

## Topic Page: [Hajj](#)

Definition: **hajj** from *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*

In Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims at least once in their lifetime, provided they are physically and financially able. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. By tradition the pilgrimage is undertaken between the 7th and 12th days of the last month of the Islamic year. At Mecca, the pilgrims are obliged to perform several rituals, including walking seven times around the Ka'bah shrine. They must also visit holy places outside Mecca and sacrifice an animal in honor of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. In conclusion, they return to Mecca and perform a farewell circling of the shrine.

**Event:** hajj

**Keywords:** hajj

Summary Article: **Hajj**

From *Religion and Society: Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals*

The hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and its most elaborate ritual. It is essentially a highly structured pilgrimage to Mecca, where Muslims believe that Abraham and Ishmael built the Ka'ba, the first temple dedicated to God. Surrounded with pomp and pageantry, the hajj is a compelling symbol of the solidarity of the worldwide Muslim community—the *Ummah*. All Muslims should complete the hajj at least once in a lifetime if they are physically and financially able. It is enjoined in the Qur'an: "And pilgrimage to the House is a duty unto Allah for mankind, for him who can find a way there" (3:97). The hajj consists of a series of symbolic rituals performed together by all pilgrims; the Prophet Muhammad determined these rituals shortly before his death.

The pilgrimage to Mecca has been traditionally divided into two. The *'umra* (visitation), sometimes called the "lesser pilgrimage," takes place in and near the sacred mosque in Mecca and can be done at any time of the year. The other is the hajj (pilgrimage), done in the month of Dhū'al-Hijjah (the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar). The hajj entails a series of symbolic rituals designed to bring the faithful as close as possible to God. Muslims from all over the world come together to perform these sacred rituals, and no distinction is made between rich and poor. For several weeks before the commencement of the hajj, millions of Muslims come to Mecca. Before moving into the sacred landscape around Mecca, pilgrims enter a state of ritual purity (*ihram*) by performing a ritual ablution (*ghusl*) and expressing their intention (*niyya*) to perform the hajj, and ultimately wear a white seamless garment also called an *ihram*. The devout disposition of someone who is to embark on the hajj is documented in a popular novel—*Midāq Valley*—by one of Egypt's foremost writers, Najīb Mahfūz. The main character in the novel, Ridwān Husseini, who is renowned for his piety, is about to go to Mecca and he describes his anticipation as a period of intense joy. He describes his longing for Mecca, how he anticipates drinking from the well of Zam Zam, and how he longs to visit the grave of the Prophet and pray in the holy garden. He passionately describes his vision of Mecca and the peace that comes with completing the hajj. Part of his ultimate desire is to walk through the lanes of Mecca and recite verses from the Qur'an, just as they were first received as if he were hearing a lesson given by Allah.

### **Performing the Hajj**

Before the hajj officially starts, all male pilgrims put on special clothing called *ihram*, consisting of two

white pieces of cloth covering the upper and lower parts of the body (this clothing can also be used as the shroud in burial ceremonies). Female pilgrims have more freedom in what they wear as long as they wear something modest. The uniformity of the *ihram* symbolizes the solidarity of all people before God: this is the way people will appear when they stand before Allah on the Day of Judgment. In the state of *ihram* it is absolutely forbidden to have sexual relations, kill any living creature, or remove hair from the body. It is a state of complete purity and consecration. The state of *ihram* is also analogous to what Arnold Van Gennep has described as the liminal phase (betwixt and between) in rites of passage, the phase between the old status and the new. It is a state of purity when certain things and behaviors are no longer permitted.

On their way to Mecca, pilgrims recite the *talbiya*:

I am here, O my God, I am here!

I am here, Thou art without any associate, I am here!

Praise and blessing belong to Thee, and Power.

When they get to Mecca, pilgrims recite these verses from the Qur'an:

And say: "My Lord, lead me in with a just ingoing,  
and lead me out with a

Just outgoing; grant me authority from Thee, to help me."

And say: "The truth has come, and falsehood has  
vanished away: surely

Falsehood is ever certain to vanish." (17:80-81).

The initial exercise of the hajj, the *tawaf*, is performed at least twice, upon first arriving in Mecca and just before leaving after completing all the other rituals. The *tawaf* is the sevenfold, counterclockwise circumambulation of the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped "House of God" (*Bayt Allah*). During this process, many pilgrims also try to touch the black stone (*al-Hajar al-Aswad*), a meteorite believed to be from heaven and placed by the prophets Ibrahim and Ishmael in one corner of the Ka'ba. Legends hold that Abraham and Ishmael used to circle the Ka'ba in this way. Muhammad used to touch the black stone whenever he went around the Ka'ba, and it is very common to see pilgrims kiss it and meditate near it. Given the huge crowd circling the Ka'ba, not all pilgrims can get near the stone, so they simply extend their arms toward it and devoutly recite, "I am here, O my God, I am here." The Ka'ba was a pilgrimage site even before the emergence of Islam; however, before his death, Muhammad claimed the site for Muslims and purged the Ka'ba of all pagan idols. The Ka'ba is sometimes described as the earthly example of God's throne in heaven, and the *tawaf* is often likened to the human imitation of the angels' circling his throne in worship.

The next ritual after the *tawaf* is the *sa'y*, when pilgrims run between the two hills of Safa and Marwa. This reenacts an episode in the life of Abraham and his family, when Abraham had abandoned Hagar and her son Ishmael in the desert. When Ishmael cried out for help, Hagar in frustration ran seven times back and forth between Safa and Marwa searching for water. Meanwhile, Ishmael kicked his feet into the ground and mysteriously produced a spring of water. The spring, later called the well of Zam Zam, is believed to have divine powers, and pilgrims drink from it during their stay in Mecca. Pilgrims customarily take some of the water of Zam Zam as a souvenir for friends and family members unable to perform the hajj themselves.

The next stage in the pilgrimage is for pilgrims to assemble on the plain of Arafat, southeast of Mecca, where Muhammad delivered his farewell sermon. From noon to sunset, pilgrims engage in prayer and

continuous devotion (*wuquf*). Many believe that this is the best time to experience the presence of God in the world, as this is when God is closest to the world. The assembly at Arafat also allows Muslims from all over the world to engage in serious discussions about the condition of and challenges to Islam in the world.

After sunset, pilgrims move their tents to Muzdalifa, an open area on the way back to Mecca. Pilgrims pray intensely and also collect forty-nine stones to throw the following day at a symbol of the devil.

On the tenth day of Dhū al-Hijjah, pilgrims proceed to the adjacent valley of Mina. At Mina, pilgrims perform two rituals that commemorate the spiritual virtues of Abraham. First, pilgrims reenact Abraham's rejection of Satan's temptation by throwing stones at a tall stone pillar (*jammah*) symbolizing the devil. This stoning ceremony recalls an event that happened when Abraham and Ishmael were going to the place where Ishmael was to be sacrificed. The devil quietly spoke to Ishmael, telling him not to obey this divine command. Ishmael then picked up some stones and threw them at the apparition of the devil. The second ritual act involves an animal sacrifice (*qurbāri*) commemorating how God allowed Abraham to sacrifice a sheep in place of his son. Likewise, Muslims around the world offer their own animal sacrifices in a celebratory ritual known as the feast of sacrifice (*'īd aladhā*) or the Great Bairām. The feast lasts three days, and whoever sacrifices an animal must share a third of the meat with poor people, a third with a neighbor, and the rest with his or her household. After the sacrifice, pilgrims must have a ritual haircut, known as the *taqsīr*, that indicates the end of most of the restrictions of the state of *ihrām*. The white garment may be discarded, but sexual intercourse is still strictly forbidden.

For the next two or three days, until the twelfth or thirteenth day of Dhū al-Hijjah, pilgrims go back and forth between Mecca and Mina. They now have a more flexible schedule, and may perform one or more *tawāf* and *sa'y* in Mecca. At this time pilgrims, in a visit known as *ziyāra*, go to the Prophet's tomb in Medina. (The Hadith says: "Whoever visits my tomb, my intercession will be granted to him.") In these final days, male pilgrims can wear their regular national dress or local Arabian garb, testifying to their gradual return to the ordinary world.

## Significance of the Hajj in the Modern World

The essence of the hajj is a pilgrimage undertaken with the humble intent of coming closer to God. The pilgrimage is rich in symbolic rituals that profoundly renew solidarity among the *Ummah*. These rituals have multiple meanings and implications that can only be interpreted by delving into the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and local legends.

The hajj is the most compelling reminder of Islam's message of unity. During the hajj, pilgrims passionately discuss the role of the *Ummah* and the challenges facing Muslims worldwide; they are supposed to return to their respective countries as renewed believers. The radical change in the political profile of Malcolm X after he went on the hajj pilgrimage is one compelling modern testimony to the transformative power of the hajj.

See also Islam; Liminoid; Pilgrimage

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