

Cultures of the Middle East/ Prof Salih

Midterm paper

Middle Eastern Food, Festivals, and Pastimes
(With an emphasis on Egypt)
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The Middle East is the heart of the world with its rich culture and incredible history it has influenced all parts of the world. It all began in the Fertile Crescent or Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) and spread into Europe, Africa, and Asia. The centrality of the Middle East compared to the rest of the world allowed them to influence all parts of world, as well as all parts of the world to influence them. During the time of Muhammad, Baghdad, Iraq became a very prominent and thriving area of trade between Europe, Asia, and Africa because it's land connected all the continents together. Although they significantly influenced all reaches of the world their food, religious beliefs, and pastimes are quite unique compared to those of the West.

After spending three weeks in Egypt in January 2009 I became very familiar with the food the country had to offer. Every morning for breakfast I would eat ful medames with bread, falafel, and some fruits, either bananas or apples. Bread is an essential part of their diets and is served in abundances with every meal. For lunch I would sometimes use the pita bread to make sandwiches by stuffing it full of falafel or meat. Another common sandwich was shawarma, which was chicken served in a wrap or sub. This delicious sandwich was very prominent in Egypt and was a great snack that's on the go. However, Kushari, the national dish of Egypt is by far the most popular with rice, lentils, chickpeas,

and macaroni as it's main ingredients; I ate it almost everyday for lunch between classes.

The dinners in Egypt were quite large and the plates would take up most of the table.

The dinner would consist of appetizers such as bread, falafel, eggplant, and hummus.

Appetizers would be followed by lentil soup and salad, and then the main course, usually

lamb, kofta, or chicken. Egypt is known for it's delectable desserts, and after the main

course desserts and coffee/tea are served. I personally enjoyed the Om Ali, pudding, and

coffee. Meals, especially dinner in this culture are shared and enjoyed with little regard to

time. I remember going out to eat and our teachers would offer us their food to try first

before offering it to themselves. The company of others is truly valued and meals can

take up a significant amount of time especially on certain occasions, such as weddings,

holidays, religious duties, etc.

On the other hand the United States thrives on every moment and the mindset

"time is money" this has a significant impact on the way the way the culture consumes

and values a meal. Food is essential for survival and the Middle Eastern culture

understands that, and because of this understanding is able to value food in a different

way. Unlike the United States, which focuses on the materialistic lifestyle, the Middle

East values the essentials such as food, water and shelter. Since most if not all the

Middle Eastern countries are 3rd/2nd world countries they value a hot meal or a piece of

bread because they do not know when they will eat next. However, because the U.S. is

such a fast pace country food is consumed on the go and the uses of fast food restaurants

made that possible. Fast food chains such as McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, and

Subway have replaced home cooked meals and traditional family values. Even though these chains are seen in these countries not many can afford it and bread or Kushari are eaten. Kushari has helped Egypt survive through famine and disease because of its inexpensive qualities and large servings. These contrasting cultures function in different ways with religion being a huge contributor to the differences in food, practices, and values.

According to Islamic law animals must be slaughtered humanely and facing Mecca, the holy land in Saudi Arabia. The butcher must say, "In the name of God; God is most great," this praise to Allah will make the animal religiously accepted. Muslims are prohibited to eat pork and ritually wash their hands before and after meals. I noticed that my teachers performed this ritual hand wash whenever we went out to eat, but I think it is just proper hygiene. Middle Eastern people are known for their legendary hospitality, offering anyone who calls; even strangers a plate of food. It is common for food to be eaten by hand and sometimes even off one plate. However, if the individual eats with their hands they may only use their right hand to eat. Meals are usually prepared in large quantities due to the inconsistency in guests and are served on low tables with cloth-covered carpets with cushions for sitting. Their hospitality and traditions are further developed by Ramadan's customs.

Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month, takes place throughout the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is a religious observance that floats from one month to the next because the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, instead of a solar calendar. The lunar

calendar is approximately eleven to twelve years shorter than the solar calendar making Ramadan shift through the seasons. Ramadan is a celebration of the coming of the Qur'an and is one of the five pillars of Islam. Ramadan is a time to reflect, confess, and purify both mind and body as they worship Allah and commemorate the first revelation of the Qur'an.

During the month of Ramadan Muslims do not eat or drink anything from sunrise to sunset. Ramadan is also a very useful teaching technique hoping to instill patience, sacrifice, and humility into the individual. This month is a time of relentless prayer and devout worship as the Muslims fast for Allah. Before the sun is up Muslims during this month get up and eat Sahur, the meal before dawn. Accompanied with the Sahur is the fajr prayer, the first of the five daily prayers. Once the sun has set Muslims are allowed to eat until the next morning; however, most begin the evening with water and something sweet before prayers then proceed to eat dinner with family and friends late into the night. This process is then repeated everyday throughout the ninth month of the lunar calendar.

Ramadan is a time of self-analysis and selflessness where the devotion to Allah is more vigorously practiced abstaining from salacious and irreligious sights and sounds. Muslims practice self-discipline, self-control, and sacrifice during Ramadan in hopes of a more generous and charitable people. "One of the key principles of Ramadan is providing charity for the poor. Donations made during the holy month are believed to bring the giver closer to God" (McDonough) . It is important to treat others, as you

would like to be treated and throughout the month it is continuously promoted to help the needy.

Unfortunately in Egypt, commercialism has taken over the true spirit of Ramadan. Sohour tents are prime advertisement locations for the western commercialistic society to make money. The tents have performances, cafés, restaurants, etc.; however, many tickets are too expensive for most of the commonwealth. According to Soha, a housewife, “the tents have nothing to do with the spirit of Ramadan” (McDonough). During Ramadan it is difficult to tell who really is poor due to the increase of beggars on the streets who abuse the charitable and generous nature of the Muslims during this time. The generosity of the Muslim people is only truly seen during the month of Ramadan; otherwise, the people are less generous and open. This Western presence has begun to corrupt devout individuals into lying, filth with money being their only concern.

On the contrary, the United States, a predominantly Christian society practices Lent, a Christian tradition. This tradition begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Traditionally Lent is forty days of fasting where the individual practices prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in obedience to God. Many people give up materialistic goods for this time leading up to Easter; however, some tend to donate to charity as a way to show their faith. The traditional customs of Lent vary depending on the individuals’ level of devotion severely altering the true message and purpose of Lent. Unlike, Ramadan, where the individual does not eat all day, the restrictions for fasting in Lent are much more lenient and individualistic depending on church and level of devotion.

Generally Christians avoid all animal products during the fast; however, in 1966 Pope Paul VI thought that the fast should be voluntary depending on the economic circumstances. Also, in the Apostolic Constitution he allowed fasting to be substituted by charity or prayer.

It is important to realize the different amount of devotion these two religious traditions have by their followers because they both hope to instill generosity and charity into the people for a more connected and caring whole. However, Ramadan is a true test of sacrifice making the individual aware of their self-control, self-discipline, and sacrifice as they fast and abstain from food and secular things. In comparison to Lent, which is very lackadaisical because of the significant influence of the secular world and nature of the United States. Most Christians do not learn from their sacrifices during Lent because they do not actually sacrifice anything significant. For example, last year I gave up chocolate for Lent. This is so insignificant and unworthy of sacrifice because it is a luxury already; wanted not needed. Muslims sacrifice their essentials, food, clothing, and shelter for one another during this month. These two standards for these religious traditions greatly affect the lessons and awareness suppose to be practiced during the month. In my opinion these two traditions will continually lose following due to time. Already Lent has been degraded and undermined, as well as Muslims pretending to be poor in order to reap the benefits of Ramadan and it's generous nature.

Although religion is a huge factor in Middle Eastern society I noticed on my trip that there were a lot of coffee shops, and filled to the brim with men. As I became

familiar with my surroundings I realized that coffee shops were places of social gathering, especially for men. It was very common to see two old Egyptian men playing a game of backgammon with some tea and hookah. Coffee shops became my second home, while I was in Egypt because I was able to practice my Arabic with others. Chess, backgammon, and dominos are the most popular board games at coffee shops providing entertainment for costumers. Besides board games and coffee, the shops offered tea and hookah, which further explains the popularity of these shops. Smoking hookah is a very common thing in the Middle East especially while socializing. I remember going to the coffee shops after dinner to enjoy hot tea and hookah. Cafes in the Middle East are like “man caves” because women are not usually seen inside, unless accompanied by a man. Since Islamic law prohibits Muslims to drink alcohol they tend to enjoy conversations, and clean fun. Cafes are also great gathering places to watch the national sport, soccer/football and can become quite crowded on match days.

In comparison to the United States local bars would be considered the coffee shops. Bars serve alcohol and in most cases is abused and used to become intoxicated. Specific types of bars offer very secular activities, for example, strip clubs, which would not be permitted in Middle Eastern society because it breaks their religious law. However, bars are often gathering places for men and women to socialize, as well as relax and watch sports. American bars tend to have billiards, darts, arcade games, and cards for recreational activities. It is quite clear that the biggest difference between these

societies in regards to socializing is alcohol. America without alcohol is like the Middle East without hookah.

To surmise, the Middle East and the United States share many similarities, as well as many differences in regards to food, religious beliefs, and pastimes. Food in the Middle East is natural and meals are very significant because the importance family has in the society. Muslims are very religious and are forbidden to eat pork and drink alcohol according to religious law. On the other hand, America is a fast paced country that has focuses less attention on the family and more on the individual and making money. So, the utilization of fast food chains has severely altered the diets of American's. As the United States continues to grow it is becoming a more materialistic and secular society with less regard to religion. Although both share a religious tradition for fasting, Ramadan and Lent, Ramadan is taken more seriously by its followers than Lent. Islam has been known for its enduring faith and devoted following for centuries and Ramadan test's that enduring faith through the sacrifices made throughout the month. Also, both cultures have very similar pastimes with the exception of alcohol in the United States. They both tend to socialize and relax in similar settings with different forms of entertainment, but are used for the same purposes. These two countries have significantly influenced each other over time. The Middle East was once the beginning of civilization, which later expanded and developed into a very influential power that impacted western civilization. Now, the United States is influencing the Middle East in hopes of a brighter future for both in these rough times.

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