

Mubarak from Manzini!

By Yusuf Omar

I didn't wear new clothes this Eid. I didn't even wear clean clothes. But determined not to spend Eid alone in Swaziland with no animal to slaughter, planning began on Monday for the holy day.

There were some Muslims but no Mosque in Siteki, the town I was staying in. I took a one hour bus to Manzini, Swaziland's biggest city to find Muslims and buy a goat or sheep. I started with all the shops and businesses, which are pretty much all owned my Indian Muslims.

Asking really leading and rhetorical questions like "what are you doing for Eid?" and doing the jugular neck slicing action with my hand across my neck for those that didn't speak English. Finally I walked into a cellphone shop owned a South African Muslim. The owner has a pretty daughter working in the shop and a Mercedes parked out-front.



Manzini Mosque

BINGO! Read my namaz right and surely I would be in for a fantastic Eid breakfast, lunch and dinner on Wednesday. Maybe even a place to stay.

We drive just down the road to Manzini Mosque. The Mosque is across the road from a church and locals recall the tensions when the Mosque was being constructed and the minaret was slowly edging taller than the church's tower. The mosque is enormous, far too large for Manzini. In fact it could probably house all the Muslims in Swaziland. I'm wearing shorts and a Swazi man generously lends his Kurta. There are two stories and it is very well furnished. Making wudu was refreshing, I hadn't had a warm shower in over two days and people

weren't even sitting next to me on the buses anymore. About fifty people congregated for the midday prayer. The feeling I get when I visit Mosques around the world is something that will never fade.

That feeling of unity, the fact that I can pray next to a Swazi man, and largely that we do exactly the same motions and read the same surahs. After namaz Mr Mercedes had disappeared and my hopes of a lavish Eid lunch were crushed.



Meeting Shoaib, Zakir and Zahir at the cellphone shop in Manzini

Back on the Muslim hunt I visit all the Gujarati Indian owned cellphone shops. Apparently in India for around R2000 you are a qualified cellphone repair

technician, so it's a common trade here. Finally I met Soaib Patham, who moved to Swaziland alone when he was 18 and is now my age working for a friend. The sun was fading and I had to make my way back to Siteki but I spoke to him briefly and got his phone number. He was no Mr Mercedes, but at this point I couldn't afford to be picky.

On the evening before Eid I took a bus back to Manzini and messaged Soaib asking if I could stay at his house. To my surprise he replied instantly saying I should come straight to the shop. Playing the Muslim card can reap its rewards. When I arrived at the store behind the bus stop in the center of Mazini, Shoaib, Zakir and Zahir were closing up the shop and packing the cellphones from the glass cabinet into a big duffel bag. A muscular Nigerian man wearing a t-shirt two sizes too small and a large silver necklace walked in. He placed a suitcase full of phones from Johannesburg onto the table and demanded his money. Zahir, the 25 year old owner of the shop, tried to negotiate on price but when the man threatened to slap him for “fooling around” with him, they readily agreed on a deal. “You are a small boy,” laughed the Nigerian as he left the shop with a palm-full of money in his hand.

Zahir then went outside to get the car, leaving us with the phones and money. His black Nissan Gloria screeched around the front of the store and hooted once and we raced into the back of the car with the black bag. Zahir speeds off along the pothole plagued roads.

We went straight to Bangla-cafe, where they order boiled eggs and Chana Chat pati, a very spicy entree of chickpeas, tomatoes and onions. They visit the restaurant every day after work from around six till eleven at night. One by one, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian friends join. Generally the Indians own the cellphone stores; the Pakistanis have the car yards; and the Bangladeshis operate the restaurants.



Bangla Cafe

The three men are Surti Gujarati Muslims in their early twenties, like me. I like to think I am a brave and courageous traveler but these guys are really brave. They leave the comfort of their families and homes as young at seventeen for Swaziland to find a better life in an unknown land. “I’m legal,” boasts Zahir. Most of them are not legal and are constantly paying bribes and living in fear that one day they will be sent home. Most marry local Swazi women to gain permanent residency. We headed to the Mosque for Eisha and then back to their one bedroom apartment where we drink ellatche tea and watched classic Bollywood films. They ridiculed me because I don’t speak any Indian languages.

For dinner we sat on a traditional Indian catayi straw mat on the floor and ate rice, scrambled eggs, roti, beef chundne daar and chicken curry. No plates or cutlery, just communal dishes.

At 6.30 am on Wednesday morning we walked to the



Eid morning at the Mosque

mosque for Eid namaz. I was shocked to see at least 500 people and Muslim representatives from every country. It's a depressing feeling having no one to hug after salah, or not see any familiar faces, but I greeted my new Indian friends as if they were my closest family.



Dinner on floor

Back at the apartment we enjoyed a similar Eid breakfast to what mum makes at home on Eid morning; almonds and milk, sweet rice and samosas. They sat and reminisced about how good the food is back in India.

It was pouring down with rain so after breakfast they decided not to open the shop. We drove half an hour to the oldest Mosque in Swaziland, Ezulwini Valley Masjid. In the two hours I was there, they slaughtered over fifty goats and four cows in the name of Allah.

Taking photos without wetting my camera in the unforgiving rain was near impossible. All the animals were gutted and skinned on site, and the meat was loaded in the back of white vans to be sent to Swaziland's seven Mosques.

From there, they would distribute it to the poor. Nothing went to waste, and on a small BBQ stand next to the Mosque I tasted goats' brains and stomach. The skillful Afghanistan butchers carved the skin off the goats and cows so it could be used to make blankets and clothing.

We drove back to Manzini and carried out four goat carcasses up the three flights of stairs to their apartment, blood dripping on the concrete floors. One black bag ripped open and a goat's head rolled down the stairs, scaring some Swazi children away. Victor (the French friend I would be traveling with) then called to tell me he had arrived in so I walked to the bus stop to collect him. On my way there the Indian guys phoned to say that I couldn't bring Victor back to their place because a white man couldn't come in their house.



This was a very disappointing end to a wonderful Eid, and in my opinion it definitely went against the essence of Eid and Islam.