

# Fluorescence of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria

FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR WAHAB O.A. NASIRU

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## The Quranic Exploration on the Lessons of Fasting for Nation-Building

*Sulayman A. Shittu*

### Introduction

*Sawm* or *Siyam* is an Arabic word that literally denotes: abstention or abstinence. (Cowan 1960:531). But technically it denotes: "a spiritual discipline designed to enable man to exercise self-restraint when the evil propensities threaten to overcome the harmful effects of over-eating and to cultivate with him, as far as possible, a likeness of Divine Morals." (Ali, 1973:393).

### Philosophical motives behind the needs of human beings to fast

In the divine scheme of creation man is a combination of body and soul. The soul pulls him towards its origin and reminds him of his true destiny. It opens within him the window through which he can behold the beauty and expansiveness of the celestial world and inspires him to revolt against the ugly, materialistic conception of life and soar high into the great beyond by breaking open the golden cage he has been imprisoned. The body of man pulls him towards its own source and origin that is the earth. The Holy Qur'an describes the two combinations; one is light and clamours for spiritual uplifts while one is fragile and less powerful than other creatures like Jinn who was created from the fire. Allah says: "They will ask you concerning the spirit say: the spirit is by the command of my Lord." (Qur'an 17:85). Allah also says: "Verily", we have created man of clay of black mud altered." (Qur'an 15:26).

Whenever the hold of the spirit weakens and man passes under the control of his physical self, he is swept off his feet by the powerful currents of sensuality and luxuriousness. Self-indulgence becomes the motto of his life, and his ingenuity is directed towards inventing ways and means for the satisfaction of his carnal propensities which militates against all commons of law, health, morality and worship of Allah. Man becomes a gourmand and eating becomes passion with him. He eats so that he may earn more or rather earns so that he may eat more. In the end, the finances of his inner existence are frozen and his conscience and higher mental powers

become stunted. It is only the stomach that matters to him. Crimes and injustice become rampant which bring down human beings to the level of the wild beasts that devour not only their kind but also their own brood. For that reason, the annual routine of fasting was prescribed to relax the hold of sensuality and introduce in its place as much of faith and spiritualism as could be effective in the maintenance of moderation, poise and equilibrium of life.

### Observation of fasting in the Ancient Religions

The Qur'an has pointed out that fasting had been in existence ever before Islam and it was among the obligatory religious duties. On this, Allah says:

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed upon those before you. In order that you may attain piety. (Qur'an 2:183)

The way some ancient religions observed their fasting is different from the Islamic mode of fasting although both yield the same results.

Hinduism is one of the Ancient religions in the World. The form and manner of fasting in the faith of Hinduism had been abridged by Mahadran of Madras as follows:

A different group of festivals are the purificatory fasts. The followers of each cult have their own special days in the year which they spend exclusively in prayer and Worship. Many people on these occasions fast and keep vigil during the night, read from the sacred texts and keep their minds engaged in thoughts on God. (Mahaderan, 1954:172).

Although there are other days on which women fast and offer prayer to the *Devi* in her various manifestations, their primary aim of fasting is for purification of the soul and providing it with spiritual food.

**Judaism:** Among the *Jews* fasting was instituted in Biblical times as a sign of mourning, or when danger threatened, or when the seer was preparing himself for a divine revelation. Occasional fasts were also instituted for the whole Community, especially when the nation believed itself to be under Divine displeasure, or a great calamity befell the land or drought set in.

The Day of Atonement was the only fast day prescribed by the Mosaic Law. (Kidwai, 1978:176). Besides the fixed fast days, there are some other fasts. Which may be described as local and regional. It is customary among many Jewish communities to fast on the eve of New Year's Day. Private fasts had also been frequent among the Jews during the earliest times. Even fasting was also done in consequence of seeing an evil dream. Generally speaking, no fast is permitted among Jewish communities on Sabbath days or holidays. The Talmud allows it to be undertaken on these days provided that it is complemented later by another fast.

The Jewish fasts begin at sunrise and end with the appearance of the first stars of the evening, except those of the Day of Atonement and ninth day of *Ab* which last from evening to evening (Cohon, 1948:73). There is no special ritual for the ordinary fast days. The giving of charity is encouraged on a fast day, especially the distribution of food for the evening meal. The first nine days observed in commemoration of the event of burning down of the tabernacle are

regarded as partial fast in which the eating of meat and drinking of wine alone are forbidden.

**Christianity:** In the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics it is stated that the Christ himself fasted for 40 days before the beginning of his ministry. (Kidwai, 1978:177). Therefore, he gave the principles and left his church to make rules for carrying them out. No rules on the subject could claim to come directly from the Master himself. (Kidwai, 1978:177). There were various modes of fasting.

- (a) Some abstained from things that had life,
- (b) Some ate fish only; others ate both fish and fowl. Some did not eat eggs and fruits while some ate dry bread only.

The reformation of the Church of England made no rule on how fasting should be observed, leaving it to the individual conscience. But "Acts of Parliament of Edward VI and James I and proclamations of Elizabeth vigorously enforced fasting, ordered abstinence from fresh meal on fast days and gave the curious reason for the injunction that fish and shipping trade might be benefited." (Kidwai, 1978:178). The kinds of liberties the Christian communities enjoyed became very difficult to keep an eye on following their observation of fasting. If anyone who was fasting was asked, why he was eating at day time he could very well say that his fast has ended. Similarly, if another one was queried why he was keeping fast at the time of breaking it he could reply that his fast had just begun.

## Islam

Islam as the final religion with final divine scripture consists of earlier laws and states its obligatory duties clearly. On Islamic fasting, Almighty Allah states:

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed upon those before you in order that you may attain piety. (Fasting) is for a fixed numbers of days. But if any of you is ill or on a journey, the prescribed number (should be made up) from the days later. For those who can do it (with hardship), is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more, of his own free will – it is better for him. And it is better for you that you fast, if you only knew. Ramadan is the month which was set down" the Qur'an as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance ... (Qur'aan 2:183-85).

The word *Ramadan fasting* is referred to as Muslim fasting. The month was spelt out clearly in the above-mentioned verse of the Qur'an. The word *Ramadan* is derived from the word *ramd* which denotes "to burn". Therefore *Ramadan* is "intense heat" and sun-scorched ground. (Dar al-Mashriq, 1969:280).

A number of reasons have been advanced to explain the linguistic connection.

- (a) It refers to the hot, dry sensation of thirst during this month of fasting.
- (b) *Ramadan* burns out evil like the sun scorches the earth.
- (c) Just as heat shapes and influences all matters-organic and inorganic- so does *Ramadan*



shapes and influences the believer.

Technically, *Ramadan fasting* is one of the five pillars of Islam made obligatory on any Muslim, male or female, who reaches the age of puberty. Month of *Ramadan* is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The beginning of the fasting is traditionally based on a sighting of the *hila*- the crescent of the month. As the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) confirmed:

Commence the fasting as you sight the moon and break fasting as you sight the moon (of Shawwal) but if it is obscured, complete the number that is thirty. (Al-Jaza'iri, 1976:266).

### Observation of Ramadan Fasting

Special meals are eaten before and after each day of fasting; *Sahur* before dawn prayer, and *iftar*, the evening meal often eaten communally and including dates and different types of fruits after sunset. Ramadan fasting is a total abstinence from eating, drinking, sexual intercourse. Also prescribed is abstinence from sins. Ramadan fasting also means a cultivation of virtue from dawn to dusk and beyond. The number and period of fasting was clearly stated in the above quoted Qur'anic verses also interpreted by the Prophet (29 or 30 days). Allah says:

Has ordained for you, and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread. (Qur'an 2:187).

The Qur'an further explains persons who may not fast as quoted in earlier verses of the Qur'an namely: a sick person, a woman in menstruation period, a woman with the blood of confinement, during a stressful journey, person with permanent illness, etc.

Muslim scholars held opinion that there are three levels of the Ramadan fast: (Ali, 1973:397).

- (a) Refraining from the physical things that are forbidden (performed with the mouth\ stomach and sexual organs).
- (b) Restraining one from saying, hearing, and looking at forbidden things (performed with senses).
- (c) Renewing one's devotion to Allah (performed with the heart and mind).

Although observation of fasting may vary from one religion to another, the goal as adduced from above submissions states as follows :-

To develop patience and self-control.

To learn sympathy for the poor.

To cleanse the body and mind.

To appreciate Allah's bounty.

To protect against Sin as the Hadith of the Prophet was reported to have said: "Satan runs in the circulatory system of the Son of Adam in the same way blood circulates in our system; so block his passages with hunger". (Al-Jaza'iri, 1976:269).

## Various Benefits of Fasting in the Qur'an for Nation-Building

The most important consideration in undertaking a fast, as in any act of devotion, is to seek nearness to God, to seek his pleasure and forgiveness. This generates a spirit of piety in man. This spirit assists leaders or political office-holders to see themselves as trustees of Allah who are expected to manage human affairs and resources with a sense of responsibility since they are accountable to their electorate and God who destined their elevation into those posts.

Fasting creates the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to Allah. Being a leader or a Governor, God measures his weight of contentment and puts it into a severe test. This really curbs some public office-holders who are contented with what they get and did not use the position as a conduit pipe to siphon public funds into their private accounts a human being can curb his desire for food and water and lust of soul for days, the spirit will be purified and empowered to help him in his day-to-day activities.

Fasting makes us deeply conscious of the pangs of hunger and discomfort suffered by the less fortunate ones in our societies. The poor have to put up with difficult conditions all through their lives. This kindles the spirit of concern with Weaker Section Welfares in the society which really contributes to the success of good governance of a nation.

Fasting gives man an unflinching training in endurance and a spirit of acceptance. This prepares a governor to be sensitive to the electorates' plight. People should advise the ruler and support him if he obeys the law and counsel him when he deviates.

Fasting develops courage, fortitude and a fighting spirit in man to surmount the heavy odds in life with a cool and tranquil mind. This spirit assists the society and its leaders to bear any economic hardship which may ultimately bring good results to the nation.

Fasting teaches man reliance on God, and confidence in Him. Just as the vigorous state of fasting for a whole month is undertaken with His assistance, bitter situations in life could also be surmounted with His Help.

Fasting is meant to conquer anger and thirst and this could be extended to conquer other infirmities of human character that lead man into error and sin. Admittedly, indiscipline leads to lawlessness which serves as a bane of the upright leader and undermines the respect and obedience he expects from his subjects.

Fasting mellows a man and enhances his character, giving a jolt to the human instincts of pride, haughtiness, jealousy and ambition. Fasting softens one's character, clears one's heart and mind against hatred and many negative emotions. This would ensure that the ruler gives equal dignity and honour to his subjects. Freedom of conscience and fearless objective criticism of the rulers will be given a room. The following speech of Caliph Abu Bakr which he made while assuming his office as the first Caliph of Islam is instructive:

O people, Behold me – charged with the cares of government and I am not the best among you I need all your advice and all your help. If I do well, support me; if I commit a mistake, counsel me. To tell the truth to a person commissioned to rule is faithful allegiance; to conceal it, is treason. In my sight, the powerful and the weak are alike; and to both I wish to render justice. As I Obey God and His Prophet obey me; if I neglect the laws of God and the Prophet, I have no more right to your allegiance. (Hussain, 1974:96).

Fasting breathes the spirit of forgiveness in man towards others, as he seeks God's forgiveness through fasts and prayers. This spirit enhances his accommodation to political opponents and the showing of utterances which may make him deviate from maintaining justice and fair play as well as guaranteeing human rights. An instance could be drawn from Umar bn. Khattab (the second Caliph of Islam) when someone reacted to his speech publicly and people attempted to erode human right of the speaker; Umar said:

Let him speak. He is free to give his opinion. If people do not give their opinions they are useless, and if we [rulers] do not listen to them, we are useless. (Abdalati, 1975:134).

Fasting also gives lessons in punctuality and cooperation we commence the Ramadan fasting together and break together at the same time communally. This spirit of punctuality and cooperation can also be adhered to in all our daily activities. Good governance can only be achieved through cooperation, punctuality, dedication and sincere commitment of both governors and the governed. Fasting affects the economy of the individual as he is less wasteful on food and meals. This spirit could be a great lesson for Nigerians on maintenance culture which seems to be lacking among public office holders. On the physical side, fasting cleanses the human system of the accumulated impurities of uninterrupted eating throughout the year. It also prepares the body to face diseases or conditions of scarcity. This rigid abstinence regulates man's health, sharpens his intellect and enhances the quality of his output.

## Conclusion

Having seen the literal and contextual connotation of fasting in all religions, the objectives and benefits of fasting could be summed up as follows: To gain piety, nearness to Allah, cultivating good manners and enhancing people's unity. The lessons can enhance good citizenship whereby everyone considers his compatriots as partners in progress. The government should be sensitive to the complaints of weaker groups of the society. Freedom of speech should be given but in a soft manner without foul language. As we avoid committing sins during fasting, everyone can still avoid causing political disturbance in order to have free and fair elections in the country. These lessons if followed can make any nation achieve its vision.

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