

The Rituals of Hajj

Pilgrimage to House (Ka'ba) is a duty that mankind owes God, whoever is able to make their way there.

Qur'an 3:96-7

One of the five pillars of Islam described in the Qur'an, the *hajj* is a pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims must perform at least once in their lives, if at all possible. The *hajj* occurs annually, over a period of five days between the eighth and twelfth days of *Dhu'l-Hijjah*, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. When in Mecca, the pilgrims are required to perform specific rituals at locations in and around the holy city, which is the spiritual center of the Islamic world.

In his most famous work on Islam, the *Iy-ulm-al-dn*, the 11th century Muslim theologian and philosopher Al-Ghazi discussed the magnitude of one's choice to perform the *hajj*:

As for the decision [to make the hajj], the [would-be pilgrim] must know that through his decision he intends to leave his family and home and leave aside desires and pleasures in order to visit the Lord's House, and thus to glorify even more the majesty of the House and of the Lord of the House. He must also know that he has decided on a sublime and momentous thing, and that he who is seeking a great thing must make great sacrifices.

In Peters, *The Hajj*, p 114-115

A. *IHRAM*: Proper Dress and Behavior

The very first rite of *hajj* requires the pilgrim to enter into the state of *ihram*, which means sacred. A Muslim must accomplish this before crossing into the boundaries of the holy city of Mecca. The pilgrim attains *ihram* by performing the necessary cleansing rituals, wearing the required dress, and behaving in the appropriate manner.

For men, the clothing of *ihram* is two sheets of white cloth. The top cloth is draped over the torso and the bottom cloth is secured onto the lower body with a belt. Men also wear simple sandals. For women, *ihram* consists of a loose-fitting garment of any color that covers all of the body except the face and hands. There are no restrictions for women's footwear. The purpose of *ihram* clothing is to eliminate all differences among pilgrims by requiring all to dress the same in order to attain a greater sense of spiritual equality and unity in the shared experience of worshipping God. Muslims must also adhere to specific

ihram behavioral standards during the hajj. Any activity that could distract pilgrims from their purpose of the pilgrimage and their focus on God are prohibited, such as cursing, fighting, killing animals, cutting trees or plants, excessive laughter, excessive eating, and even personal grooming or using perfume or scent on the body.

B. TAWAF: Circumambulating (Walking Around) the Ka’ba

The origins of the *tawaf* (circumambulation), the next ritual of the *hajj*, date back to the times of the prophet Abraham. Allah had commanded Abraham and his son, Ishmael, to build a shrine: the Ka’ba. When they had finished the construction of this sacred shrine, an angel brought Abraham the Black Stone. According to tradition, the Black Stone was a holy rock that had fallen to earth from Heaven. After Abraham and Ishmael placed the Black Stone in the eastern corner of the Ka’ba, they circled the shrine seven times. Then Abraham received an order from Allah to proclaim the message of the *hajj* pilgrimage to mankind: “And proclaim among men the Pilgrimage: they will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every remote path” (Qur’an 22:27).

During the *tawaf*, Muslim pilgrims circle the Ka’ba seven times, counterclockwise, just as Abraham and Ishmael did in ancient times. As the pilgrims circle, they pray to Allah and if possible, try to kiss or touch the Black Stone each time they approach it. The *tawaf* demonstrates the brotherhood of the pilgrims in the worship God, as they move in harmony together around the Ka’ba praying to Allah

C. SA’I: The Running

The next ritual of hajj is the *sa’i* or “the running”. In the *sa’i* pilgrims run between the two small hills of Safa and Marwa seven times. These hills are enclosed in the Al-Masjid Al-Haram (The Grand Mosque), the oldest mosque in the world, which houses the Ka’ba. During the *sa’i*, pilgrims visit the well of Zamzam, also located within the Al-Masjid Al-Haram, in order to drink the spring’s sacred water. Even though millions of Muslims visit the Zamzam well yearly, the water of the spring never dries out.

The *sa’i* ritual commemorates another person from the time of Abraham: Hagar, his wife. The following tells her story.

Ibrahim [Abraham] decided to leave Mesopotamia and he travelled to the lands of Canaan and Egypt. On his return he married Sarah, the daughter of the King of Harran and settled with her in Palestine. Sarah was unable to have children and after some years she persuaded Ibrahim to take her Egyptian maid, Hajar [Hagar], as a second wife, so that he might have a child from her.

In due course Hajar gave birth to a son, Isma’il [Ishmael], who brought great joy and happiness to both his parents. Only Sarah was unhappy. She began to regret her kindness, for jealousy tore at her heart and she could not bear to watch the young

mother with her child. At last she asked her husband to take Hajar and her new-born son to the remotest place he could think of. 'I do not wish to set eyes on them ever again!' she declared.

Ibrahim agreed to do as she asked, sensing the will of God in all that happened to him. He made the necessary preparations for the journey, loaded two camels with food and water, and set out with Hajar and the baby. They travelled on and far, far from the places they knew, into a strange desert land. At last, weary and tired, they reached the area around Mecca, and made camp near the place where unknown to them, the Ka'ba had once stood. Only a low mound remained in the sands after the flood, covering the foundations; to the weary family it looked like just another dune.

The next day while resting, Ibrahim told Hajar that was where he wanted her to live with their baby son. Hajar looked around at the arid landscape in despair. To her it looked so desolate, so forlorn: nothing but a sea of sand stretching away endlessly, unbroken by the shade of trees or the sudden green of pasture. 'How can I stay with a helpless child in this merciless desert?' She pleaded. 'I have no friends here, no family; there is neither food nor water.' 'It is God's will,' Ibrahim replied sadly, 'We must bow to his wishes.'

As he left to return to his wife Sarah, Ibrahim prayed, entreating God to protect Hajar and Isma'il and to have mercy on them. 'Let thy people befriend them, O Lord. Grant them safety and the fruits of the earth so that they may worship you,' he murmured as the sand dunes rose between him and his beloved wife and son.

For a while Hajar was able to survive on the provisions of food and water which Ibrahim had brought but soon these were all used up and she felt the pangs of starvation and thirst began to twist her body and mind. Her milk dried up and she could no longer feed her baby son. One morning she could endure it no longer, for the baby, hungry and thirsty, had started to wail piteously, tearing the cruel silence around them with his ceaseless cries. She panicked, running aimlessly to and fro, blinded by tears and not realizing that she was tracing and retracing her steps between the mounds now known as Safa and Marwa. Seven times she ran between the two, unaware of the burning sand under her feet or the ritual she was unconsciously performing. In future all Muslims travelling to Mecca were to re-enact the same ritual in memory of her desperate search for water.

The child missed his mother. He started to writhe violently as spasms of hunger twisted his young body, and all the time he kicked the hard stony ground under his soft feet. Suddenly, the rocks below split open and the sand parted as water, pure, fresh, whispering water, gushed forth, drenching the thirsty baby, restoring him with its healing coolness. Hajar, returning at last to her senses, rushed back to find him gurgling happily as he splashed and played in the spring.

It happened that a wandering tribe, the Jurhumites, were camped not far from the place where Hajar and the baby were living. That evening they noticed large flocks of birds flying low in the distance and, knowing from experience that birds crowd to water in the desert, they made their way in the same direction. They found the birds drinking from the spring while Hajar knelt with the baby beside a newly dug well. The Jurhumites asked if they could use the water and enquired whether they could bring their tents and animals to camp around the well. Hajar gladly agreed and the tribe settled from that time as their neighbors.

From then on, the well was known as the Well of Zamzam, which means the well of abundant waters.”

El-Amin, *The Prophets of Allah*, Vol. 2, pp. 38-40

While performing the sa'i, pilgrims re-enact Hagar's frantic search for water to emulate the intensity of her extreme faith in God. Fearing that her infant son, Ishmael [Ismail], would die of hunger and thirst, Hagar desperately ran between the hills of Safa and Marwa, begging for Allah's help and mercy. Finally, Hagar's prayers were answered; Allah created the spring of Zamzam for her and baby, Ishmael.

D. WUQUF –E-ARAFAT (The Standing at Arafat)

After the pilgrims have arrived at Mecca, entered into *ihram* and have performed the *tawaf*, they travel 5 km (3.1 miles) east of Mecca to Mina. Mina is a place of temporary accommodation where more than 100,000 tents house visiting pilgrims. In Mina pilgrims rest, spending the night and the following day. Before the sun rises on the third day of the *hajj*, pilgrims then travel 14.4 km (8.9 miles) to the Plain of Arafat. The Mount of Mercy is located at the end of the Plain of Arafat. In 632 CE (10 AH). The Mount of Mercy is where the Prophet Muhammad delivered the last sermon before his death. In this very holy spot, Hajj pilgrims perform the ritual known as *wuquf* or “The Standing at Arafat”. From noon until sun down, pilgrims spent the entire day on the Mount of Mercy praying for strength and asking for forgiveness for their sins. The Standing at Arafat serves as an enactment and practice for Judgment Day. The Standing at Arafat is considered the “The Heart of the *Hajj*” and the most important day of the pilgrimage because here Muslims spiritually cleanse their souls by praying and asking for forgiveness. The Standing at Arafat reminds the pilgrims how everyone will stand equally in absolute truth and humility before God on the Day of Judgment. As recounted by the 11th-century caliph and imam Al-Hakim, the Prophet Muhammad said: “*Hajj is Arafat.*” After the sunset and the final prayers, the pilgrims next travel to an area known as Muzdalifah. This a 9km (5.6 mile) trip from Arafat and here in Muzdalifah the pilgrims will spend the night under the stars. During this evening many people in Muzdalifah also begin collecting pebbles for the following day's ritual.

The *Futuh al- Haramayan* (Description of the Holy Cities) also contains a poem by Muhyi al-Din Lari about the ritual significance of the *Wuquf-e-Arafat* (The Standing at Arafat), which many Muslims consider to be a practice for the final Judgment Day:

“Enter this area, with full sincerity,
making your supplications, and behold . . .

The Mountain of which Arafat is the name
is more lofty than all other mountains are.

Its skirts are filled with the Compassion of God;
around it mankind and angels assemble.

Its shadow betokens the cool shade that God
Provides in the courtyards of Paradise.

Though smaller in form than other mountains,
In meaning it is higher than all of them.”

Futuh al-Haramaya by Muhyi al-Din Lari, (d.1526) (fol.27b)

“After the two prayers of noontime and mid-afternoon had been combined this Friday, the faithful made their “standing” in adoration, in humility and in tears, begging the favor of the Most High. Cries of “God is great!” arouse and a tumult of voices went up in invocation of God . . .

The crowd remained there, their faces burned by the sun, until its orb had disappeared and the prayer of sunset had arrived”. (ibn Jubayr 1948-1951:201/Ar.173-175).

E. KISWAH – NEW COVER FOR THE KA’BA

Another important *hajj* ritual is the changing of the *kiswah* which is the black cloth cover of the Ka’ba. At the beginning of Hajj, the old *kiswah* cover is removed and replaced with a white cloth. The white cloth cover of the Ka’ba symbolizes the entrance into the sacred state of *ihram* and corresponds to the white ceremonial robes that the pilgrims are required to wear. Every year, on the ninth day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah, the same

day that *hajj* pilgrims travel to the Plain of Arafat, a new *kiswah* is placed on the Ka'ba. Traditionally, *kiswahs* are made every year in Egypt. Verses from the Qur'an are elaborately embroidered with gold and silver thread onto black silk lined with cotton and wool. The finished *kiswah* is over forty-five feet long and one hundred and thirty feet long with a cost of about 4.5 million dollars to produce. The new *kiswah* signifies the process of transformation and a new state of rebirth and purity that, again, mirrors the process of transformation and rebirth experienced by the pilgrims performing *hajj*.

F. JAMARAT (STONING THE DEVIL)

After a night in Muzdalifah, the pilgrims depart again very early before the sunrise of the fourth day and head back to Mina where they will perform the next ritual of the *hajj*: the *jamarat*. The *jamarat* is a rite where pilgrims throw stones at three pillars that represent the devil. Pilgrims collect forty-nine pebbles either the previous night in Muzdalifah or collect them in Mina, the location of the three pillars. The stoning ritual lasts from one to three days and, because of the huge number of pilgrims and overcrowding, the *jamarat* can be extremely dangerous.

For the Muslim pilgrims, the *jamarat* symbolically represents the universal struggle between good and evil and the rejection of the powers of wickedness and temptation in life.

G. EID AL-ADHA (THE FEAST OF THE SACRIFICE)

After casting their *jamarat* stones, in the next ritual of *hajj*, pilgrims must perform or donate an animal sacrifice. This tradition goes back to the same story when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Ishmael. At the moment when Abraham was about to cut Ishmael's neck with a knife, God sent the angel, Gabriel, to replace Ishmael with a ram to be slaughtered as the sacrifice instead.

Eid al-Adha, or the Festival of the Sacrifice, thus commemorates Abraham and Ishmael's submission and willingness to sacrifice to the commandment of God. It is one of the most important Islamic holidays celebrated by Muslims around the world. Since Festival of the Sacrifice occurs during the *hajj*, pilgrims are required to sacrifice a sheep, goat, cow or camel, representing the ram that was slaughtered in place of Ishmael. However, pilgrims more commonly pay for the animal sacrifice to be done in their names and then the meat is distributed to the poor. In this way, Muslim pilgrims demonstrate and embody the concept of *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity) embodying the religious duties and values of compassion, love, friendship, and generosity.

H. HALQ/TAQSIR

The final ritual of *hajj* is *halq* (for male pilgrims) or *taqsir* (for female pilgrims). After pilgrims have completed and donated their animal sacrifice, males either trim their hair or shave their heads completely.

Women, on the other hand, simply trim their hair. This final act of *halq* and *taqsir* completes the required duties of *hajj* and officially ends the state of *ihram*. All of the behaviors and prohibitions previously forbidden in the sacred state of *ihram* become allowed. Pilgrims bathe, clean and groom in a ritual that literally demonstrates and symbolically represent the pilgrim's religious transformation and newly acquired spiritual purity. After pilgrims have successfully completed all of the obligatory rituals of *hajj* they are given the honorific title, *Hajji*.