



With her own unique flare and infectious sense of humor, **Issa Rae**'s content has garnered millions of views online and two Golden Globe nominations for Best Actress for her hit show, HBO's *Insecure*. Issa's web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, was the recipient of the coveted Shorty Award for Best Web Show and her first book, a collection of essays, is a *New York Times* bestseller.

Issa Rae

WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, I decided to celebrate Ramadan for the first time. After a lifetime of telling my Muslim dad and extended family, “I love y’all, but I’m not fasting,” I finally decided to celebrate it too. And by “celebrate,” I mean starving during daylight hours for a full month. Good times.

Except not. I decided to do Ramadan, and I did Ramadan wrong.

My whole life I had lived in fear of it. Not because it was foreign to me. My dad is from Senegal—where almost everyone is Muslim. I grew up visiting Senegal and even lived there for a short period of time as a very young child. It’s more that I just don’t like being hungry or checking off a list of things I can’t do. And when it comes to Ramadan, you can’t eat, drink, have sex, or even think ungenerous thoughts for an entire month. You also have to pray a lot. Which I didn’t do, outside of “I pray they don’t serve Domino’s for lunch, Lord Allah, because I may be tempted.” Ramadan is a beautiful tradition, but I had not grown up developing the strength or discipline to properly celebrate it the way so many of my family members had.

When I gave it a shot, I really truly wanted to feel like I was putting my

whole being into it (for reasons I'll get to later). My initial failings were due to straight laziness for the most part. I had trouble waking up in advance of the sunrise, which is when you are supposed to get out of bed so you can have your food and water for the long day ahead. Then once the sun was up I acted nasty and hangry all damn day till the sun set, at which point I would grossly overeat to make up for lost time and calories. Which isn't really the point of the fast. The idea is to focus on what you can sacrifice and give, not what you wish you had more of. And I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to turn your thoughts to how to sneak boys into the house and get them to go down on you, but that's what I did the whole damn thirty days. Because that shit is hard. And I have deep respect for Muslims who see it through every single time. I remember I kept telling myself, "Damn Jo-Issa, your ten-year-old cousins are doing this, so your seventeen-year-old ass can do it too." I think the first week, I was drinking water during the day because I didn't know you weren't supposed to because what kind of dehydrating shit is that? And then my Muslim classmate was like, "What are you doing? You know you're not supposed to drink water, right?" And I was like, "Girl, I know. I was just rinsing my mouth out. Chill." I presented it to my friends all wrong too, like I was tackling a new diet, as opposed to being connected with my Senegalese side. They were mildly impressed: "If you're not eating during the day, can I get your lunch tickets?"

Looking back, I am not proud of how I did Ramadan wrong. I am not telling this story to make light of Ramadan or to pat myself on my weak-ass back. It was not my finest moment. But it was a rare moment in my life where I was seeking religion. My mom is from New Orleans, and she won the "debate" about which religion me and my four siblings would be raised in. So even though my dad never let us forget that we were Senegalese, we grew up attending Christian churches. Despite being raised Catholic herself, my

mother was heavily involved in the church and made sure we were too. I never wanted to be there on Sunday mornings. Most kids and teenagers don't. It was not fun. And I wouldn't call myself religious today. Of course, looking back I can see how the church rooted my family and gave us community. It also gave "younger me" an audience. My mom's church is where I put on my first play. Church is where I was standing the first time I said something into a mic that I had written myself. It's where I found my creative roots. That meant a lot to me. Plus, they don't make you fast, so . . .

Spending time in Dakar, Senegal, growing up, sometimes my visit overlapped with Ramadan. It's a monthlong holiday that is based on the lunar calendar, so it doesn't happen in the exact same month every year. One year it might fall in June and another year it's in April, so sometimes it would creep up on me. And I was always disappointed if my time in Dakar was shadowed by Ramadan. I know that sounds selfish or disrespectful, but I was a kid—away from her regular home and school life—in a place where I got to have fun. All the rules were different there. The age limit at the clubs was only sixteen, which felt too good to be true. But during Ramadan everything would shut down. You couldn't go out dancing. You couldn't even go to restaurants. It was so irritating. Those teenage summers were supposed to be all about *me* living my best adult life—and then Ramadan had to get in the way. And my cousins did *not* play when it came to maintaining it—which I couldn't really be mad at. As a culture, everyone was united in being hungry and bored together. Even if you weren't celebrating it, you had to respect it.

But then when it's over, you get to wild out. Imagine that almost a quarter of *all the people on the entire planet* are on their best, foodless behavior for an entire month. They've all been celibate, quietly fasting and focusing on spiritual matters and now they get to feast (and *feast*, o-kay?!). It has a real exuberant vibe. There's food and gifts and music and parties. In Senegal, they

wait a little while after Ramadan has ended to kick off the holiday called Tabaski.

People get dressed up, do their hair, and, for weeks, you see them fattening up the goat or sheep they're going to feast on for the big day. It's a celebration honoring Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God. As the story goes, at the last minute, God provided a sheep instead of asking Ibrahim to take his son's life. People at my mom's church were also all over that biblical story (except Christians call them Abraham and Isaac), but they didn't actually reenact the slaughter/eat/party part the way they do in Senegal.

I still remember my first Tabaski experience. I was about five years old, but the memory is pretty vivid. You don't soon forget the sight of a live goat's throat being slit. It played like a horror movie. Except everyone was watching and cheering. Just gathered around while the poor goat lay there bleeding his little goat life out. That goat had been hanging around for the month prior, just chilling with us. To five-year-old me, he was our pet. We named him Martin le Mouton and everything (RIP Martin). After they had finished butchering the goat to prepare it to be cooked, my older cousins, who smelled my fear, would come at me with a severed goat leg and chase me around the yard. I had nightmares about the whole thing, and in following years, actively decided not to watch the killing go down. And every damn year, I would get too close to that goat. I'd give it yet another name and allow myself to get attached while fully knowing our time together would be brief. Pretty soon his head was going to be floating in a soup that I was supposed to get excited about eating.

So I got a rough start with Tabaski, but it didn't take too long for me to look forward to it. My dad's very favorite thing was to take us to Senegal, and my mother was just as enthusiastic about it. She was already fluent in French

by the time she met my dad in college, and over the years she learned to speak Wolof and even learned how to cook Senegalese food, thanks to my dad's sisters. The food in Senegal (pet goats notwithstanding) is 100 percent my favorite thing to eat. They used to try to teach me to cook there too, and I skirted that responsibility/privilege for a long time.

"Oh, y'all make it so perfect, you don't want me messing it up!" I'd say, and backward tiptoe out of the kitchen.

I remember my aunt saying, "Oh, Issa, you will have to learn to cook for your man. Get in here!"

The gender roles are real there. And yet, my mother never felt so respected and regarded as she did in Senegal. She was born in New Orleans in the fifties, and my grandparents moved her and my aunt to LA when she was four. But her parents had been brought up in the time when you had to slip under the radar if you were black. They were afraid for my mom when she would speak her mind in any way. Even though they lived in the more liberal California, they still didn't want her to wear her hair in an Afro, much less discuss civil rights. I'm sure my mom has all kinds of stories about being a black woman of her generation and all the obstacles that came with that. But both of our experiences in Senegal were loving, warm, and welcomed respect for black women—all women really. It's a culture that has gender roles but feels to me that it pays due respect to all the roles. I can understand why my mother was very attracted to it.

I have so many good memories of being there and feeling connected to something that I couldn't fully explain—it just felt right. And it was also hella fun. Not like the kind of fun you expected to have in the United States as a kid in the nineties—here in America we're always on a phone or a computer. Kids spend their time playing video games and going to the mall to buy shit. But in Senegal, most of what we did, even as kids, was sit around and . . .

talk. There was never anything good on TV there (when the TV actually worked). I remember when they first got Wi-Fi at my aunt's house in Dakar because it was a pretty momentous day—not that it really changed things for us. The internet only worked in my aunt's bedroom and it was hot as fuck in there, so you had to ask yourself, *Do you want to be hot on the internet or catch a breeze and talk to Grandpa?* When I would make the mistake of asking what we were doing today, I got blank looks because my cousins were basically like, “That’s on you, bruh.” Boredom was not a thing to complain about there. Parents weren’t always scrambling around figuring out how to entertain us. It was just *Go play*, or *Go sit outside and talk*. So we played a *lot* of games and did a *lot* of talking.

We would make up games to entertain ourselves. There were always so many kids, babies, and toddlers around that you had to kind of invent an activity that would be good for all ages. I excelled at this (probably my need to entertain, or just my inherent geekiness). There was the game “questions in a hat,” where we’d rip up small pieces of paper and write anonymous, naughty questions for each of us to pull out of a hat and answer (I’ve since turned it into a drinking game with my friends). We made up dances to show off in the club. We’d play characters and perform skits for one another. We were all the entertainment we had and it was glorious.

You’d think as I got older, this environment wouldn’t hold as much appeal for me. But Dakar was so dope, and I felt like a queen. I’m not trying to be conceited, but I was beautiful there. The first time I ever got catcalled in my life was on a street in Dakar. I was so excited that I turned around and answered the guy. It wasn’t a clapback either. “Hey, girl, where you going?” *Wherever you’d like to go, boy.* “Oh . . . uh . . . never mind.” My older brothers, who were so used to me being completely safe from any sort of sexual interest from men on the streets of Los Angeles, had not learned to be protective of

me in any way, shape, or form. They were not wrong to assume that no one would ever sexually harass their sister. But in Senegal, there was a new girl in town, and she was fly.

One of my Senegalese cousins had to pull me aside and say in a very gentle way that it was not a good idea to respond to random men who yelled things about my body out in public. "*Tu es trop facile*," he told me, frustrated, which meant I was too easy. He told me that I should have more respect for myself because I deserved better. I wanted to cry happy tears. I was so touched, because not only did men here think I was hot enough to whistle at, they also thought I deserved respect.

This was a very empowering and exciting feeling as a teenager. By this time, I had become a well-established awkward black girl back in America—a progression that had come to light at the beginning of middle school. When I was in sixth grade, I moved across the country from a mostly white, gifted school in Maryland, where I was one of the only black girls, to a predominantly black middle school in Los Angeles, where I was berated for "acting white." Being a young adolescent is hard enough. Being black is hard enough. But I had awkwardness in the mix too. Yet somehow in Senegal this awkwardness got lost in translation.

I had this amazing currency there because I knew more about pop culture and I lived thirty minutes from Hollywood in America. By the time I was a teenager, I started bringing over VHS tapes and CDs to show my cousins all the latest American TV shows, music videos, and songs. One of the few American shows they already had over there was *Beverly Hills, 90210* and we'd all watch it together, and then I would field questions about all the cast members.

"Have you ever run into Dylan, walking around on the street, Issa?"

"Oh yeah, yeah, me and Dylan have crossed paths," I'd say without missing a beat.

"Whoaaa. What about Donna and Kelly?" (I love that they knew exactly what was up and didn't care about wack-ass Brenda either.)

"As a matter of fact, I was just at Kelly's house last week."

They totally bought it. I was a hero. I was cool.

But back home, I would regularly embarrass myself with my lack of coolness. When Tupac was shot, which was a huge event in LA, all the kids were talking about it at school. My nerdy self had no idea who Tupac was, which I blame on my older brothers, who usually would have introduced me to stuff like that, but they had all gone off to college at this point. So I didn't know a damn thing about Tupac. I remember kind of edging into someone's conversation at school one day trying to fit in, mimicking their hushed melodramatic tones.

"Yeah, I heard Two-Pack died." I nodded my head slowly like I was so devastated. "That's so sad. What did he sing?"

People rolled their eyes and walked away. It was humiliating. I was chubby (something my Senegalese aunts thought was lucky and healthy), and always in love with boys who wouldn't give my tomboy-looking self the time of day. Meanwhile, all the girls would make fun of my "Valley girl accent" and natural hair. It all got to be pretty exhausting.

It was so much easier to be myself in Senegal. And it was so much clearer that I belonged. I looked like regular women you'd see walking around there. I had so many cousins and aunts and uncles. I could have written my grandfather's biography. I was a dignified cultural ambassador. They thought it was cool that I wanted to write plays and TV shows. My dance floor movements registered as actual "dance." No matter how confused I was about myself, my identity, or my family—in Senegal I always found a feeling of home.

I remember going back just after my parents divorced, when I was sixteen. It was a really difficult time for me because I was angry at both of my

parents in different ways. And yet, it was impossible to hate on my dad in his homeland. He was never the most present in my life, but his presence was so strongly felt there. He was a hero—one of seven kids, who became a successful doctor and helped so many people from his family and community. Whoever he was—which was mostly a mystery to me as a girl—translated better in Senegal. People always had huge smiles on their faces when they talked about him. It was an honor to be his daughter. I felt closer to him.

As for my mom, being there without her was deeply sad. My relationship with her was suffering as a result of the divorce, but I still missed her presence in Dakar. I knew she loved that place just as much as I did. Even though she wasn't Senegalese per se, she held on to it like I did. She had raised her kids in that culture and built her whole life around it. She loved my dad's family as much as her own. And now she was going to lose it all.

I remember having some long talks about Islam with my seventeen-year-old cousin Malick Seine during that trip. He was very religious, but also the bad boy of the family who smoked and drank and reveled in being the black sheep. He used to take pride in the fact that he was an excellent liar who could con anyone out of money, and he bragged about all the creative places he found to have sex with girls around the neighborhood. A picture of morality. Yet he could casually quote the Quran, and he clearly found strength and comfort in the role his religion played in his life.

It really inspired me, because I was just awkward and pessimistic about everything.

Hence my attempt to observe Ramadan when I got back home—which I already explained wasn't my most graceful gesture. I still give myself an A for effort. My Muslim family members in America were beside themselves with excitement. They used to tease me that I was too good to fast, so this was surprising news for them. My cousins were asking if I planned on keeping it up

year after year. My dad would call to check in on me to see how I was doing, like a Weight Watchers buddy. He was proud of me. I was—mostly—proud of myself.

And PS, I would like to formally ask forgiveness from the religion of Islam as a whole for humoring me. I wasn't trying to become a devout, disciplined Muslim. I just missed my family and my dad. And I don't know if I learned anything deeper about myself, but it did allow me to pause for a moment at a troubling time of my life and collect myself. Connect myself. It wasn't a deeply religious gesture, but I can see now that in its own awkward and reluctant way, it was a spiritual one.