

Celebrations in African Immigrant Communities

Islamic Celebrations in the African Immigrant Communities in Washington, D.C.

Sulayman S. Nyang

Immigrants from the Muslim world have introduced global Islam into the American cultural and religious mosaic. They can be easily seen at the rituals, rites, and celebrations they perform as part of their faith communities and at annual events that reaffirm and revalidate their identities as Muslims. This aspect of Muslim life in the United States is now felt around the country and especially in the greater Washington area, where almost all Muslim countries are represented by their respective embassies and where a small but growing body of immigrant and native-born Muslims now reside. Estimates by local media put the Muslim population in the area between 50,000 and 75,000.

Muslims annually celebrate several feasts now reported in the local press and discussed between Muslims and their neighbors and friends in American society. The three most widely celebrated events among African Muslims are the Eid el-Fitr, Eid el-Adha, and Mawlad el-Nabi. The first feast takes place every year at the end of the month of fasting known as Ramadan. Because they have not yet established religious centers of their own, African Muslims in the greater Washington area usually join other Muslims at various local *masjids* (mosques) and Islamic centers for the Eid prayers. If they have been able to secure leave from work to celebrate, they also partake in a meal of chicken bought from *halal* (ritual expert) butchers, who cater specifically to Muslims. Some pay visits to relatives and friends in the area, while others are hosts or hostesses to other Muslims they have not seen during the year because of conflicts in work schedules and other responsibilities of modern urban life.

The second feast, the Eid el-Adha, comes two months and ten days after the Eid el-Fitr. This celebration is a re-enact-



ment of Abraham's offer to sacrifice his son to God. It is also the day after the Muslim pilgrims converge at Mt. Arafat as part of their *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Like the first Eid, this one is celebrated by prayer at the mosque and by social visits and meals. This occasion is distinctive in its tradition of sacrificing a lamb (or any other animal approved by Islamic law) and sharing the meal prepared from it with neighbors and friends.

The third celebration, Mawlad el-Nabi, centers on the *sira* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad. On this occasion African Muslims organize lectures and chanting sessions at a local mosque or rented facility. Such celebrations are often acts of devotion by members of local Muslim community organizations connected with African Muslim brotherhoods. These American branches of African Sufi orders

In Maryland, Sierra Leonean immigrant Muslims pray at the Eid Celebration at the end of Ramadan, 1997. Photo by Harold Dorwin

Suggested Reading

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maintain this form of veneration of the Prophet, but the tradition is frowned upon by members of the Wahabi sect from Saudi Arabia because it is seen as an innovation. During the celebrations, congregations sing poems known as *qasidas*, composed and written down long ago by African and Arab poets like Shaykh Alhaji Malick Sy of Senegal and other Muslim poets from Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Harar in Ethiopia.

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Nature & Significance of Durbar in Ghanaian Societies

Kwaku Ofori-Ansa & Peter Pipim

Ghanaian traditional rulers sit in state and meet their people at events called *durbars* (an Indo-Persian term for "ruler's court"). To the accompaniment of music and dance, ceremonies honor their ancestors, rekindle their bond to the people, revive unity, cleanse the society, and pray for the fruitfulness of the land and the welfare of the people. Beautifully adorned kings, queens, chiefs, and their elders appear in public procession amidst intensive drumming, singing, and dancing. At their destination king and queen sit in state flanked by chiefs and elders, as sound and motion continue around them: drum languages articulate praises; special guests extend greetings and pay homage; gifts are presented.

The Akan people of Ghana organize *durbars* for the installation of chiefs, kings and queens, and their elders, a tradition that has been carried over to the United States. This year the Asanteman Kuo, an association organized by the Asante, one of the Akan groups in the United States, will hold the third installation of its leadership, an event which happens every three years. During a *durbar*, the Asanteman Kuohene (chief of the Asanteman association) of the Washington metropolitan area will host members of Asanteman Kuo from Atlanta, Toronto, New York, New England, Montreal, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas. The chiefs and the queen mothers of these Asante associations will appear in traditional ceremonial clothing of hand-woven, hand-stamped, hand-embroidered, and hand-appliquéd cloths accentuated with glittering gold,



silver jewelry, and precious beads. Accompanied by drumming, singing, and dancing, they will process under ceremonial umbrellas of brilliant colors.

Symbols of status and authority, the royal paraphernalia reflect a complex array of philosophical, religious, and political concepts, which inform ideals and codes of conduct. The large, colorful umbrellas (*akatamanso*) represent the protective role and the authority of chiefs and queens. Gold-plated staffs (*akyeamepoma*) of the chief's spokesmen, or linguists, symbolically depict political ideals. Ceremonial chief stools (*ahenkongua*) — carried by stool bearers and placed in front of the chiefs — are symbols of spiritual and political unity. Their carved images refer to certain philosophical, religious, and political concepts. Gold-plated ceremonial swords carried by the Council of Elders are traditionally borne by royal messengers and are used in swearing oaths of allegiance during installations of rulers and elders.

Traditional *durbars* can last a whole day until sunset. Sharing special drinks at these occasions symbolizes hospitality and community spirit. The *durbar* ends with a

Officials of the Washington, D.C., Ghanaian community organization Asanteman Kuo were attired in regalia for an inaugural event in 1994 at a local gym in Langley Park, Maryland. Photo courtesy Peter Pipim, Asanteman Kuo organization