



# This does not feel like home

## The holiday experience for international students at AU

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It is Oct. 5, 2014. In Arabic, the 10th of the Dhul-Hijjah, the 12th and final month of the Islamic calendar year. It is Eid Al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice.

The Feast of Sacrifice is the sec-

ond of two Muslim holidays celebrated worldwide each year, which Muslims consider it the holier of the two in Islam.

Around two million Muslim people from all around the world gather in 2.6 square miles in Mecca, a desert valley in western Saudi Arabia. A lot of smiles and greetings in every language exchange between pilgrims. People hug and bless each other for finishing the Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Some pilgrims are in their 60s, and some are in their early 30s and 40s, crying over a once in a lifetime chance to be in Mecca, Islam's most holy and most sacred site.

While millions of people are celebrating the purity of the spirit and a new life without sins after the Hajj, Sulaiman Bondagji, now a 21-year-old sophomore double major in Marketing and International Business at Ashland University, is celebrating finishing his job as a guider that helps pilgrims who are practicing their first Hajj successfully.

Bondagji did not know in the few years while he was in in the U.S. he would miss serving people who he does not even know, even when he is assisting the pilgrims with a lack of sleep for many long days.

Many international students face a feeling of alienation on holidays. The traditions are not their traditions, and the people around them are not their people, Bondagji explained. They are accustomed

to having the holidays as days to remember that they are far from home, far from family and far from friends.

Bondagji comes from a family well-known for guiding the pilgrims in Mecca for hundreds of years. Since his early childhood, Bondagji worked with his father in

doing what he used to do since the time he was seven.

To Sulaiman, the Feast of Sacrifice was not a simple day where he just dresses nice and draws a smile on his face. He does not want to celebrate the day by exchanging gifts as usual, but by clearing forehead sweat and jumping with joy

not one of his family members was around him. His friends were not there to share laughter with him. Also, the Eid sermon was in English, which he is used to hearing in Arabic. He understood nothing from the sermon.

It was not the best holiday for him. He felt like the day was a disappointment, he said.

"I spent the holiday with more than 30 Saudi people," Bondagji said. "And still, I did not feel the spirit of the Eid as I did three years ago back home."

For Bondagji and many other students, the other problem is that the cost of tickets to go home is just too expensive.

Feast of Sacrifice this year happened to be in the first week of the spring semester. Even if students are willing to spend the money to buy a ticket, they cannot leave school in their first week, Bondagji explained.

The problem of detachment of holiday spirit does not affect just Muslim students. Even Christian students from other countries say they have the same feeling.

Temidayo Aluko, a 34-year-old MBA Nigerian student, who described himself as a "not so religious" person, said that when he experienced Easter in the U.S. he found it so different. He was surprised when he learned that Easter was observed for three days (Good Friday, the following Saturday, and then Easter Sunday) while in Nigeria it was four days.

He also said that even though he did not go to church very much when he was in Nigeria, he misses the movement and high activity present in the churches in his city, Lagos. The churches there are different than American churches, which he describes as monotonous compared to what he is used to.

"Easter Monday is included with the holiday in my country. Also, we do not have the Easter Egg or the popular games related to it. People love it here, but it does not exist where I come from. The church experience is different here too," he said.

There are more than 360 international students at AU, hailing from 29 countries. Most of them are from China, Saudi Arabia, India, Bangladesh, and lately a growing number from Nigeria.

The International Student Services at the university tries to celebrate student holidays, but the multiplicity of religions, different races, and intellectual orientations make this task almost impossible. The number of staff we have cannot handle it, director of international student services, Scott Parillo, said.

Parillo understands what international students go through as he himself has experienced that

feeling. He used to teach in Japan for years and he experienced the Christmas holiday while there. It took him a while to find a church that lined up with his beliefs and it was far from the city he was teaching in.

It used to take him an hour train ride to reach the church.

"Christmas for me... well, the traditions are important but they are not terribly important. Like if I don't have a Christmas tree in my house I don't feel sad," Parillo said. "I would say, if I lived there for 20 years I would miss going to church for Christmas Eve service, but I knew that was there for short amount of time, so we were able to find substitutes for the social aspect."

Because the culture is so different in Japan, the popular Christmas holiday meal there was Kentucky Fried Chicken. They even dress Colonel Sanders as Santa Claus, Parillo said. To celebrate the holiday, he and his wife ate fried chicken and cake.

Parillo said that different groups of international students are trying to make Ashland feel like home by getting together to celebrate their holidays.

The biggest ethnic group on campus is the Chinese group, he said. They celebrate the Chinese New Year annually. Another group is the Saudi club, and while they used to be one of the biggest clubs at AU, their numbers have decreased over the past few years due to the Saudi government reducing the number of scholarships it supports.

Because of the small number, their presence at celebrations is irregular and sometimes may not exist at all, Bondagji said.

There are 1.18 million international students in the U.S. and more than 37,000 of them are located in Ohio according to Student and Exchange Visitor Information System.

International students face various challenges such as culture differences, affording tuition, fitting in and language barriers. Holiday seasons are just another way international students feel homesick.

Despite the efforts of the International Students Office to avert the homesickness feeling, holidays continue to remind international students of the beautiful memories they have lived for many years.

"I cannot wait until I finish school to go back to my country and guide the pilgrims again just like the old days. That's the Eid to me, to help people get their first Hajj experience right," Bondagji said.

"Although I am unhappy with missing the holiday and spending time with my family, I am here to study and build my future, and that is very understandable reason to be far away from home."



SUBMITTED BY SULAIMAN BONDAGJI

Sulaiman Bondagji celebrating Al-Eid with his brothers. From left to right: Mohammad Bondagji, Sulaiman Bondagji, Ahmed Bondagji.

following the traditions of his family in serving the pilgrims in Mecca.

For all his life, he did not celebrate the Feast with his family like other Muslims. His feast was finishing the season smoothly, without any problems. Each year, his father and his family are responsible for the wellbeing of 3,000 people from Southeast Asia, from places such as Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia.

The Bondagji family starts preparing for the season two months ahead of schedule to reach the Feast safely with satisfied pilgrims who might not come to the city again in their life.

Sulaiman, who is usually heavily involved in the process, has been in the United States for the last three years, missing three Hajj seasons in a row.

"The work I usually do during the Hajj season is like part of me," Bondagji said. "Each year since I come here I get so hyped before the Hajj, but the enthusiasm disappears when I realize that I'll be here in Ashland and not amid the crowds and pilgrims in Mecca."

For the last three years, he studied the English language at the access program at Ashland University, and after graduating from that program, he started crossing between the corridors and classes of Richard E. & Sandra J. Dauch College of Business & Economics.

He says the Feast is not the same so far from home, and he misses

because of the success of his effort with his family after a pilgrimage season.

During his years in the United States, the Feast of Sacrifice day goes on like all other days. He only tries to do one thing: call his family, which ends up as a series of desperate failed attempts.

For years, all apps that use an encrypted Voice over Internet Protocol service (such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Viber, and Snapchat) were blocked by the Communications and Information Technology Commission.

Consequently, these apps either do not work at all, or work so poorly that the two sides of the phone call can barely hear each other.

"I remember when my older brother was in the U.S. years ago. He used to call us via Skype in the Feast of Breaking the Fast. The internet was so bad, to the point that we just see his picture, then the call will drop," Bondagji said. "He used to call once, twice, three, four times until he lost hope of a good connection, to say hi, and congratulate the family on a special day like this."

Bondagji celebrated his first Feast of Sacrifice in America with other Saudis. They started the day by going to the Islamic Society of Mansfield where the Prayer of the Feast is usually held.

He was puzzled. Everything was not what he was used to, dozens of new faces, many nationalities, and



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Sulaiman Bondagji's brother, Mohammad, with pilgrims from Southeast Asia celebrating the end of Hajj.