

PITAJKAT'S WITH EGGS AND SOME OTHER THINGS...

Prizren | January, '98

By Agron Shporta

In the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the holy month of Ramadan, Prizren pulsates with its very own rhythm.

Sometime before eight in the evening, the crowd starts to and from the city's almost thirty mosques. They are mostly men, with young ones accounting for an ever-larger proportion.

Only after tarawih, the city begins to liven up: people visit their relatives (if they have not already been invited to an iftar), the younger ones head towards Shadervan, whereas the elderly prefer to walk near the Bistrica river.

Prizren, too, has cafes, coffee/tea-places and bars. What happens to them during Ramadan? Cafes whose owners are Muslim remove the bottles with firewater from their shelves and replace them with bottles of gazoz (a product of Prizren) or even buttermilk. Sweets are served, too. This is also valid for the tea places, where people play backgammon, which they refer to as 'shesh-besh' or 'tablla.'

What about the bars? Well, it depends how each of them has adapted to the situation. Those who do not allow their clients to start their 'literary hour' (that is played with 52 cards, of course) after 23.00 cannot hope to earn a lot, for alcohol goes almost unconsumed during Ramadan in Prizren. But, is that really the case?

Curiosity and a gut feeling tempt me to go to a bar, the owner of whom is a Serb, where I know Albanians hang out at times other than Ramadan (not necessarily sharing a table with Serbs!) and where I see some familiar faces. They are not pleased to meet me there, but they invite me to their table, where one could see a battle between Heineken and Peja Beer, whereas in the background we could hear the rap-version of 'Staying Alive,' the once popular hit of the Bee Gees. The talk revolves around graphic design and the newest tendencies in applied arts...

I resume my walk alongside the right-hand side of the river, from Shadervan towards Marash. At 22.00, there are many young ladies at the bars, but soon they will head towards their homes, to leave the city to men. A couple of nights ago, in a bar that after 23.00 converts into a casino (they usually play sorts of 'Rummy' and other card games), just as she was leaving the bar as the last of her sort, a woman could not resist screaming "This is a man's world" from the one-time hit of James Brown.

But not always and not all the time: in between Shadervan in the west and Marash in the east, in front of the Castle to the south and next to Bistrica in the north, I see four young couples. The spring breeze of January and the music coming from the play between the water and the rocks of the river, has them exchanging whispers and kisses...

I don't disturb them and resume my walk, cross the bridge and while passing by his door, remember the words of the late Gani Tada, who by many was considered to be the Nasreddin Hoca of Prizren: "After

having eaten well, either take forty steps, or fall onto your back..."

And here, we have the monumental site of the Albanian League of Prizren. The serious cracks in the buildings of this site and the darkness (the light bulbs are broken) give it a frightful look. I wouldn't be surprised were I to see the late Hitchcock... But here is the contrast: we face the minaret of the mosque in Marash, the vertically positioned bulbs of which glimmer the message "MUBAREK RAMAZAN" (for some reason, only the 'R' of 'ramazan' is made of red light-bulbs, whereas the rest are yellow). The tip of this minaret carries other multi-colored bulbs that are turned on and off at intervals and in a manner that makes impossible a comparison to the Christmas tree... However, the other mosques of the city, maintain a more dignified appearance...

I decide to make some 'blitz' visits to as many 'post-midnight libraries' with the aim of comparing the atmospheres, which for tonight seems to be impossible: In the first tea-place I enter, I see some friends, who are looking for a fourth mate. I sit and begin to spread the cards. We play 'Zhol' or the '14' (cards) as it was popular. The two that come worse are to pay the sweets and beverages served during the game. The same happens at the surrounding tables, too...

Cafes or even tea-places that do not possess a satellite receiver, mostly turned towards Turkey, are quite rare in Prizren. In the one I frequent tonight, people watch 'Kanal D,' the news discusses the pupils of a high school in the Turkish city of Malatya, who have stabbed three of their friends because the latter had not been fasting. Then, there were comments (some of them even jocular) about the event, continued by talks about the editorial policy of private Turkish TVchannels...

A merchant comes in and from the door shouts at his friends "Oh, quite the gamblers that you were: you're playing for pudding and Coca-Cola... you can't even match the women..." Laughter. The allusion was directed towards the topic that has been trending in Prizren for quite some months now: some women in Prizren gamble with great amounts of money: it is said that one even lost her flat to card-games!

One can't even realize how quickly time passes! Now it is 1.30 of the coming day and one of the guys proposes to go and buy 'topli' in Jenimahalle, a neighborhood that lies in the opposite part of the city. This bakery is one of the most frequented: pans containing mixtures of eggs, curd, oil and smelly herbs, wait in line to enter the high-temperature oven heated by wood. To foreign visitors 'pitajka's with eggs,' this traditional Prizreni dish and blessing of Ramadan, people of Prizren translate it as 'Prizren Pizza.'

Ten people wait for their pitajka's inside, in the heat offered by the open oven: the ember is uniformly spread around the old oven. We are outside, where about fifteen other people, divided into small groups, wait for the warm 'syfyr.' One of them comments the news he had earlier watched at the 'Voice of America.' The names of Djukanovic, Bulatovic and Glebard are mentioned. The talk turns back to Kosovo, and one of the man says "We will never be able to keep our state, even if we get it..." This infuriates the

other. The talk gets so heated, that they almost forget about the pitajka's.

Young boys and girls exhibit themselves around Jenihmahalle, even though it is past two. Four or five kids are seen roaming here. One of them kicks a man in his foot in a manner that the latter thought that a coin dropped off his pocket, while the kids were laughing from the first corner. Here it seems that nobody sleeps before morning!

Another group talks of a police officer of finance, who after taking a huge sum from Prizreni merchants, had escaped to an unidentified place in Serbia. The talk, then, smoothly passes to the baker and to the amount he may be earning during Ramadan...

We change the venue. A family restaurant turned into yet another "library": cigarette smoke, sweets and buttermilk. On the TV one can watch the erotic-satellite channel 'Babylon Blue,' but not many pay any attention. Is it out of respect for Ramadan? No, perhaps because the stares are resting on the 14 cards lying in their hands.

One of the men talks of the case where he was mistreated by a medical technician in the city hospital. "Yes, yes, he was an Albanian..." The other says that it is a well-known case in the psychopathology of Ramadan that goes by the name of "cigarette fever." The other speaks of the unpleasant experiences he and his wife had had at a textile shop. The previous one proposes that the entrance of the shops should have a sign saying "WARNING!!! The salesman is fasting"...

Here comes the talk that is repeated almost every night and in almost every place: "Where will you celebrate Bajram?" This year, here people say "Bajram came during Ramazan," alluding to the New Year's eve, which only few celebrated like in the previous years, therefore it is expected that in the Bajram that succeeds Ramadan, people will hyper compensate for this loss...

And what about tomorrow? Tomorrow owners of private businesses will open their shops later than usual, play backgammon when they have no customers, or go to their immediate neighbors for a chat, until time passes and iftar comes. And then? All of the above from scratch... until Bajram...

Agron Shporta (1962-2014) was a journalist, translator and poet, among other things.

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Translation by: Ares Shporta*