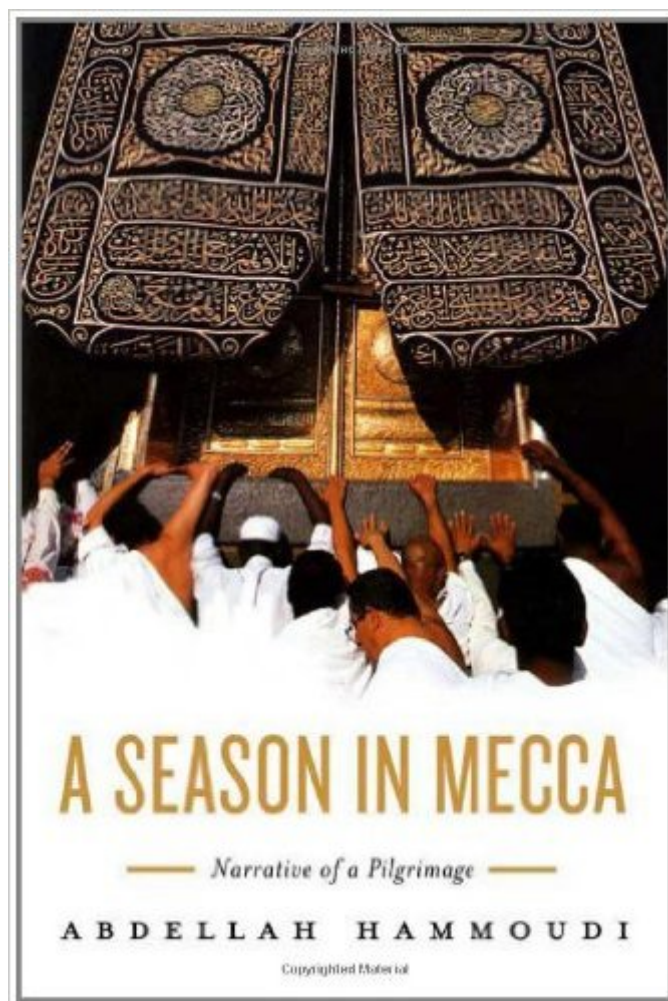


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A Season In Mecca: Narrative Of A Pilgrimage



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

In 1853, Sir Richard Francis Burton went on the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca, and his wonderful account of his successful impersonation as a Muslim pilgrim is still an exciting book. There have

been other non-Muslims and Muslims who have written about the travel, which is one of the five pillars of Islam (the others being profession of faith, prayer, fasting, and alms giving). All Muslims who are able are obligated to take the hajj once in their lives. There are few modern accounts of the pilgrimage, which has become commercialized and, for those who have the money, routine. Now there is a unique account, from Abdellah Hammoudi, a professor of anthropology at Princeton University, who determined that he would undertake the hajj in 1999 for the purpose of writing a book on anthropological aspects of his trip. Any pilgrim has a journey unlike any other pilgrim, but Hammoudi's effort, chronicled in *_A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage_* (Hill and Wang) is distinct. He is not a believer like his other fellow pilgrims, even the friends he goes with. "I am not contemptuous of religions; I believe that under certain conditions they allow for expression of major existential dilemmas and encourage reconciliation on a grand scale." He grew up in Morocco, and was raised as a Muslim, which he says he still is, but a secular one. And so his journey set up conflicts from the start that he analyzes scrupulously at length, and which never really become resolved: "I couldn't possibly be an observer plain and simple, whether hostile and distant or friendly and admiring of Islam." He also had constantly to analyze his own participation in the ritual; can anthropologists rightly study cultures in which they are themselves taking part? Can the hajj have any value if undertaken in a secular vein? These questions, and those having to do with the basic personal meaning of the hajj, will perhaps be less interesting for most readers than the stories of preparation and the travelogue of the journey, told with good humor in a readable translation from the French (by Pascale Ghazaleh). For instance, Hammoudi had to submit thirty passport-style photographs and six copies of his birth certificate. He had to fill out a file on himself, and had to enlist the help of someone who knew someone. Of course, just filling in the forms would not do; he had to give a sum of money to a government employee ("which we decided to call `alms'") in order to lubricate the process. Once he was fully registered, he could not simply pack up and go. He had to be trained into what he was about to undergo, for violation of minor rules would invalidate the hajj and make it as if he had never participated at all. There were constant conflicts with commerce. One of Hammoudi's fellow pilgrims even says that the hajj is "a merchants' conspiracy." There is an obsession with purchasing suitcases, suitcases that will hold other purchases that are brought back home from the hajj, souvenirs for those left behind. The commercial aspects of the hajj were only one of the disappointments Hammoudi had to face. He was continually confronted with the segregation from women, which is stricter in Saudi Arabia than in his Moroccan home. Pilgrims were eager to criticize others; one pious man pointed out, "Our neighbors prayed behind our women. Their prayer is invalid." Hammoudi is disgusted by those who declare themselves the ones who

have an absolute right to interpret the prophet's words for others. He is dismayed by the obvious differences between Shiites and Sunnis and the Wahhabi brand of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. It sounds a troublesome way to take a vacation, indeed. Hammoudi was, however, not just moved by the sad events that gives his narrative an overall "Ship of Fools" tone. There are surges of joy he describes, such as when he visits Mohammed's tomb. He describes the circling crowd at the Kaaba and being overcome with emotion and tears, and is willing to leave behind any negative lessons he has learned. "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!'" Many of the pages of *_A Season in Mecca_* have to do with an intellectual's attempts to come to an objective understanding of the many strange events which compose a hajj, but the subjectivity and ineffability of faith keep breaking through.

I'm writing this review knowing that I'm not going to do the book justice. The number one reason is that I'm far too removed from academia now and far too pressed for time to be able to follow closely and read and reread each passage. The second reason is that I read the first 141 pages more than a year before finishing the rest of the book. When I started reading the book, I was turned off by what I saw as the author's complaining about the endemic corruption of the developing world, similar to the WAWA (West Africa Wins Again) of U.S. travelogs in west Africa. The author's mentioning his disregard for ritual requirements and prohibitions and his lack of reverence for the blessing of Allah's invitation to His house pained me. And I just stopped reading the book. But from page 142 on, and I don't know if I'm imagining it, it was as if I was reading a totally different book. The participation in the rituals of ziyara, umra and hajj, no matter how "defective" the author's intention, changed the tone of the narrative. It was as if the magnitude of the crowds, the power of the stories the rituals reenacted, the landscape, the buildings, the sounds and the words of the Quran flooded over the dam of the author's preconceived research plan. But this flood was not destructive. Rather, the water initiated the germination of the seeds of Muslim identity lying in a soil enriched, not polluted, by the European-American discipline of anthropology. Now I may still be on a post Eid al-Fitr high, and I have to say just thinking about Makka is enough to make me cry (even this instant!)-May Allah azza wa jall invite us all there!-but I thought this author made me as a Muslim think about the hajj in ways I had not considered. And is there worship better than pondering Allah's signs in His messengers and His judgments? For the non-Muslim reader, I hope that the latter half of the book will bring attention to Islam as a religion rather than as a political movement. This book has by far the best description of the replacement and sacrifice of Ibrahim, Hajar and Ismail alayhim assalaam that

I've read. In my brief Internet search, I came across a good article by Carol Delaney's Was Abraham Ethical? Should We Admire His Willingness to Sacrifice His Son? But Professor's Abdellah's discussion is at a whole other level. The book reminds me a lot of the only other "deep" anthropology book I've ever read, Paths Toward a Clearing by Michael Jackson. I have to read these kinds of books repeatedly to find their rhythm. If you have the time, it's well worth it.

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