



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

An Experience of Ramadan at Michigan's Fordson High

Abram Brosseit, Jenison High School, Jenison, MI

Abstract

The following lesson provides students with a better understanding of how the Ramadan fast fits within both Islamic traditions and Muslim community life. It was developed for use in a semester-long elective world religions class taught at the high school level in a public school.

Students will examine the Ramadan fast as a lived experience, with a particular focus on the experiences of high school football players in Dearborn, Michigan (a predominately Arab-American Detroit suburb). As documented in the film *Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football, and the American Dream*, the experiences of Muslim students practicing for a cross-town rivalry football game during the last ten days of Ramadan in 2009 revealed a community holding onto its Islamic faith while struggling for acceptance in post 9/11 America.

In addition to a selection from the film *Fordson*, the lesson includes the use of a newspaper article and topical readings, as well as the potential to extend learning into a video conference cross-cultural dialogue through the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Face to Faith program.

Pedagogic Goals

1. **Basic goal:** to have students learn how the observance of Ramadan fits within the Islamic tradition and to consider how the observance of Ramadan is experienced as a lived experience.
2. **Specific Goal:** Have students better understand how Ramadan is observed by a group of students who attended Fordson High in 2009. Students will better understand the how the Ramadan observance is a meaningful experience for the individuals shown. This will be demonstrated by watching selected clips from the film *Fordson*.
3. **Student Outcomes:** Students will better understand how the observance of Ramadan presents both challenges and meaning in lives of American Muslims who observe the fast. This film depicts a group of football players fasting for in Ramadan during the month of August as they prepare for a football game against their cross-town rival.

Relationship to the Broader Curriculum

1. This lesson on Ramadan observance in Dearborn, MI, will compliment a course unit on the Five Pillars of Islam.
2. This lesson will help students better understand how Islam is practiced and experienced by a specific community of Arab-American Muslims.

Practical Details, and Resources Included Below

1. Students will first need to learn about the fast of Ramadan via lecture, reading, research, etc.
2. Students will read and answer questions regarding the Arab-American communities in and around Fordson, Michigan. See pages 3 - 7, below, for a fact sheet on “The Michigan Arab American Community,” and pages 8 - 9 for student questions.
3. Students will read and discuss an article in the *New York Times* regarding the observance of Ramadan in New York City schools. (Note: this reading could serve as a general introduction to Ramadan.) See pages 10 - 12 for “Ramadan Enters New York City School Life,” and page 13 for student questions.
4. Students will watch selections from the film [*Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football, and the American Dream*](#). If you are not able to screen the entire film, I'd suggest screening from minute marker 33:26 to 45:55. Please see the website linked just above for information on viewing options and permissions.
5. Students will respond to the film individually by writing in class for five minutes and then open up the conversation to the class as a whole.
6. Individual class members would blog on their reactions to the documentary and their questions that they may still have. Teacher would develop a question regarding the lived religion aspect of the observance of Ramadan.

Face to Faith Video Conference (optional extension activity)

1. The ultimate goal is for students to participate in a joint blogging activity and/or video conference with high school students in a predominantly Muslim society. Students would prepare questions for their Muslim peers regarding the meaning and practice of Ramadan, and share own experiences of practicing religious and/or cultural traditions.
2. Participating in the video conference would require additional training and support from the [Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Face to Faith program](#).

The Michigan Arab American Community

<http://www.arabamerica.com/michigan/arabamericans.php>

The Greater Detroit area is home to one of the largest, oldest and most diverse Arab American communities in the United States.

Who were the first Arab immigrants come to Michigan and what was their motivation?

The first Arab Americans to immigrate to Detroit were the Syrian/Lebanese in the late 1880's. The early wave of Syrian/Lebanese sold goods door-to-door as peddlers and sought jobs in the auto factories when Henry Ford, the pioneering automobile entrepreneur offered \$5.00 a day. A story has been told and passed for generations that a Yemeni sailor met Henry Ford in the early 1900's. That early encounter began a chain migration of Yemenis to Detroit.

Immigration

The earliest wave dates from 1890 to 1912. As with the national pattern, the earliest Arab migrants to the Detroit area were Syrian/Lebanese Christians. The first Arab immigrants to Detroit were Syrian/Lebanese men seeking employment. Many of them settled and worked on the east side in close proximity to the Jefferson Avenue auto plant.

The first Muslims settled in Highland Park near the Ford Motor company Model T plant where many of them worked. The first Palestinians arrived between 1908 and 1913 and were Muslim. Chaldeans first came to Detroit between 1910 and 1912, before the establishment of modern Iraq as a state. Although some Yemenis arrived in the Detroit area as early as 1900, they established a real presence in the Detroit area between 1920-25.

Diversity in the Michigan Arab-American Population

There are 22 Arab countries, including Palestine, which are members of the Arab League and share a common history, language and culture-the immigrants who migrated to America and the Greater Detroit area are from a select group of Arab countries.



Syrian/Lebanese

The earliest Arab immigrants to Detroit were Syrian/Lebanese Christians from the Mount Lebanon area. The later Lebanese immigrants were Shi'a from villages in the South of Lebanon. The

majority of the later Lebanese immigrants come from the villages of Bint Jebail and Tibnin, others from Deir Mimas etc.

U.S. Arab American Population

Nationality Group	Population Estimates
Lebanese/Syrian	1,600,000
Palestinian/Jordanian	180,000
Egyptian	360,000
Iraqi	160,000
Moroccan	100,000
Other	600,000
Total	3,000,000

Michigan Arab American Nationality Groups

Nationality Group	Population Estimates
Lebanese/Syrian	120,000
Iraqi/Chaldean	100,000
Palestinian/Jordanian	25,000
Yemeni	15,000
Other	15,000
(Outside greater Detroit)	25,000
Total	300,000

Iraqi/Chaldean

Many Chaldeans do not self-identify as Arab Americans but their story as a minority population in the Arab world is very similar to other Arab Americans. Almost all of the Chaldeans that immigrated to the Greater Detroit area came from the village of Tel Kaif and some 16 nearby villages in the mountains of northern Iraq. They are speakers of modern Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus) and the majority belongs to the eastern rite Catholic Chaldean church

Among the most recent arrivals to Michigan's Arab-American population are sizable numbers of Iraqi refugees. The majority of these refugees are Shi'a from the South and Kurds and others from Northern Iraq. They were expelled from Iraq and many of them found themselves in refugee camps in Turkey and in Saudi Arabia. The United States allowed approximately 3000 new Iraqi immigrants to the US following the first Gulf War, however today it is increasingly difficult for Iraqis to immigrate.

Palestinian/Jordanian

The majority of Palestinian Americans in Metropolitan Detroit are from villages and small towns in the West bank. Sizable numbers of Palestinian Americans in Detroit are Christian. The largest concentration of Palestinian-Americans in the area is in Livonia. The first Palestinians in the Greater Detroit area arrived in the early 1890's, but the bulk came after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967.

Yemeni

The largest concentration of Yemeni in the Greater Detroit area is in the Southend of Dearborn, with another smaller concentration in Hamtramck. Some Yemenis have worked in the Ford Rouge plant and related automobile industry since the early 1900's. But they did not start settling permanently until the mid 1960's. After 1967, Yemenis began bringing their families, and the Yemeni Southend community was established as a result.

Demographics and Population

Because Arab Americans are not officially recognized as a federal minority group, it is hard to determine the exact number of Arab Americans in Michigan. The estimates range from 409,000 to 490,000 based on information from the Michigan Health Department and the Zogby International polls respectively. In the Greater Detroit area, estimates range from 300,000 to 350,000. While the latest Zogby polls rank Michigan's Arab-American population as second largest in the US, after California, Michigan's Arab-American community in Southeast Michigan still has the greatest local concentration (California's Arab-American population is much more spread out). The Greater Detroit area hosts a diverse population of Arab Americans. Arab Americans are believed to be the third largest ethnic population in the state of Michigan.

Arab American Origins

The Arab World includes 22 countries stretching from North Africa in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east. Arabs are ethnically, religiously and politically diverse but descend from a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

Not all Arabs are Muslim. Not all Muslims are Arab.

- Today there are over 3.5 million Arab Americans in the U.S.
- About one of every three Arab Americans lives in one of the nation's six largest metropolitan areas (about 90 percent live in urban areas).
- 66 percent of Arab Americans live in 10 states.
- 33 percent live in California, Michigan and New York/New Jersey.
- The cities with largest Arab American populations are Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Arab Americans in Michigan

According to the U.S. Census, the Michigan Arab American community grew by more than 65% between 1990 and 2000 - more than double since 1980. 66% of the community identifies having either Lebanese or Iraqi/Chaldean heritage along with sizable numbers of Palestinian/Jordanian and Yemeni Americans. More than 80% of Arab Americans reside in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. 1/3 of the city of Dearborn claims Arab heritage.

Arab American Religion

The Arab American community is religiously diverse. Almost every major religion is represented in the Arab American community, including:

Christians: Maronite Catholic, Melkite Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Roman Catholic, Antiochian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Protestant

Muslims: Sunni, Shia and Druze

Arab American Education

- Arab Americans with at least a high school diploma number 85%
- More than 4 out of 10 Arab Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher.
- 17% of Arab Americans have a post-graduate degree which is nearly twice the American average (9%).
- Of the school age population, 13% are in pre-school, 58% are in elementary or high school, 22% are enrolled in college and 7% are in graduate school.

Arab American Income

- Median income for Arab American households in 1999 was \$47,000 compared with \$42,000 for all households in the U.S.
- Approximately 30% have an annual household income of more than \$75,000 compared to 22% of all households in the U.S.
- Mean income for Arab American households measures at 8% higher than the national average of \$56,644.
- Arab American incomes are 22% higher than the U.S. national average.

Rosina Hassoun, Ph.D. contributed to this section.
(part of the "Discovering the People of Michigan" series,
East Lansing: Michigan State U. Press, 2005)

Selected References:

- Abraham, Nabeel and Andrew Shryock, eds. 2000 Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Abraham, S. "Detroit's Arab-American Community: A Survey of Diversity and Commonality." In Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab American Communities, edited by S. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham, 84-86. Detroit: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1983.
- Abraham, S.Y., Nabeel Abraham, and Barbara Aswad. "The Southend: An Arab Muslim Working-Class Community." In Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab American Communities, edited by S. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham, 164-84. Detroit: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1983.
- Abraham, S. "Detroit's Arab-American Community: A Survey of Diversity and Commonality." In Arthe . Ameri, Anan, and Yvonne Lockwood. Arab Americans in Metro Detroit: A Pictorial History, Images of America. Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2001 .
- Aswad, Barbara and Barbara Bilge, Eds. 1996 Family and Gender Among American Muslims: Issues Facing Middle Eastern Immigrants and their Descendents. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Aswad, Barbara, ed. Arabic Speaking communities in American Cities. New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1974.
- Baker, Wayne, Sally Howell, Amaney Jamal, Ann Lin, Andrew Shryock, Ron Stockton, and Mark Tessler. 2004 The Detroit Arab American Study: Preliminary Findings and Technical Documentation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.
- David, Gary. "The Mosaic of Middle Eastern Community in Metropolitan Detroit." Detroit: United Way Community Services, 1998.
- Hassoun, Rosina Arab Americans in Michigan 2005. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press 2005 (part of the "Discovering the People of Michigan" series)
- Khater, Fouad. 2001 Inventing Home: Immigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McCarus, Ernest, ed. 1994 The Development of Arab American Identity. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sarroub, Loukia. 2005 All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sengstock, Mary. 1999 Chaldean Americans: Changing Conceptions of Ethnic Identity. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Sengstock, Mary C. Chaldean Americans; Changing Conceptions of Identity. Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1982.
- . "Traditional and Nationalist Identity in a Christian Arab Community." Sociologist Analysis 35 (1974): 201-210.
- Strumm, Philippa, Ed. 2006 American Arabs and Political Participation. Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center.
- Suleiman, Michael, ed. 1999 Arabs in America: Building a New Future. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Walbridge, Linda. 1997 Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

**Please refer to the handout distributed in class
and answer the following questions after reading the document.**

1. Who were the first Arab immigrants to arrive in Michigan, when did they first arrive, and what were the economic opportunities that they pursued?
2. What countries are members of the Arab community and what are the specific things that unite them across lines of nationality?
3. Why is it important that people understand that not all *"Arabs are Muslim and not all Muslims are Arab"*?
4. What are the countries that the largest number of Arab immigrants to Michigan came from and when did they arrive?

The New York Times

Ramadan Enters New York City School Life

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

Published: February 6, 1997

As new immigrants and new converts swell the numbers of Muslims in New York City, the rites of Ramadan, Islam's holiest period, have quietly seeped into the culture of the city's schools.

At McKee High School on Staten Island, the basketball coach excuses one of his players from practice at sunset every day so he can dive into his gym bag for a snack. At a Brooklyn junior high school, a seventh grader with a Mickey Mouse ring sits patiently in the cafeteria every afternoon and watches her classmates noisily dig into platters of tuna sandwiches and apple-sauce.

And at schools across the city, nurses report an increase in the number of students treated for dizziness and stomachaches, and teachers say they notice some students acting up and others who seem calmer and more reflective.

Since Jan. 10, when Ramadan began, thousands of teen-agers from Parkchester to Bay Ridge, like Muslim youths across the country, have been fasting from dawn to dusk, quietly inserting into their daily school routines their annual ritual of self-restraint. Ramadan ends Saturday night, when a new moon appears in the sky and Muslims worldwide celebrate the Id al-Fitr feast on Sunday.

"It's just become a part of our school year," said Hector Rivera, the principal of Middle School 136 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where a smattering of Muslim youngsters have been fasting. "We just go through it."

"It seems a very meditative kind of holiday," he observed, and then wondered aloud what school would be like if every student fasted: junior high, he said with a laugh, would be a whole new experience.

For Liela and Shareefa Rahman, Palestinian-American sisters at Mr. Rivera's school, passing up lunch is generally no big deal. Why?

They answered in unison: "It's school food!"

Fasting has been more challenging for Ahmed Zayed, 13, an Egyptian immigrant who is spending his first Ramadan in this country. The other morning, Ahmed shuffled around the back of the cafeteria at Intermediate School 235 and rubbed his stomach. "When I see others eating, it's

hard," he said, noting that in Egypt, hardly anyone would be eating during Ramadan. "I go to the back, so I don't see any food."

There are nearly half a million Muslims in the city, but because the Board of Education does not keep files on children's religion, no one in the system knows how many are of school age and observe Ramadan. The board recognized the first and last days of Ramadan as holy days a couple of years ago and now allows children to take the days off.

The Ramadan fast, a central tenet of Islam, is intended to engender a sense of empathy with the hungry. In the United States, some Muslims also see it as a rare withdrawal from consumerism. So during Ramadan -- the month when the Koran is believed to have been revealed -- every Muslim, once arrived at puberty, is required to refrain from eating and drinking -- even water -- during daylight hours. Exempted from the fast are the sick and the elderly, pregnant and menstruating women, and young children. Those in elementary school rarely fast, but once students enter junior high school, the practice becomes more common.

Islam is said to be the fastest-growing faith in the United States: its adherents speak a variety of languages and come from places as diverse as Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bangladesh and the West Bank. There are large Muslim communities in Newark and Jersey City, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, Chicago and Detroit, according to the Muslim Public Affairs Council, an advocacy group based in Los Angeles.

But uniting all Muslims in this country, experts say, is Ramadan, which is increasingly regarded as their most important act of faith. "It has become a symbol of what it means to be a Muslim," said Yvonne Haddad, a historian who edited "Muslim Communities of North America" (SUNY Press, 1994).

In New York City schools with sizable Muslim populations, educators are increasingly trying to understand and explain Ramadan's significance to the larger student body: At John Jay High School in Park Slope, school officials announced the beginning of Ramadan over the loudspeakers last month. At Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, the principal, Alice Farkouh, who is an Arab-American Christian, also allows students to leave early for Friday afternoon prayers.

But many more schools are like Mr. Rivera's M.S. 136, where about 30 of the 936 students are Muslim. Most of them are Palestinians who blend in with the mostly Hispanic student body -- except, that is, during Ramadan. During these four weeks, Liela, 12, and Shareefa, 13, are among the small group of Muslim students who spend their lunch break in a corner of the cafeteria or in the schoolyard reading, if the weather is warm enough.

This is the first year the girls have seriously fasted. So far, they have slipped up only once, on a school trip to "Pocahontas on Ice," when all the children around them were munching on gooey nachos. Shareefa was salivating. "I was like, 'Man, I want to eat some nachos,' " she recalled. "I got a craving."

Liela, the quieter and more serious of the two, tried to stop her, but Shareefa could not resist. Nor, ultimately, could Liela. "I saw her eating next to me, and I had to have some," she confessed.

The girls say they feel no different from anyone else at school. Shareefa said with a shrug that Ramadan is simply "regular." In fact, they say, they have more trouble with the stigma attached to being Muslim than with hunger from the fast.

Once, Shareefa said, a girl asked whether her parents were arranging her marriage. More recently, another student predicted that she would shrivel up and die before she finished fasting.

"That's not true!" snapped Shareefa. "They really don't know what they're talking about."

Liela and Shareefa, who were both born in New York, do not know what it is to observe Ramadan in a heavily Muslim area. They have never been to their mother's home in Ramallah on the West Bank, nor their father's in Jordan. They know nothing of living in a town where restaurants do not open until sundown, where school is just half a day during the holy month, where there's no gym class and no nachos.

Miles away, in a blinding blue cafeteria in Long Island City, Queens, Fahmida Chowdhury, 13, and her friends mused in Bengali about a different kind of Ramadan. The girls, students at I.S. 235, are all recent immigrants from Bangladesh, and this is their first American Ramadan. In some ways, they said, it is an easier passage here: In Bangladesh, they would be sitting at home for half the month, getting bored and famished by midday.

Here, there is really only one thing that tempts Fahmida's taste buds: "Pizza," she confessed the other day, as the rest of the school went on with lunch -- a thick slab of cheese pizza and a banana.

One thing about Ramadan this year is easier, they agreed: it falls in midwinter, when the days are shorter. The Islamic lunar calendar is 10 days shorter than the Gregorian, so Ramadan rotates by 10 days every year and becomes a real challenge when the days are longer.

Some things are harder here, like the absence of their extended families, of everyone on the block getting up at the crack of dawn, feasting together at the end of the day, and staging huge parties to celebrate Ramadan's end. It is customary to wear new clothes to the festivities, and the girls have all done their shopping. But the parties just aren't the same in America.

"I already have new clothes for Eid," Farhana Afroze, 12, announced in Bengali. "But where am I going to show off these new clothes? I mean, that's the main thing!"

Possible discussion/reflection questions
from *New York Times* article and *Fordson* film clip

These questions could be used as discussion and or blogging questions in class.

1. In what ways does the environment of school seem to present unique challenges to the students who are observing Ramadan?
2. What do you think are the various motivations that someone might have for observing Ramadan?
3. Who doesn't have to observe the fast?
4. In what ways would it be more challenging to observe Ramadan depending on the type of school that a person were to attend?

Fordson reflection questions:

1. In what ways does it seem uniquely difficult for the students in the film to observe the fast?
2. How does Ramadan seem to bring the community together?
3. In what ways do the people in the film claim that observing Ramadan is a beneficial act?

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.***