

Ramadhan Traditions: The Malaysian Way of Welcoming the Holy Month



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By: Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak (Ph.D.)

Every year, Muslims around the world eagerly await the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan. This anticipation begins two months before the appearance of the crescent moon that marks the start of Ramadan. As a tradition in the Muslim world, devout Muslims begin preparing themselves joyfully when the month of Rajab begins. Following the example of the Holy Prophet (SAW), many Muslims worldwide start to habituate themselves to fasting by observing optional fasts during the months of Rajab and Sha'ban. These few days of fasting, depending on one's capacity and choice, serve as a warm-up for the obligatory fast during Ramadan. While Muslims globally prepare mentally and spiritually for Ramadan, there are always cultural differences in how the fasting month is welcomed. In this article, I would like to share some of the interesting ways Malaysians prepare for and celebrate Ramadan.

Shopping Before Ramadhan

Many families in the country enjoy shopping for foodstuffs, such as dates, nuts, dried fruits, spices, and more, a week or two before the start of Ramadhan. In addition to food items, some also prefer to buy tailor-made family apparel to wear during the Eid festival that follows at the end of Ramadhan.

Those who purchase or order their items early are, in part, anticipating a rise in prices as demand surges when Ramadhan approaches. Another reason for early preparation is to avoid the last-minute rush or to prevent exhaustion during the fast. Lastly, some people shop in advance to fully focus on their act of *Ibadah* (worship) during Ramadhan.

Seeking Forgiveness from Family and Friends

In many parts of Malaysia, it is customary for people to seek forgiveness for their shortcomings before the start of Ramadhan. Traditionally, this culture of asking for forgiveness was done in person. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, people now call or send text messages to one another seeking forgiveness. This practice is undertaken in the hope of starting Ramadhan on the right footing. According to Islamic belief, God will not pardon the sins committed against others until the victims of those wrongdoings forgive them.

A Reunion of Family and Friends

In Malaysia, it is a cultural tradition for families and friends to gather and dine together before the start of Ramadhan. Typically, a week before Ramadhan, people meet at homes or in restaurants to share a meal. In both government and private sectors, staff also participate in reunion breakfasts or lunches to welcome Ramadhan. The atmosphere during these gatherings is always joyful. As colleagues and friends, people are generous in sponsoring food and beverages for others who attend these occasions. After enjoying the meal, they also promise to gather again to celebrate their successful completion of the month-long fasting in Ramadhan.

A Visit to the Grave

In Malaysia, some families visit the graves of their elders, family members, and relatives. Before the start of Ramadhan, it is common for families to visit the graves of their deceased loved ones. During these visits, they tidy the grave area and pray to God for those resting there.

From an Islamic perspective, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) encouraged Muslims to visit the graves of those who have passed away. This act serves as a reminder that life in this world is temporary. Whether one is rich or poor, young or old, everyone must eventually leave this world to meet the Creator of the universe. Moreover, visiting the grave humbles one's ego and serves as a reminder to stay on the right path as prescribed by God in the Qur'an.

Preparing the Mosque for Ramadhan

Close to Ramadhan, almost all mosques in Malaysia prepare in every possible way to welcome the fasting month. Normally, the mosque committees organize spring cleaning and make all necessary arrangements to accommodate the increase in worshippers attending the mosque. During this time, mosques in the country are at their busiest. Some mosques remain open past midnight for those who wish to engage in supererogatory worship (Sunnah and Nawafil Ibadaat). These mosques remain open throughout the entire fasting month. In some well-established mosques, before the start of Ramadhan, invitations are extended to those who have memorized the entire Qur'an to lead the *Tarawih* prayer (a special prayer held during Ramadhan). During this special prayer, which is conducted at night, the person appointed as the Imam will recite a portion of the Qur'an on a nightly basis until the entire Qur'an is read in its entirety within the Holy month of Ramadhan.

Concluding Remark

I truly believe that the information on how Malaysian Muslims welcome Ramadhan may have some similarities with the traditions in your own culture. I realized this fact when I travelled to other parts of the Malay world. By adopting the aforementioned unique traditions, Muslims in Malaysia prepare themselves spiritually, emotionally, and physically to welcome Ramadhan. Activities before the month of fasting, such as shopping for essentials, seeking forgiveness, gathering with loved ones and friends, or preparing the mosque for worshippers to engage in prayers and Qur'anic recitation, all play a crucial role in ensuring a meaningful and fulfilling Ramadhan experience. Through these traditions, Malaysian Muslims strengthen their connection with their faith and fellow Muslims.

(These are views of Dr. Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak who is affiliated with the Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies at AHAS KIRKHS, IIUM which do not represent Potret Online)