

# Fanous

## The Light of Ramadan



By Ali Qleibo

The month of Ramadan is sacred time. Between the evening ritual prayers (*taraweeh*), sacred music, and Ramadan social visits, Jerusalem nightlife takes a new turn. One strolls in the alleys of the Old City under brightly lit canopies of screeching blue, shrill green, discordant red, and blaring phosphorescent white lamps that stretch and zigzag throughout the city. Here and there, scintillating oversized crescents, stars, and a wide array of gaudy light fixtures sparkle and transform Jerusalem's night into day. Magical wands and gaudy plastic lanterns and lights in various shapes and forms flicker eclectically to celebrate Ramadan.

Ramadan reinvests the common elements of everyday life with symbolic meaning. In the quest to embrace the ideal, all forms of celebration become overt ritual expressions. In its elusive transience, the elliptical lunar month exudes a mysterious appeal and its chief product – *fanous Ramadan* (traditional Ramadan lantern) – provides a completely traceable and transparent symbol of expression. In its transformation into hanging canopies with pendant flickering colorful lamp bulbs, the gaudy eclectic light installations buoyantly announce the death of myth and the demise of Sufism in Arabic cultures. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the rise of the modern national Arab state, and the influence of European culture, Sufism lost its hold. With the advent of modernity, people started to look suspiciously at Sufis, their practices started to be considered backward, irrational, their rituals strange. Without a Sufi referent, religious symbols as witnessed in Ramadan lights lose their religious mythos.

*Fanous Ramadan* is intrinsically symbolic. The religious concepts embedded in the *fanous* provide a valuable resource for reevaluating the most basic categories of Muslim symbols of transcendence, in which the “religious sensibility” and the related concept of mysticism are mutually constitutive. Mysticism de rigueur uses the language of symbols, and since the mystical impulse belongs to the core of religion, religion of necessity must employ symbolic language.

*Fanous Ramadan* is a work of artistic craftsmanship and design. As artwork, it is traditionally shaped and designed with visible religious symbolism, according to aesthetic values. As a ceremonial symbolic icon, its color and Pythagorean algorithmic design represent 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.





In every religion, light is celebrated as a sign of divine presence. By analogy, “light” and “truth” are synonymous with the knowledge of God. 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.

*Fanous Ramadan* stands out as the quintessential art form that separates sacred time from profane time. The design, combination of forms, opaque glass, colors, textures, geometric, figurative, and calligraphic decorations encapsulate the highly elusive, transient, and mystical allure of Ramadan – the month in which the Qur’an was revealed – and by extension refract light as a metaphor for God. One can tell at a glance its socio-religious referential values that 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 the golden gloss design. The explicit decoration is in direct proportion to the implicit symbolic religious function of the *fanous*.

The shiny copper *fanous*, which was popular in old 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 that indicate the stars and the crescent, the lower case is lined with the translucent, thick colored 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. 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. The colorful glow in conjunction with the dim light streaking

though 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* (24:35).

*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.*

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 those of 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

**The meticulous workmanship of the traditional *fanous*, the dexterous manipulation of form and function to produce a religious object that is aesthetically refined, has become a memory of the past. In modernity, a variety of commercial designs have flooded the Arab markets. Canopies with pendant flickering colorful lamp bulbs decorate the windows, balconies, and streets of Jerusalem. In their brilliance, they cast their blinding glare over the once-upon-a-time demure light emanating from the opaque glass and brass *fanous Ramadan*.**





**Symbols and the ideas they entail are supplanted in the modernist commercialization, redesign, and secularization of *fanous Ramadan* into eclectic, colored, brash Chinese lamps. The same lights are used as Christmas decorations, at weddings, and at high school graduations. With the death of myth, content has become the form. Light in and by itself, devoid of meaning, remains an expression of joy.**

green is distinct from the Christmas green. Each culture has its own range, texture, and timbre of colors that have their specific values.

The color green is closely linked to Islam. 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 *ashraf* (Muslim religious nobility, plural of *sharif*) and the descendants of the family and companions of the Prophet; thus it became 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 serve, in this sense, as reminders of paradise.

The crescent and the star came to be widely associated with Islam during the Ottoman Empire. 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 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 (a subtle hue of red hazel, amber, and light brown) typify the sweets and drinks associated with the Ramadan menu. The color modulates from the deep-brown 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 قمر الدين (*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 sides of *fanous Ramadan*.

The deep ultramarine-blue-colored glass on the side of the *fanous* is a metaphoric crystal of truth that hearkens 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 inspires 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.

To celebrate Ramadan, Jerusalem has cast away its wistful melancholy and has donned joyful, festive apparel. 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 time when Muslims take their last meal before sunrise and a day of fasting), the relationship with the Almighty modulates to heighten the Muslim's consciousness of God and deepens the sense of religious feeling, casting a different light on the way in which Muslims discourse with God, themselves, and others.

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