



A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage

By Abdellah Hammoudi

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An unforgettable report on one man's hajj--the sacred rite that brings millions of Muslims to Mecca every year

In 1999, the Moroccan scholar Abdellah Hammoudi, trained in Paris and teaching in America, decided to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. He wanted to observe the hajj as an anthropologist but also to experience it as an ordinary pilgrim, and to write about it for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Here is his intimate, intense, and detailed account of the Hajj--a rare and important document by a subtle, learned, and sympathetic writer.

Hammoudi describes not just the adventure, the human pressures, and the social tumult--everything from the early preparations to the last climactic scenes in the holy shrines of Medina and Mecca--but also the intricate politics and amazing complexity of the entire pilgrimage experience. He pays special heed to the effects of Saudi bureaucratic control over the Hajj, to the ways that faith itself becomes a lucrative source of commerce for the Arabian kingdom, and to the Wahhabi inflections of the basic Muslim message.

Here, too, is a poignant discussion of the inner voyage that pilgrimage can mean to those who embark on it: the transformed sense of daily life, of worship, and of political engagement. Hammoudi acknowledges that he was spurred to reconsider his own ideas about faith, gesture, community, and nationality in unanticipated ways. This is a remarkable work of literature about both the outer forms and the inner meanings of Islam today.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hammoudi, a Paris-educated professor of anthropology at Princeton University, brings his worldly experiences to the most personal of journeys: the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (called the hajj in Arabic). Originally written in French, this English edition is being published to coincide with the 2006 hajj. Hammoudi is eager to explore the academic angles of the hajj, all the while doubting the strength of his own faith. He is constantly tested. First, he must bribe a mid-level government official in his native Morocco several times simply to be added to the country's quota list of pilgrims. Upon arrival in Medina, the city of the Prophet Muhammad, Hammoudi is stunned by the omnipresent markets hawking everything from rugs to suitcases. Still struggling for a religious experience, Hammoudi is angered by the Wahhabi stewards of Mecca and Medina, who police Islam's holiest sites with irrational Wahhabi zeal. Beset with the flu, Hammoudi still circumambulates the Kaaba in Mecca, appreciating the rare absence of gender segregation. Ghazaleh's translation is reminiscent of both French eloquence and Moroccan storytelling. At times, Hammoudi's intellectualism becomes too abstract to follow, but even such abstraction further adds to the mystical, almost surreal, journey. (Jan. 7)

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From [Booklist](#)

Hammoudi is a Princeton anthropologist whose previous work examined deeply rooted structures of authoritarian rule in Moroccan daily life through a highly accessible, if undeniably Foucauldian, lens. Here, he retains his focus on the profound minutiae of power structures as he examines the hajj, the highly ritualized journey to Mecca required of all Muslims. At least initially, Hammoudi approaches the Fifth Pillar as an academic outsider, fascinated by the rituals of pilgrims and the bureaucracies built around piety but privately conscious of his inability to dedicate himself to only one truth. Yet, without abandoning his academic wisdom--the source of much insightful analysis, particularly about the obstructive and instructive role played by national identity in a ritual celebrating religious unity--Hammoudi cannot stop the circumambulations at Mecca from awakening in him an understanding that does not easily translate into anthropological categories. It's not exactly a conversion story, but it is a tale of transformation. Hammoudi's deeply personal plunge into the subtleties of the sacred and the profane will interest many readers and perhaps inspire some as well. *Brendan Driscoll*

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Review

"[A] moving and sometimes painful book . . . Mr. Hammoudi infuses this social and personal drama with meditations on ritual, travel, family, state power and the ceaseless desire for global communion, aspects of religious life that have guided the footsteps of pilgrims of all faiths since ancient Egypt. His is a book of surpassing intelligence, humor, sadness and grace." --Richard B. Woodward, *New York Times*

"[Hammoudi's] observations offer readers an intimate, insider's account of the minutiae of a hajj, particularly intriguing for those of us who will never be able to come any closer. Equally engaging are the moments when the anthropologist disappears and Hammoudi surrenders to feeling he can't explain." --Marjorie Kehe, *The Christian Science Monitor*

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