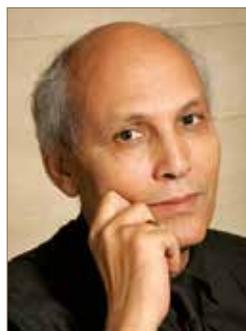


An Anthropologist's Umrah

By **PROFESSOR ABDELLAH HAMMOUDI**

PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY



Abdellah Hammoudi was Professor at the Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, and the first holder of the Faisal Visiting Professorship at Princeton. He was the founding director of the Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Professor Hammoudi has done extensive work on the ethno-history of his native

Morocco, fieldwork in Morocco, Libya and Saudi Arabia, as well as participating in major development projects in these three countries. His most recent book, *Une saison à la Mecque*, published by Le Seuil, Paris, in 2004, was translated into English: *A Season in Makkah*, Hill and Wang, 2006, as well as in several other languages including Arabic, Dutch, Italian and German.

Our Umrah took half a day. After twelve hours of traveling, coming and going to find our lodgings, we hastily performed our ablutions again and headed for the Holy Mosque. We went down a wide boulevard lined with more or less undistinguished white buildings; the traffic was loud and heavy, the crowds very dense, becoming more and more compacted as we drew closer to the mosque. Then, halfway there, at a street corner, I saw two minarets dominating a large grayish white wall. I learned that this was the Gate of King Fahd ibn Abd Al Aziz. We went around it to the right to enter through the Gate of Peace. Taking advantage of a break in the ranks, we crossed the vast gallery covering the path between Safa and Marwa and reached the central court where the Kaaba stands. At last, I could contemplate it at leisure. Like everyone else, I paused instinctively. We were between noon and mid-afternoon prayers. There was the imposing cube, its unusual dimensions, garbed in black, the frieze of gold calligraphy running along its four sides. The surprise was complete – despite the immediate familiarity, despite the sense of being reunited with a Kaaba that had lived in our lives since childhood in Quran recitations, conversations, writing, drawing, painting, photographs, newspapers, television, cinema, poetry, songs, stories...

We began to pray the two required prostrations to “salute the Mosque” – and then we joined the rotating circles. This first circumambulation into which we plunged was that “of the arrival.” We started off, as planned, at the south-south-western quadrant, called the Yemeni quadrant. Crying

“God is great!” and saluting the edifice with our right arms raised, we set off counterclockwise, at a slow run for men, a quick walk for women, and were instantly pulled into the immense, perpetually moving human circles. Prayers, invocations, and laments rose from all sides to the sky. A golden light bathed everything against the dark backdrop of the arcades, rotating in the opposite direction. The kinesthetic impression I received with each movement was one of winding something up, following an outline in concentric circles. Vertigo. Now and again I would move left or right to make room for formidable black workers who bore the elderly or the infirm on stretchers hoisted above our heads. I pivoted as I approached the Kaaba. On my seventh time around, I managed to touch the silk sheeting that “clothes” it. The crowd, impressively oblivious, pressed toward the Black Stone. I went around once more, hoping to touch it, but was violently tossed away by the crowd. I didn’t try again but saluted it from afar and slowly left the moving masses.

Facing the Kaaba and surrounding it, we were tied to each other denied to ourselves by ihram, which modifies the limits of bodies and identities. It was testimony to a condition I didn't comprehend. Emotion flooded through me. Tears welled up in my eyes but didn't flow, putting me in tune with the others

Men and women were relentlessly propelled, as if by a magnetic force, toward the Black Stone, which was guarded by apparently unarmed men. Others were plastered to the building's walls, motionless and silent, under the sun's rays. Supplications joined the prayers: for health, for the relief of distress and misfortune. I withdrew little by little to the back, where the arcaded galleries gave a little shade. I couldn't take my eyes off the cube in silken black. Women around me were praying, pleading, sobbing, and begging for forgiveness. Facing the Kaaba and surrounding it, we were tied to each other denied to ourselves by ihram, which modifies the limits of bodies and identities. It was testimony to a condition I didn't comprehend. Emotion flooded through me. Tears welled up in my eyes but didn't flow, putting me in tune with the others.

I will never know, I am sure, with what these tears were associated, but I was experiencing something concrete and precise: I felt I had been stripped bare by the sight of the “Ancient House,” with no hesitation and above all with no fear of the law. Religion communicated to me its power above the law or perhaps beside, over, beyond it. A plague on the courts' authority! The great Shari'a courthouses that had crushed me in Madinah shrank and disappeared behind the black cube. Now I understood the meaning of certain statements I had often heard: “What happiness to be here! How good God's grace is ... What joy one feels at seeing all this.” Or, “Seeing the Kaaba, I felt the most intense Joy I had ever known.” Without presuming to know what others felt, I realised these phrases now meant something to me.

Soon I left the covered galleries and rejoined the circumambulation. This time I went to visit the Hijr, the place where, according to tradition, Hajar and Ismail stood when Ibrahim exiled them. Sarah, according to the narratives I had read, could no longer tolerate her “servant,” although it was Sarah, unable to bear children, who had suggested to the ageing patriarch that he approach the Egyptian woman. A low porphyry wall encircled the place; two gold lamps framed the entrance. Many women – far surpassing the number of men – were prostrating themselves here. Our group gathered once more, and we went to pray at the station of Ibrahim, the founder of “original Islam,” who, according to the same stories, came here to meet his family and, along with Ismail, built the Kaaba and founded Makkah, “mother of cities”. We made two prostrations around a small pavilion, shaped like a sanctuary with a gold and crystal dome over a lighted lamp. I had read that “this is where Ibrahim first gave the call to prayer, turning in each of the

four directions of the world.” A few steps away, we went to the “well of Zamzam,” at the place where Hajar had miraculously discovered a spring after running anxiously between Safa and Marwa. According to a fairly widespread version of the story, it was the archangel Gabriel who revealed this source of life to her. The child was thirsty, his life in danger. Hajar's efforts, her devotion, and her faith in God were rewarded.

Behind Salah, who spontaneously took the lead in reciting the invocations, we went quickly down to a hot, humid underground room. I drank from one of the glasses set out beneath the taps. One has to do this while invoking the miraculous water's virtue; I had already tasted it at the Mosque in Madinah. Ultramodern machines pump out water for the millions of pilgrims who come to Makkah. Abbas spoke of the “joy” of bringing some of this water back to Morocco, “like all the other pilgrims.”

Then we went up the stairs to the gallery, a few hundred metres long, that covers the path between Safa and Marwa. Seven times we covered this obligatory distance between the two rocks (which barely break the surface of the earth), men running slowly, women walking. The path only started at a certain distance from the rocks, and neon signs showed the limits. We recited the obligatory Quranic verse that calls this itinerary sha 'ira-men out loud, women in low voices. When the cycle was completed, a Moroccan woman didn't hesitate to cut off a lock of my hair: this act is compulsory for both sexes. I suddenly remembered that the word “sha'ira” is also used for the mark identifying animals to be sacrificed. A link was appearing: between marking, separation, sentiment, and growing awareness.

Our Umrah was completed a little before the mid-afternoon prayers. ■

This article is an excerpt from the book A Season In Makkah by Abdellah Hammoudi Polity, 2006

As a hub for people of different races, nationalities, opinions and classes, Makkah provides a fascinating anthropological case study for scholars looking to better understand the human condition



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