only Anatolian Janissaries (soldiers) to reside in Tunisia, but also many former Christians from Italy, Spain and Province, France who had converted to Islam. By the 1860’s, Ottoman influence had waned, but bankruptcy forced the country to turn its economic governance over to the French, Italians and the UK. In 1881, France invaded Tunisia and declared it a French protectorate. Europeans were encouraged to immigrate to Tunisia and set up residence there. After a series of violent revolts against French rule, Tunisia achieved independence in 1956. Since that time, it has passed through phases of westernization, socialism, Islamic fundamentalism and militant secularism. Thus, its ancient, medieval and modern historical periods have been marked by diverse religious, cultural and economic influences (Esposito 1999; Lapidus 1996).

In spite of the big number of research studies about religion, culture and consumer rituals, the literature about consumer behavior during the month of Ramadan is very poor. However, this phenomenon touches millions of people all around the world. From an external point of view, Ramadan can be considered as a period of de-consumption due to the fasting practice (Marticotte and Cherif, 2003). The reality is much more complex and rich than it may appear at first, since during this holy month there is a radical transformation of the way of consuming and living. Studying consumption practices during Ramadan can offer a new perspective to analyze the relationship existing between rituals and consumer behavior. This holy month is rich of meaningful consumption acts that can be studied not only from a pragmatic but also a symbolic point of view. Besides, consumer research can bring an original and new insight to understanding Ramadan rituals, because consumption is certainly the archetypal domain in which the fusion of tradition and modernity can be observed and analyzed. In this perspective, the present research study will try to bring an answer to the following two major questions: what are the main ritual practices that manifest themselves during the month of Ramadan? What is the place of cultural syncretism in these ritual practices?

**METHODOLOGY**

The informants were contacted according to qualitative sampling rules—i.e., a small, non-probabilistic sample whose size was not specified a priori (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This exploratory research was carried out among 27 Tunisian adult consumers in a way that provides diversity within the sample at the level of gender, age, and social background criteria. A minimum of 20 years was set, and we made sure that the informants made most of the purchases undertaken by their households. However, the sample was geographically limited to the great Tunis area: thus differences between the rural and the urban environments could not be investigated in this study.

The interviews were extended over the whole Ramadan month of the year 2005 to take into account potential behavior differences between the beginning and the end of the month. Thirteen interviews were conducted before breaking the fast, Sawma, and fourteen after. The data saturation principle was abided by. The existence of a theme saturation was obtained when no significant added input emerged during four additional interviews.

During the interviews, the objective was the generation of comments and opinions about Ramadan and consumption behaviors related to this month. The discussion guide was designed around four major themes: consumption habits during Ramadan, money and expenses, the relationship with the media and purchasing behaviors. A conversational approach was adopted and, to make the respondents feel more comfortable, discourses, hesitations, and redundant developments were not subject to any comment or criticism. Moreover, the interviewees were allowed the choice to relate their experiences in Arabic, in French, or in both languages. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and a half. They were recorded with a digital recorder, and then transcribed for the purpose of making analysis easier.

To identify the main themes on the basis of the qualitative data, each interview transcription was read several times. For the production of this paper, quotations recorded in Arabic or French were translated into English. When the words or expressions had no English equivalent or when they had connotations or references to semantic areas that do not convey the appropriate meaning in English, the Arabic wording was maintained and a rough translation was inserted between brackets.

**FINDINGS**

The impact of Ramadan ritual practices (Rook 1985) on daily behavior was emphasized by all the respondents; they perceived a dramatic shift of their lifestyle during the holy month as they adopted practices and behaviors in conformity with the ones of their families and their society. Among the interviewees, it is worth noticing that “I” is often substituted by “we” and the use of expressions like “the people” or “everybody” is very common. These expressions underline the emergence of a ‘w concept’ (Zouagui and Darpy, 2005) revealing the extent to which collective awareness is present in the attitudes and behavior of the respondents during the fasting month. The observance of Ramadan was also pointed out by the respondents either directly or by the use of words like “rite” or indirectly by statements noting its existence (Rook 1985):

*There is a kind of pattern by which everybody seeks to be shaped: everybody goes shopping at the same time, cooks the*
Fasting as a religious ritual. During the holy month of Ramadan, all individuals observing the fast are expected to refrain from drinking, eating, and smoking “as long as you cannot make a white thread from a black one”, i.e. from sunrise to sunset. At nighttime, however, we witness the allowance of the forbidden, and night acquires a hedonic dimension. This practice reiterates the separation of the sacred and the profane forbidden practices by juxtaposing sensory pleasure against ascetic religious beliefs. It was derived as early as pre-Islamic pagan times through the use of powerful symbols such as the sun and the moon and the separation of bodily pleasures from spiritual observance. This period makes the individual closer to God and religion, since it is suitable for faith renewal and self-examination.

During this holy month, people listen to the Quran, the Holy Book and read it. The Lord is omnipresent in our life. This is noticeable in many aspects. First, people often remember God during this month. Moreover, more prayers are observed; the faithful go for the “Taraouih”, (the Ramadan nightly prayers) performed as a congregation in the mosque. The elderly, holding a “Sibha” (a rosary) in their hands, praise Allah all day long (male, 46, civil servant).

The fasting ritual is intended to achieve two goals: on the one hand, it aims at allowing the individual to maintain self-discipline and exercise self-control; on the other hand, it is to establish a fellowship with the poor who lead a wretched life, so as to make the person fasting feel the same misery. This kind of self-submerging ritual strengthens religious values and contributes to the development of the cultural and social identity of the individual.

It is the month when we feel more to be Arabs and Moslems. We implement this commitment not only through fasting, but also through our daily behavior: our attitude, our dressing, our purchases, and the TV programs we watch. Maybe it is the period of the year when we are least influenced by the West (female, 34, faculty staff).

This aspect of Ramadan then makes more visible the tension between West and East, between capitalism and communalism, between individual identity and group belonging. It also constitutes an echo to some previous findings in the literature according to which during traditional and religious holy days and celebrations, individuals are less open to other cultures and record lower levels of acculturation (d’Astous and Daighfous, 1991; Al Ma’sebh, 2006).

Fasting as a purification ritual. Most of the respondents stated that they felt purer because of not only restricting food consumption, but also by not smoking tobacco, not drinking alcoholic beverages and not using cosmetics or perfumes. This seems to contain elements of self-mortification and self-denial; that is the punishment of the body, in addition to the avoidance of hedonic gratification. This conforms to the widespread idea that all aspects of the body are impure and that individuals need to restore to the body its original purity by removing indulgences and experiencing discomfort (Jacobsen, 1996). Fasting during Ramadan provides a unique opportunity to achieve this goal. That is why many respondents said that they go to the “Hammami” (the Turkish baths) during the days that precede Ramadan, as part of their cleansing regime. A fifty-three-year-old female interviewee declared:

Prior to Ramadan, I do the overall housework; I dispose of the useless stuff we have accumulated during the year, I get ready for welcoming and managing this month (female, 53, housewife).

This speaks of a desire to unburden not only oneself, but also one’s household of polluting, materialistic accretions that have gathered during the year. Beyond this purely physical aspect, purification bears a moral and spiritual dimension. In fact, among the 27 interviewees, 19 expressed the idea that their behavior also ought to be geared to the path of honesty, generosity, and abiding by the rules of righteousness, and that by this behavior a greater proximity to God could be accomplished.

Diurnal Disorder: Day for Night. One’s daily life is thoroughly overturned during Ramadan. The social operating system has to adjust to the new fasting time (that lasts from dawn to twilight). The working hours are therefore reduced to a half-day working period; many businesses close their shops, and major projects are postponed to later dates. At night, which is usually quiet, the cities become busy with a friendly environment which encourages the outings of women and families after breaking their fast.

In this diurnal disorder, beyond simply being the frontier between day and night, the communal moment of breaking the fast also plays the role of a liminal ritual as defined by Durkheim (1912). This moment brings people from one state to another, as it constitutes an invisible chronological threshold, separating the moment when individuals, stressed and tired are doing their duty and the moment when interdictions are revoked. This threshold separates austerities and festivities. Praying, eating dates, and drinking milk appear to be transitional ritual practices helping individuals to move from one stage to another.

There is a role reversal of public as well as private locations both for men and women (Buitelaar, 1993). The coffee shops, the restaurants, the shopping malls, and the supermarkets, which are usually patronized during daytime, are almost deserted for the benefit of home and family gatherings. But during the night, these places will be once again be a gathering place for crowds of people. These changes have repercussions not only on the daily life of individuals, but also on the public places and commercial activity. All life momentum changes; there are no more only two meals; the working time changes as well, since people work only half a day, and the sleeping time is utterly displaced. During this period, the citizens are stressed out, as they are short of time to go about their business. Besides, wherever you go, you are hamstrung by thick crowds: in the market, in the shopping malls, in the streets and transportation (female, 33, civil servant).

The social rituals

The “Ramadanian period” seems to be an auspicious occasion for bolstering all kinds of social links. Gatherings between relatives and friends are characterized by talking around the table, a sense of humor, a deep feeling towards the community, and an aversion for...
formal rules; a festive mood conveys all the fundamental attributes of the depth of the rituals.

**Family and friend evenings.** At nightfall, worshipping is taken over by reunions and family life sharing. People are expected to meet, show a sense of solidarity, and all family members, friends and relatives should be side by side in order to consolidate the relations that tie them. In the evening, sitting around a table and giving each other support and love becomes more important, as the days are so hard. All the respondents stressed the interpersonal relations which become tighter and gain an enhanced importance.

Whether it be the family evenings or the card games played with friends until dawn, it is essential to get together in the evening. It is the magic aspect of Ramadan! Furthermore, it is the best way to forget the stress of a tough day: traffic, moody colleagues or shopkeepers owing to "hchichet romdhane" (a state of want and tiredness due to the fasting) (male, 44, stationer).

The Ramadan gatherings can be occasions for reunions where vigorous chats are more common and the debates are hotter (Chouikha, 1995); similarly, they can bear a feast aspect, where sensory pleasures are heightened.

**It’s a kind of feast celebration within the family, and it is always spontaneous and happy. Everybody is delighted by these reunions. We exchange hugs and kisses; we sing and dance. We feel really deep emotions. I feel very moved when I talk about it. It is also an occasion to recall the celebration of the weddings, the circumsicions, or the summer delights. Then we eat delicious cakes, drink the sweet pine-seed tea, and meet everybody (female, 30, secretary).**

Words like “magic”, “marvelous”, “extraordinary”, “warmth”, “table companionship”, and “love” were associated with these family reunions. These associations remind one of the myth of “the sociability miracle emanating from the holy” identified by Durkheim; the interpersonal ties contribute to the creation of a state of spirituality which further bolsters solidarity. A sense of community and a concern for the welfare of the other emerges in such circumstances (Durkheim, 1912).

This testimony, and similar ones, also emphasizes the existence of a fasting/feasting paradox that materializes itself through the coexistence of practices pointing to very different purposes. On the one hand, fasting is a duty imposed to the whole Muslim community, aiming at disciplining the body through restraint, abstinence and self-control. It serves as “penitence, expiation for transgression, the humbling of the self” (Grimm, 1996). On the other hand, feasting is rather associated with celebration, joy, conspicuous wasting consuming wealth without any pragmatic aim in return, and sometimes transgression, disorder, excess, and cancellation of the authority and the virtue (Maisonneuve, 2002). The permanent alternation of opposites related to this fasting-feasting antinomy appears to be the core of this celebration of consumption, the abstinence making the indulgence richer and more anticipated.

It is also interesting to notice that even here there is an emergence of the recurrent theme of the reversal between public and private spaces. During the rest of the year, home is supposed to be a “center of intimacy”, a place protecting its inhabitants from the impersonal outside, from others’ gaze, and permitting them to lose their inhibitions (Madanipour, 2003). However, during Ramadan, the permanent stream of neighbors, family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances gives home a public function that it usually does not have.

**Oblative rituals.** During the whole month one witnesses an exaggerated generosity. For instance, the sense of hospitality, the concern for helping others seems to gain a greater importance. This generosity reaches its peak as the “Eid” (End-of-Ramadan feast) draws near. During this period, the gift rituals as defined by Solomon (2002) become numerous and assume several forms. The baking of traditional sweet cakes is a main concern of the households:

*We must serve cakes to all our guests for the three-day feast. Some families don’t do it, but when we pay a visit to friends or relatives, we take a plate filled with a wide range of cakes (female, 40, civil servant).*

There is a sense here of sweet foods indicating love and affection; i.e. the sweetness of life and friendship. Those who are unable to bake these gift cakes will be willing to spend extravagantly to purchase the cakes commercially so as not to miss this tradition. This period is also an occasion for expressing best wishes to everybody; not only in a high voice pitched to people we come across, but also by sending greeting cards, whose sale rises sharply during this period or by phone which undergoes line congestion owing to the spreading contagion of this phenomenon and more strikingly in recent years by e-mail or cell phone text messages. It is interesting here to note how new, modern technologies such as the internet and cell phones have actually assisted the maintenance of these ancient sacred rituals. Often technology is cast as the enemy of religion and family, but here it is used to bring people together.

The Eid is also a time when children request gifts from their parents, who wish to indulge them as part of the fast-breaking process:

*Parents purchase the cutest clothes of the year for them and all their whims are satisfied. At first, we parents refuse their demands when they ask for candies or sugary items, but then the children insist so stubbornly, that we have to yield (male, 27, manager).*

It is worth noting that as this gift giving to children goes on, it features new aspects in keeping with new technologies, highlighting once again the syncretism of culture. The statement given by this 41-year-old respondent and father of 2 children well expresses this idea:

*As our parents bought toys for us, we perpetuate this tradition and we buy toys for our kids. But, it’s no longer the same. When we were offered a small toy-gun, or a plastic watch, a spinner or even a ball, we felt very happy. The electric train or the building games were a dream-come-true. Nowadays, children are not satisfied with such stuff. What they demand are electronic games, play consoles, and play stations or computer games. They desire gadgets that carry them away to a virtual world with fictional heroes and weird characters. Even soccer, they’d rather play it in front of a TV screen than in the “Huma” (the quarter) as we used to do in our childhood. So, the “Eid” gifts aren’t the same anymore. But what matters is to satisfy our kids, doesn’t it? (male, 41, senior executive)*

Another aspect of the modernization trend undergone by this rite is the interest shown by parents in the toys (Eickelman 2000). The gifts, and more particularly the games and the toys, do not only belong to the world of children, but also involve the parents who become stakeholders in the choice and purchasing process, as before, but also in the use and consumption of these products (see
also Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; LaBarbera and Gurhan 1997). This radical change of the availability of the types of games and toys on the market, thereby yielded an alteration in the rites which until then, was confined to the privileged children’s realm and a progressive shift toward greater parents’ involvement and a wider family integration. Many parents stated “that the toys are also for mom and dad”, and that the video games should meet their taste, as well as their children’s. This represents a syncretic aspect of the hedonic/materialistic aspect of Ramadan. It seems a reversal of the value of self-denial and appears to copy from Western norms that one is supposed to indulge during holiday as for example the American celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Consumption rites
During Ramadan meal behavior rules and values acquire a tremendous importance. Housewives cook treats like: “breaks with eggs, varieties of salads and soups, grilled salad and tagine (a thick lamb-stuffed omelette) etc…” Everybody expects that these very demanding and sophisticated dishes will be featured on the menu. The ingredients must be carefully selected (e.g., bread has to be spiced, vegetables fresh, Arbi eggs (country eggs) and cakes with the best flavors”), cooking must start earlier in the day and the dinner-table must be pompously displayed. This resembles the Jewish ritual meal of Passover, during which a huge quantity of food has to be prepared, but must follow very exacting preparation procedures—e.g., to be strictly kashrut (see Hirschman 1983). (All the Ramadan food, of course, must be halal.)

When I break fast, starting with dates and milk, these are not only the favorite items of the Prophet that I eat. I also recall the thousands or millions of people who follow suit at this very hour of the day, and each time I have the impression of living an extraordinary feeling (male, 67, retiree).

Hence, this consumption act, seemingly simple, assumes a communal and a very symbolic status, where brotherhood and solidarity encompass the fundamental principles. This act thereby, shifts into a privileged position to stir a feeling of community. It is a matter of consuming items proper to this period and giving up the purchase of products that do not fit the pattern. This sacrifice enables the individuals to abide by the rite more earnestly. But beyond that, these practices are a way of connecting each individual with the larger Muslim community worldwide, a way of belonging to the umma and contributing to its unity (Buitelaar, 1993). This is an illustration of the roles of the communal affectivity of rituals pointed out by Durkheim. As a matter of fact, it constitutes the expression of interpersonal links, as well as the basis of collective symbolism, and a moment of time where individuals, abstractly, but tightly close, reaffirm their common feelings and beliefs (Durkheim, 1912).

Even though it is supposed to be the month of abstinence, food is omnipresent during the month of Ramadan. During daytime, the majority of conversations are directly or indirectly about food.

It’s the only talk for everybody: the meal content, the ingredients used, the shortage of some products, each others’ favorites, the delicious smells of food when coming home after work, the frequented markets, and the special utensils required for this month. It’s unbelievable, but I guess during Ramadan, the kitchen becomes the center of gravity for the house (male, 43, faculty staff).

This focus on food reaches its peak during fast-breaking time. The dinner table—being supplied with the widest varieties of food—is a banquet for all.

“Plates of all kinds are set on the table: breks, chorba, tagine, chicken meat, salad and fruits” (female, 36, middle manager).

“We can listen to the Quran and the call for sunset-prayer broadcast on TV, our wives fill the table with thousands of plates that do nothing but whet our appetite” (male, 23, bank clerk).

“The food odors sharpen our appetite so all the more, because we didn’t eat anything all day long” (male, 48, engineer).

“The table is laden with all types of dishes and colors” (female, 23, student).

These passages recall multisensory stimulation and abundance—very like the Christian Christmas celebration. The intensity of sensorial stimuli is echoed in the feeling of community and in spiritual commitment, while it simultaneously responds to hedonist, oblative, and auto-expression needs. It is also echoed in the excessive aspect featured by several acts during the month of Ramadan. This excess, at the emotional level, bears a possible positive or a negative aspect; but it is the way the individual experiences the ritual, which determines whether the outcome is positive or negative. Some people use the enhanced reality to create spiritual enhancement, a pleasant time for oneself and others; others misuse it and feel a sense of guilt, desire and frustration. Each consumer satisfies whims in his/her own way.

The nightly outings
By night, one or two hours after “Iftar” (the fast breaking-time), people leave their homes. Some hurry to the coffee-shops and the entertainment areas, while others take a walk downtown for window-shopping. Within the Medina and the city center during the Ramadan nights, there is a great deal of street entertainment offered by singers and other local music bands who attract crowds of people.

This reversal of day and night is also accompanied by a reversal of public and private spaces. During the other months of the year, there are gender-based clusterings of people in public areas. The men gravitate toward the coffee shops and cafes, especially along the sidewalk, while the women and girls walk along the sidewalk, but do not sit and observe, as the men do. However, since in Ramadan purity is supposed to be everywhere, women go out by night and to enter the usually restricted places such as cafés and coffee shops. By doing so, they have access to the four sub-dimensions defined by Madanipour (2003)—spaces, activities, information, and resources—helping to get a total appropriation of these places.

All the year around, and for having fun, we go to the quarter café or to the lake, or we go farther to the northern Tunis suburbs. But during Ramadan, it is different. If we don’t go to the Medina (the old town), we feel as though we missed something. If we decide to have a drink, we’d rather sip tea with pine-seeds in a Turkish café of the Medina decorated in a “dar arbi” fashion (an Andalusian style-house), scented with the delightful smell of the Chicha (a Tunisian hookah). It is really extraordinary; for me, the delight of Ramadan is to revive the atmosphere of the old times (male, 25, software engineer).
In this passage we see references to historic events central to Tunisia’s identity as an Islamic country—the Medina is Arabic in origin and constitutes the original city “square” or market. The Turkish café recalls the resplendent era of the Ottoman Empire; while the references to the dar arbi of Andalusia recall the arrival of the Moors to Tunisia.

These were time periods of Muslim conquest and dominance in the region not only militarily, but also in crafts, science and literature (Esposito 1999; Lapidus 1996).

_Faking Habits_. Despite the overarching observance of religious tradition during this time period, it is also the case that many people do not fast in Ramadan. Beside those who declare themselves to be non-believers or to not have enough faith, there are others such as children, the elderly and the sick, as well as pregnant and nursing women who are excused from fasting. Despite the clear exceptions made by Islam for the people belonging to this excepted category, there still seems to be a sense of shame and guilt for not engaging in the fast. The interviews with non-fasting respondents were characterized by much hesitation and discourse gaps revealing the embarrassment they felt conceiving their failure to fulfill this religious duty.

Several statements similar to the following were recorded:

_I’m ill and I can’t fast. Those who eat, drink or smoke blatantly are despised, so I have to refrain from eating in public. It’s complicated, because it’s a whole fuss when you want to have a sandwich or smoke a cigarette. You have to hide away in a remote spot and be sure not be noticed (female, 56, assistant manager)._ 

_When we have to feed the kids, care must be taken not to let the neighbors smell the odor of the food. The situation is worse, when we make the morning coffee whose fragrance spreads to the neighbors’ house. So we shut all the windows and the kitchen door; who knows when someone might drop by (female, 32, seamstress)._ 

In this regard, during all this month we witness the avoidance of any appearance or clue that a person is not fasting and does not abide by the somber mood of this holy month. That is why cosmetics and perfumes are temporarily set aside, and ostentatious items are avoided. There are some strong parallels here to Christian celebrations of Easter and Jewish religious celebrations. Especially among Jews, it is very embarrassing and a loss of face to not fast on Yom Kippur or to eat appropriate foods at Passover. Similarly, those in the US who do not eat traditional Thanksgiving foods or gather with their families at this time are looked upon as acting inappropriately (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In one study, Sandikci and Ger (2001), note that “Islam… does not seem to oppose consumption or offer an alternative to consumerism… Most [Muslims] actively engage in consumption, albeit in an Islamic way… Consumption patterns can be and are appropriated into religiously acceptable styles without undermining consumption, itself (p.7, online version)”. To this we would add the following: “Religious patterns can be and are appropriated into consumption styles without undermining Islam, itself”. That is, a core part of a given Muslim observance can be—and is—enacted through consumption. As we have shown with the celebrating of Ramadan in contemporary Tunisia, the presence of certain consumption acts, such as taking sweet cakes to friends, eating banquets around a communal table with family members, giving gifts to one’s children and donations to the less prosperous are all vital elements to many observant Muslims while enacting the rituals of Ramadan.

Our exploratory inquiry into Ramadan has also detected the syncretic tension between what may be construed as opposing forces: the desires of the body and the yearnings of the spiritual soul, the objective of self-restriction and ascetism framed by the heightened seductiveness of self-indulgence and hedonic gratification.

In addition, we detected not only a sense of increasing closeness to God during Ramadan among many observant Tunisians, but also the heightened saliency of identifying oneself as an Arab and a Muslim (Barber 1995). As one respondent noted, “at this moment, all my fellow [Muslims] are offering up the same prayer…”—united by a commonality of practice as well as belief. Even among those who are non-observant, there is an effort not to disrupt the activities of those who are.

Finally, let us consider briefly the juxtaposition of Islamic tradition in Turkey, as examined by Ger and Sandikci (and colleagues), with the present case of Islamic observance in Tunisia. In our view, while both contexts illustrate a modernized version of Muslim practice, as opposed to say Saudi Arabia or Yemen, they also display some important differences. As compared to Turkey, Tunisia would seem to be more directly tied to specifically Arabic notions of Islamic observance, which, though cosmopolitan and worldly, also bears ties to a stricter, more fundamentalist, view of the Qur’an and its teachings, and to the collective consciousness of Middle Eastern and North African histories and dynasties (Esposito 1999; Lapidus 1996). As consumer research delves more deeply into the Islamic world, these differences, though now seemingly subtle, will likely become more apparent.

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