

Ramadan Festivals in Turkey

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Across the Muslim world, there are numerous signs that Ramadan, a time of fasting, prayer and reflection, is transforming from a religious month to a cultural and commercial holiday. The spirit of capitalism is felt in practices ranging from the marketing of specialty items (e.g., fasting calendars, lanterns) emblazoned with company logos to the Ramadan feasts promoted by restaurants and hotels, the Ramadan greeting cards, the Ramadan sweepstakes, the Ramadan themed shopping malls and supermarkets, and the Ramadan festivals. It appears that Ramadan has taken on the commercial trappings of Christmas and Hanukah and is transforming from a religious ritual to a holiday marked by consumption. Intrigued by these developments, our project looks at the commercial expressions of Ramadan in Turkey and explores how the dynamics of consumer culture and globalization interact with the Islamic beliefs, rituals and behaviors and reshape them to fit with modern consumption-driven lifestyles.

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~~One of the contexts of our study is Ramadan Festivals. These are month-long festivals organized~~ by the municipality of Istanbul at different historical locations throughout the city. The biggest and oldest of these festivals is the one held at the square next to the Blue Mosque. During the whole month of Ramadan, the area is transformed into a big market place, packed with more than hundred stands selling food and beverages as well as all kinds of paraphernalia. In each day of the Ramadan month, thousands of visitors cram the square before the sunset and wait until the time that daily fasting would be over. After the meals are eaten, shopping and enjoyment of various cultural activities begin. The activities include religious panels addressing different aspects of Ramadan and Islam as well as artistic performances. The performances mostly include traditional art forms, such as karagöz (traditional shadow show) and meddah (an earlier form of stand-up shows), which have been very popular during the time of the Ottoman Empire but are long forgotten in the modern era. On the other hand, for those who are interested in shopping, the stands offer a wide range of selections from religious objects, such as Qurans and spiritual books, to electronic appliances and Chinese-made decorative ornaments. Moreover, several local and global companies promote their products by distributing samples and other promotional materials. As in other festival areas, the stands are built in the style of the traditional Ottoman houses and many of the vendors are dressed in traditional Ottoman attires.

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~~Through the intersection of sacred (religion and history) and profane (shopping and leisure), public authorities and retailers, attempt to sacralize the ordinary commercial commodities (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989), most of which are commonly available. Similar to theme parks like Disneyland, a "dedifferentiation of consumption" is evident as different institutional spheres become increasingly interconnected with each other (Bryman, 1999, p.33). This tendency is also evident in the Ramadan festivals as we see a tendency for eating, shopping and leisure to become "inextricably interwoven" and very difficult to separate (Bryman, 1999). Through a selective portrayal of history (Goulding, 2000), the Ramadan festivals also resonate with the trend of the "commodification of history" (Barthel 1996), which involves consumption practices related to the past.~~

For further reading:

- Sandikci, O. and S. Omeraki (2007) "Globalization and Rituals: Does Ramadan Turn into Christmas?", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol, 34.