

Hajj: Only at this Sacred Time and Place

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For more than fourteen centuries, Muslims from all over the world have been converging in the city of Makkah to perform the hajj pilgrimage. While the pilgrimage itself is a gruelling five-day period during which a number of rituals are performed, for most pilgrims the journey has been much longer and more involved. While today the "Jet Age Hajj"¹ is most common, until well into the twentieth century the journey often involved many months of travelling as pilgrims soaked up various cultures and natural wonders along the way.

My hajj, in 1997, was of the "Jet Age" variety, taking us from Johannesburg to Jeddah in a matter of hours. And, like most other pilgrims, my wife Shamima, and I spent more than just five days in the land of the pilgrimage, dividing our three weeks there between Makkah—the City of God—and Medina—the City of the Prophet Muhammad.

The hajj rituals are exhausting and include various rites that need to be performed in the burning Arabian heat, e.g. the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, the prayer at Arafat and the pelting with pebbles of the stone pillars representing Satan. Performing these with two million other people—all trying to do the same things at the same times—adds to the challenges associated with hajj. But it also adds to the spirit of community that pervades the performance of this, the fifth of the five pillars of Islam. My hajj was further enhanced and made unique by the fact that I was engaged in this once-in-a-lifetime journey with the human being closest to me: my life partner and beloved. But hajj is characterized by many events and moments that are unique.

During our hajj, I saw something that reminded me of a statement made by Abdulkader Tayob at a conference on "Islam and Civil Society" in South Africa in 1994, referring to the period of South Africa's first democratic election and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa as "this sacred time when everything seems possible."

"Same-same"

I recalled this statement while observing the chaotic arrangement of men and women during the prayers at the mosque in Makkah. Typically, I would see a few women seated, then a man, then another woman, then a few more men, or any combination of the above in virtually every row of the prayer. There was absolutely no gender separation! And, except for a few cleaners or a few conservative, scowling men, no one seemed to give a second glance.

Once, a Bengali man sat right next to my wife Shamima and our friend A'isha. A'isha pointed him to a row in front where there were more men. "No problem," he responded, "man-woman same-same." Unfortunately, his companionable philosophy made Shamima uncomfortable as A'isha ended up sitting almost on top of her. This was not the norm, however. Usually there was a one-person space between a "strange" man and woman or no space between spouses. Only "at this sacred time and place when everything seems possible."

Where else in the world would one find Muslim men and women squeezed as tightly together as during many of the rituals of hajj: most

Committing to paper one's experiences and memoirs of the hajj pilgrimage, belongs to a long-established rich genre. The classical tradition comprises descriptive travelogues and devotional treatises. By the twentieth century the genre had expanded to predominantly include personal reflections on, and observations of, this grand collective ritual. One moving account of such a memorable experience is *Journey of Discovery: A South African Hajj* (2000), co-authored by Na'eem Jeenah and his late wife, Shamima Shaikh. This article expounds upon their "journey of discovery."

especially during the *tawaf* (circumambulation) but also during the *sa'i*—the running between the hills of Safa and Marwa on the edge of the mosque and during the pelting of the stone pillars in Mina? And unlike at any other time or place, such gender mixing is accepted as the normal thing. There are many other aspects which are peculiar to the hajj. The five days of hajj is the only period, for example, when men are prevented (by the rules of hajj) from covering their heads and faces and women from covering their faces.

Also, Muslims are normally expected to say their prayers in full in their home towns, but are permitted to shorten these when they are travelling. It is only during the hajj that people prefer to shorten certain prayers regardless of whether they are residents or travelling pilgrims. Makkah during the pilgrimage is also the only place in the world where Muslim men sometimes pray half-dressed, covered simply from the navel to the knee. While, technically, this is the accepted minimum dress for men in terms of the Sharia, it is only a brave man who will attempt such a prayer fashion at any other mosque in the world and be prepared to face the consequences.

It is also only at the mosque in Makkah that one will observe the imam leading the prayer with part of his congregation praying in front of him. At this mosque, for almost all occurrences of the two afternoon prayers—*zuhr* and *asr*, the imam stands in a little room away from the Ka'ba with a large group of congregants praying in front of him. For the *fajr* (pre-dawn), *maghrib* (sunset), *isha* (night) and *jum'a* (Friday afternoon) prayers, he stands next to the Ka'ba. Apparently the imam finds the

heat oppressive during the *zuhr* and *asr* prayer times so he prays in this room at the edge of the courtyard that surrounds the Ka'bah, with rows of worshippers between him and it.

An Abrahamic commemoration

Interestingly, the hajj is also the only one of the five pillars of Islam that follows a pre-Islamic example in the manner in which it is conducted. Most of the hajj rituals are modified versions of rituals that were already being performed by the pre-Islamic Arabs during the hajj months. And it is the only one of the pillars at which almost every ritual commemorates a human event. None of the other five pillars—bearing witness to the Unity of God; prayer; the compulsory alms-giving; or fasting—is based on such a commemoration. Most of the rituals of the hajj are linked to some act or event from the life of the Prophet Abraham and his family. And, to place this ritual on an even greater level of distinction, only in the hajj are there specific rituals which, in total, commemorate and emulate the example and struggle of a woman; many hajj rituals recall the experience of Hajar, the wife of Abraham.

We observed, further, that the hajj is the only time and place in which people attempt (and are, in fact, forced by the requirements of the ritual) to look the same, and during which the validity of the ritual depends on such equality. Indeed, there is no hajj without the ritual dressing, which for all men is two pieces of unstitched cloth. It is the occasion at which everyone would willingly give up her or his physical individuality simply to become part of the mass.

A heart-warming sight at Arafat
for me was the number of couples
standing and praying together.



PHOTO BY MOHAMED EL-DAKHANY. © HOLLANDSE HOOGTE, 2005

Pilgrims gather in the Plains of Arafat outside Mecca, 2005.

This sacred time and place has a magical quality that makes it unique, a uniqueness that is evident not only in the rituals and in the broad and general ways in which the pilgrims relate to each other. We found that there were more specific ways with regard to personal psychology and interpersonal interaction which added to this sense of enchantment. A good example is the Johannesburg woman in Shamima's tent at Arafat, whose face had been badly disfigured by acid. The woman was fasting at Arafat. Apparently, the *maulana* who was leading her delegation advised her that she could. The fact that we were languishing in temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius and, more importantly, that the Prophet Muhammad forbade pilgrims to fast on the Day of Arafat seemed lost on him.² Sometime during her stay at Arafat, the woman burst into tears. A few doctors rushed to assist her. Shamima suggested that the woman should break her fast, but she refused. Shamima then suggested that they try to "get permission" from the maulana for the woman to break her fast, thinking that it was necessary to find some way of relieving the woman's plight on this glorious day.

One of the doctors then explained that the reason for the woman's apparent distress was not the fast. The face of this once beautiful woman had been burnt twenty years earlier when a neighbour had thrown acid on her as a result of some feud. The woman was crying because, on this day at Arafat, twenty years later, she met the acid-thrower, and forgave her! Only "at this sacred time and place ..."?

Spirituality

With all these unusual aspects of the hajj, however, one cannot allow oneself to forget that the fundamental purpose of the pilgrimage is spiritual. And it was the spiritual that left the strongest impression on my mind. Many people had told us, before our departure, of particularly intense episodes of spirituality. Although we had intended that hajj would be an exceptional experience, we were not expecting anything terribly unusual. But I got more than I had bargained for.

Seeing millions of people covering the plains of Arafat was an impressive sight. But as people began their standing-supplication (*wuquf*) in the afternoon sunlight, it felt as if a strongly spiritual atmosphere pervaded the air. The *wuquf* involves standing in the open, hands raised, praying to the Creator for one's deepest desires. A heart-warming sight at Arafat for me was the number of couples standing and praying together. The heat is virtually unbearable and I, like most others, would stand in *wuquf*, then rest before resuming.

My own *wuquf*, both when I stood alone and with Shamima, was deeply satisfying. In these moments, everything disappeared from my thoughts, from my vision and my hearing; I was singularly focused on communicating with The Unseen. With Shamima by my side and our hands joined, that concentration was further enriched. It was a communication with The Divine, done with another of His creatures to whom I felt a profound closeness. These were unique and treasured moments.

Another deeply spiritual experience for me was on our last day in Makkah. The Friday congregational prayer was to be my last prayer at the haram (the sacred mosque) and my farewell to the Ka'bah. Somehow, I had reached the haram a little later than I would have preferred, and found that there was space available only on the roof. I was surprised that the roof was fairly empty, until a few minutes after I seated myself and felt the sun beating down on my head. Hats, scarves, and umbrellas did not help the other pilgrims. Wearing a hat because I had recently shaved my head as part of the rituals, I walked to the front, which was devoid of any shade from pillars or walls. Since most people disliked this full sunlight, I had an unobstructed view of the Ka'ba.

I sat there for the next hour and a half, through an Arabic sermon that I could make only little sense of, and after the prayer I lifted my hands to God. It was amazing that simply gazing on the Ka'ba could affect me so profoundly—emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. I forgot the desert sun and the people around me and—for the last time—filled my senses, my mind and my heart with the sight of this shrine to The Divine. And God gave me brief access to His Grace in those moments.

In thinking back to these moments I remember—as I and Shamima did many times during the hajj—of a piece of advice given to us by a friend, Amina Wadud, before we had left South Africa. "Don't have expectations about what you want to achieve from the hajj," she had said. "If you do, you might find what you are searching for, but you may never find what Allah wants to show and give you."

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Notes

1. Michael Wolfe (ed.), *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove Press, 1997).
2. The Prophet Muhammad referred to the Day of Arafat, the Day of Sacrifice, and *Ayam Tashriq* (the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth of the month of *Dhul Hijjah*) as "the days of eating and drinking."