



Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.

Suret el Nur 35

The Iconography of Fanous Ramadan

Color, Texture, and Design in Muslim Aesthetics

By Ali Qleibo



In every religion light is celebrated as a sign of divine presence. By analogy, “light” and “truth” are synonymous with the knowledge of God. Alternately light symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, reason over unreason, and order over chaos. Using the metaphor of the lantern, Muslims describe Allah as light of the heavens and the earth – inspiring, motivating, and guiding people. Similarly in both Judaism and Christianity the Holy Scripture is replete with references to God as light. Major world religions, namely Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, and Buddhism proffer God as light. Whether the divine emanation is a visible glaring gleam or dull opaque light is analogous to the respective perception of the identity, nature, and corresponding relationship of God to humanity. Within these theological paradigms, references to God through the representations of light such as candles, flames, and lamps have become common symbols of divine presence.



Each culture produces its own stone, metal, or paper light lanterns. In each language the lantern has its own distinct appellation and its own religious iconography that dictates the ritual use and structural elements of the lantern. The symbolic significance of the lantern is corollary to the implicit or explicit theological value of light within each religious system. In Muslim society, *fanous Ramadan* (the lantern paraded by the children during the night and displayed on windowsills, verandas, and in shops) stands as a symbolic icon and a point of connection between Muslim culture and revelation on the one hand and between humanity and God on the other. In fact, *fanous Ramadan* is a microcosmic representation, a totalizing representative system, with analogies to a larger Muslim worldview that structures the color, texture, pattern, and elements of design that underlie the aesthetic character of Muslim culture as a whole.

“This lantern has no relationship to the spirit of Ramadan.” Aida scoffed at my proposal to add the elegant white-painted “afternoon tea lantern” on sale in IKEA to our Ramadan display. “This IKEA lantern evokes neither the feel nor the magic of Ramadan. Though it is pretty, it lacks the symbolic elements that we associate with the spirit of the



Fanous Ramadan stands out as the quintessential art form that separates sacred time from profane time. The design, combination of forms, colors, textures, geometric, figurative and calligraphic decorations encapsulate the highly elusive, transient, and ephemeral spirit of Ramadan. One can tell at a glance its socio-religious referential values which reflect the universality and continuity with other aesthetic cultural expressions that embody Muslim cosmology.

The mark of craftsmanship distinguishes the quality of workmanship in the apparently functionless decoration of the lantern; the incisions to delineate the star and crescent shapes, the texture of the colored glass on the sides and golden gloss design. The explicit decoration is in direct proportion to the implicit symbolic religious function of the *fanous*.

holy month. It has nothing to do with *fanous Ramadan*.” Thus lectured my university freshman daughter!

Fanous Ramadan has a ceremonial religious function. As artwork it is intentionally endowed with perceptual religious symbolism, which has a significant degree of aesthetic interest. In fact, *fanous Ramadan* is a work of artistic craftsmanship. It is designed to express the spirit of the holy month. The embellishments of its diamond-shaped copper structure with special attention to color, pattern, texture, and design render *fanous Ramadan* a

well-finished, exquisite artisanal work that encapsulates the underpinnings of Muslim socio-religious aesthetics.

The shiny copper *fanous*, which is most popular in Jerusalem, is invariably composed of two parts that encase the candle. The top case is usually formed by two equal-angle triangles plied into six equal triangles to form a hexagonal base welded to a quadrilateral rhomboid dissected into a lozenge-shaped diamond case. Whereas the shiny copper upper case bears the incisions indicating the stars and the crescent, the lower case is lined with the opaque translucent colored thick glass.

In *fanous Ramadan* legend, myth and ritual meet to reflect Muslim microcosmic order. The opaque light gleaming through the green, lapis lazuli deep blue and tinted hues of deep amber-orange thick textured glass on the hexagonal sides of the shiny copper case further conceals the burning flame. The colorful glow in conjunction with the dim light streaking through the precisely incised stars and crescents in the shiny brass is highly evocative of the Muslim vision of God as incandescent light as expressed in *Suret al Nur*. Exquisite calligraphic Qur'anic verses or aphorisms in praise of Ramadan either as incisions in the copper between the stars and crescents or painted in black on the glass further enhance the solemn religious status of the colorful *fanous*.

In fact, *fanous Ramadan* is replete with mystical allusions closely related to Sufi esoteric religious teachings and to gnosis. Its special features distinguish it from a wide variety of lanterns that have existed in traditional Arab culture and survive in our folklore. The domestic lantern of Aladdin in which the giant genie was imprisoned is known as a *misbah* مصباح. Made of pottery or precious metals, it has its distinctive fluted flask shape, like a flattened teapot. The oil-lit wick *siraj* سراج is another form of lantern to be

distinguished from the *mishkat* مشكاة with its own shape and which hangs in mosques.

Colors hold great significance for people around the world. Not only do colors influence emotion, but they also hold meaning in religion and various cultures. Colors have culture-specific evocative resonance. Whereas saffron yellow is associated with Buddhist monks, red and green are invariably linked to Christmas. Yet the pigment, hue, and value of the red that is typical of Christmas are different and distinct from the red in the Turkish flag or the red of communist China, or even the red sun disc in the Japanese flag. Similarly the Muslim green is distinct from the Christmas green. Each culture has its own range of colors that has its specific value, much like the alphabetic letters that have their distinct pronunciation, music, cadence, pitch, and identity that reflect the cultural diversity of the human experience.

The color green is closely linked to Islam. Although the origins of this choice are obscure, by the time of the Crusades, the European invaders avoided using the color green in their coats of arms so that they would not be mistaken for Muslims during battle. It is believed that the color green was the color of Muhammad's tribe, Quraysh, while others think that green was the Prophet's favorite color, and that he always wore a green turban. The color became closely associated with the sharifs (Muslim religious nobility) and the descendants of the family and companions of the Prophet. Imagine the dismay and outrage of the Cairenes when one of Napoleon's regiments during the Egyptian Expedition arrived in Cairo dressed in green: the color of the Ashraf, the family of the Prophet and of the holy men!

During Ramadan and other holidays, minarets are lit with garlands of green light. Green silk drapes the graves of Sufi saints, and Qur'ans are bound in green. The color green derives

its evocative power in relation to a saying, *hadith*, attributed to Prophet Muhammad, "Three things of this world are acceptable: water, greenery, and a beautiful face."

In paradise, in the afterlife, the Qur'an states, "ornaments shall be given to them therein of bracelets of gold, and they shall wear green robes of fine silk and thick silk brocade interwoven with gold (18:31)" and they will be "reclining on green cushions and beautiful carpets." (55:76) Green and gold are the colors of paradise. The shiny golden copper *fanous* and the green glass, in this sense, serve as reminders of paradise.

The crescent and the star came to be widely associated with Islam during the Ottoman Empire. It is related that Osman Gazi, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, had a dream in which he had a vision of the crescent moon stretched from one end of the earth to the other. He took it as a divine sign and kept it as the symbol of his dynasty: the crescent in the Ottoman flag.

The crescent assumes paramount significance in the Muslim religious calendar, which is lunar and in which Ramadan plays a central role. The love of Allah finds its greatest expression in the Muslim passion, nostalgia, and deep yearning for the holy month of Ramadan and is reflected in the great interest in following the successive waxing and waning of the moon to measure the temporal distance towards the holy month of God. The passionate longing for Ramadan intensifies in the two lunar months preceding Ramadan in preparation for the move from profane to sacred time. Highly cherished, the names of these three months impart the most sensual forenames in the Muslim discourse of male names. As personal names, the appellations Rajab, Sha'ban, and Ramadan evoke piety and virility, and suggest a conservative character. Similarly the phases of the moon, in terms of which the Muslim year and holidays are calculated,

supply equally suggestive forenames. Hilal and Bader are common names and are associated with the two major phases of the waxing moon. Hilal translates literally as crescent and Bader as full moon. Whereas Hilal, the thin sickle shape, marks the auspicious beginning of the lunar cycle, Bader, the full rounded moon, punctuates the completion of the waxing cycle.

The crescent shape as a motif reiterates throughout Muslim cultural expressions ranging from the incisions on the *fanous* and the decoration on top of the domes of the houses, mosques, and minarets. *Katayef*, the favored savory Ramadan dessert, is a crescent-shaped pastry stuffed with cheese or walnuts. Once baked, or fried, it is doused in honey and acquires a deep amber-orange-brownish tinge. The hue and saturation of this sardius color typify the





sweets and drinks associated with the Ramadan menu. The color modulates from the deep brown color of dried dates to the lighter grades of deep orange-brown as in the carob drink that is usually imbibed during Ramadan along with licorice and tamarind.

The translucent, deep-amber, orange-red to brownish-red color finds its place on the Ramadan menu in the delicately aromatized قمرالدين *amar al-deen* apricot pudding. The splendid color of the sardius gem is the Ramadan color par excellence and is one of the three colors of the opaque glass on the four sides of *fanous Ramadan*.

The deep ultramarine-blue-colored glass on the side of the fanous is a metaphoric crystal of truth that harkens back to Sufi teachings in relation to self-knowledge, sense of dignity, and self-control. The lapis lazuli, though a semi-precious stone, assumes a special status in Muslim culture and finds its rightful place on rings and prayer beads, and was used as the background color to illuminate Qur'anic verses inscribed in gold. This

hue of blue is believed to help reveal inner truth and self-awareness. It promotes the relief of things that may have been suppressed and allows for self-expression without holding back. Furthermore lapis lazuli encourages dignity in friendship and social ability. It encourages the qualities of honesty, compassion, and uprightness when dealing with others. It provides an awareness of one's motivations and beliefs, and gives a clearer perspective of one's whole life – all of which pave the way to the knowledge of the truth and light the path to connect with Allah.

During Ramadan, the deep blue night is blazoned with light. The alleys of the Old City are decked with canopies of flickering green, deep-amber-orange and blue light-bulb installations amidst light garlands decked with stars and crescents, the symbols of Islam, which kindle Jerusalem's alleys beneath the lapis lazuli sky.

Ramadan dynamizes nocturnal social life. During the rest of the year, profane time, one's social life is concentrated

within the circle of immediate family and close friends. During Ramadan, sacred time, the circle expands to include visits and lavish *iftar*, fast-breaking dinners, with distant relatives and close friends.

Ramadan is the most joyous moment in the Muslim year. Life develops a different rhythm; a sense of excitement permeates every home. Come Ramadan, the white *djellabieh* replaces the everyday colorful clothes.

As night falls and as the pinkish-orange light of sunset drowns the dark blue and purple shadows into thick lapis lazuli, the city plunges into deep silence. The sound of Ramadan songs at the entrance of the garden and the sound of scurrying children dispel the quiet of the night. A group of children, *hawwayeh*, الحوايه, stand at the entrance of the house singing Ramadan carols, each carrying a *fanous* that casts phantasmagoric shapes in green, amber, and blue.

Time develops a different feel; a sense of excitement pervades every aspect of life. Between the readings of the Qur'an, the long afternoons spent in reclusive meditation in Al-Haram al-Sharif, the evening *taraweeh*, and the *suhur* prayers, the relationship with the Almighty modulates to heighten the consciousness of God and deepens the sense of religious feeling, casting a different color on the way in which Muslims discourse with God, themselves, and others.

Dr. Ali Qleibo is an anthropologist, author, and artist. A specialist in the social history of Jerusalem and Palestinian peasant culture, he is the author of Before the Mountains Disappear, Jerusalem in the Heart, and Surviving the Wall, an ethnographic chronicle of contemporary Palestinians and their roots in ancient Semitic civilizations. Dr. Qleibo lectures at Al-Quds University.

Our Readers Say ...

Because of all the checkpoints and walls, I think each region in Palestine developed culturally in its own way. I feel as though we are now, more than ever, culturally disjointed from each other on a regional basis. The culture and customs of Ramallah, Hebron, East Jerusalem, and Gaza City seem almost unrecognizable to one another. Except, of course, for the ideological undercurrent which we all share.

Manar Hasan, Birzeit