

The Centre in the Desert: Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca

‘Surely, the first House established for the benefit of all mankind is
the one at Mecca, abounding in blessings and a means of guidance for
all peoples.’

KORAN, 3:97

Even in the secular West, the idea of ‘Mecca’ provides a powerful metaphor for the fulfilment of aspirations. For Muslims, however, Mecca implies much more than an image of desire. It is a sacred space reserved purely for the *umma* (the Islamic community of faith), a physical centre towards which all believers should turn – not only in belief but also in bodily worship. Yet it is not located in any of the great political strongholds of the Islamic world. It lies in the Hijaz, a strip of land lying along the east coast of the Red Sea that the Koran itself calls an ‘unfruitful valley’.

Islam is the youngest of the world religions, and its tenets both incorporate and reinterpret the teachings of earlier faiths. Moses and Jesus are regarded as early prophets, but their religions are said to have distorted the will of God. In the seventh century AD the Prophet Muhammad was apparently given a final revelation from God while he lived in Mecca and nearby Medina. The divine message came to be recorded in the Koran, ‘the Perfect Book’. Written in Arabic, this text helped to define the identity of a new religion anxious to distinguish itself from the other great faiths of the Near East. It also served to establish patterns of belief and practice that would be followed far into the future. As one Islamic scholar has noted: ‘The Prophet departed, the Revelation remained.’¹

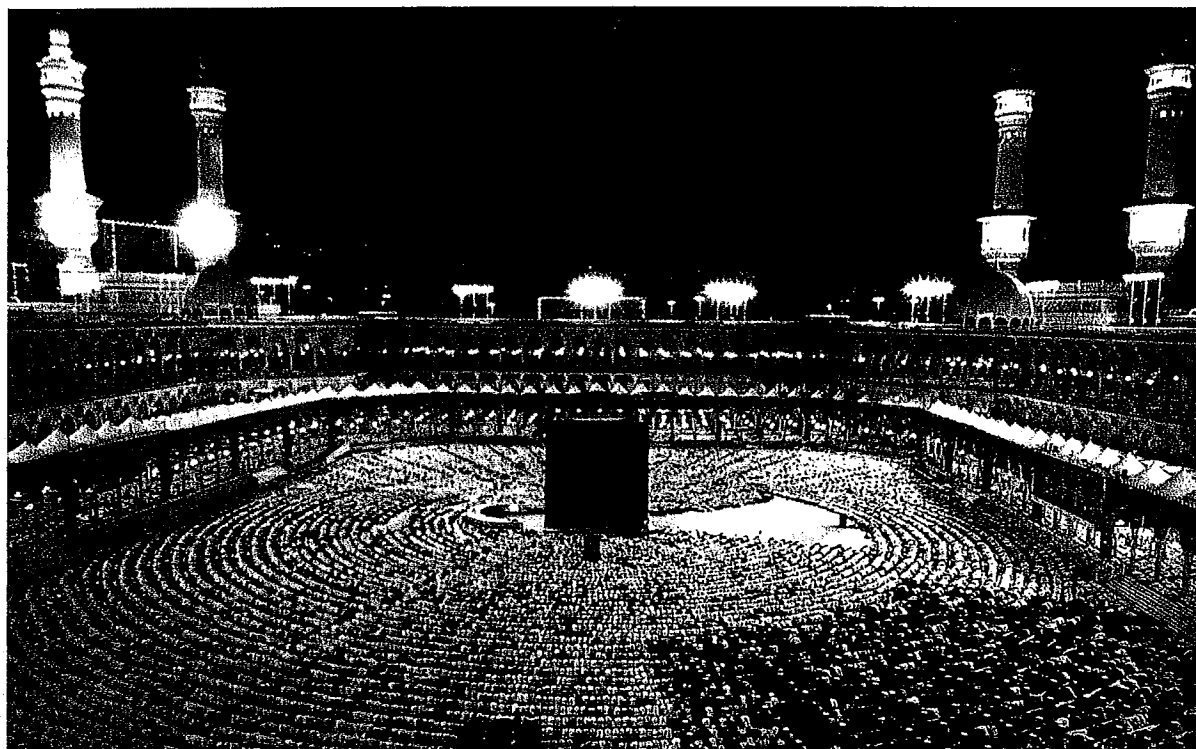
Muslim descriptions of the origins of Mecca also reflect the idea of a faith emerging out of and indeed appropriating the myths and practices of older traditions. Allah is said to have chosen the Arabian peninsula as the location of the origin of the world, and to have created the rest of the earth in a series of concentric circles leading away from what became, literally, ‘the navel of the earth’. Adam, the first prophet, then lived on the site before being expelled from Paradise. Later, following Allah’s command to leave the fertile land of Syria, the prophet Abraham built a shrine in the ‘unfruitful valley’ which echoed the divine residence of God in heaven. This earthly House of Allah came to be known as the *Ka’ba*, or ‘cube’.

The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca around AD 570. Within seventy years he had not only restored the sacred shrine to Allah, but also established the foundations of the Islamic faith. The practice of the Prophet – embodied in the 'tradition', or *sunna*, and recorded in textual materials called *hadiths* – has become a model for all Muslims. Five central pillars of faith are mentioned in the Koran. Four of these specify actions which are to be repeated at steady intervals, reminding the believer constantly of his or her identity as a Muslim. Allah is to be proclaimed God, and Muhammad his Prophet. Fasting should be practised during the holy month of Ramadan. Alms are to be given, and prayers said five times a day. It is the last of the great pillars of faith, however, which confirms the believer's identity in a way that is exceptional because its performance is necessary only once in a lifetime. This is the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. Alone among all of the contemporary world religions, therefore, Islam actually requires its followers to go on pilgrimage, provided health and funds permit. As the Koran states: 'Pilgrimage to the House is a duty laid upon people which they owe to Allah, those of them that can afford the journey thither' (3:98). The *hajj* signifies proper devotion to the will of God, and literally means 'an effort'. Even though perhaps only ten per cent of the world's 600–700 million Muslims manage to undertake the journey before they die, the thoughts of the entire *umma* are likely to be with the one or two million who reach Mecca each year.

For some Muslims, the injunction contained in the fifth pillar of Islam provides a key to the unity of peoples professing the Islamic faith. Pilgrims to the House of Allah are required to strip themselves of all marks of identity except those which indicate their allegiance to Islam. One *hajji*, conversing with the famous North American Muslim and black activist Malcolm X, expressed this ideal of cultural diversity submerged within a common religious identity in the following way:²

This would be an anthropologist's paradise. . . . Every specimen of humanity is brought together at Mecca during this pilgrimage. It's probably the only incident and the only time and the only place on earth where you can find every specimen of humanity – all cultures, all races . . . all of everything.

Yet we would be foolish to assume that a world religion such as Islam, whose tenets are designed to span and transcend both historical change and cultural variation, is a faith which reflects the perfect unity enjoined in its holy book. 'Islam' means 'submission' to the divine will, but such submission can take many forms.³ Thus, it is a religion of conflicts and contradictions, made sharper because many believers strive towards incompatible conceptions of orthodoxy and truth. Differences of interpretation and practice fracture the faith along many fault-lines – between urban and rural practice, scripturalist and mystic notions of authority, the politically powerful and the politically weak. . . . No study of Islamic pilgrimage can avoid these issues of conflict and divergence, even as it describes the *hajj* – the one occasion when a large part of the *umma* comes together, synchronising movements in time and space to converge on the central point of faith.



17 Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Pilgrims gather in concentric circles around the Ka'ba, shown here draped with the *kiswah*, or black cloth. The Ka'ba dates largely from the 7th century AD, though it has been much restored. The foundations of the present construction contain fragments from the building known to Muhammad.



18 Persian calligraphic motto, 17th century. The figure is a basmala, or form of writing moulded into a figurative representation to read 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'.

ORIGINS OF THE HAJJ: FAITH, TRADE AND CONQUEST

Call to mind the time, when the disbelievers plotted against thee that they might confine thee, or kill thee, or expel thee. They planned and Allah also planned, and Allah is the best of planners. . . .
(*Koran*, 8:31)

Around AD 400 pastoral nomads of the Koreish tribe established a permanent settlement in the valley of Mecca. The bedouin way of life in the area was characterised by constant feuds, but common religious and judicial customs required the declaration of periods of truce – times of sacred peace during which pilgrimage to local gods as well as trade could take place. Around religious sites there existed a protected or holy area (*haram*), in which the spilling of blood was not permitted. The trading centre at Mecca benefited from these rules, since it was located on the incense route along the east coast of the Red Sea. Pagan tribes would come to worship at the Ka'ba, exchange goods at great fairs and compete in recitals of poetry. As the settlement developed into an economic and political power, it also encouraged the centralisation of worship in Mecca. The Ka'ba became a pre-eminent shrine, surrounded by the idols of visiting tribal groups. Gradually, as one shrine gained in importance, so did a single deity – Allah, the God in whose name people fulfilled contracts, honoured relatives and fed their guests (*al-ilah* means 'the God'). Thus, peaceful commerce and worship, trade and religion, reinforced each other. One writer has attempted to provide a vivid evocation of the scene, as if it were occurring before our eyes:⁴

Within the tumultuous confusion which fills the desert, the festivities at the beginning of each season represent the only enjoyable periods of rest. A peace of God at this time interrupts the continuous feuds for a fair period of time. The most diverse tribes which otherwise did not trust each other at all, make common pilgrimage to the same holy places without fear, through the land of friend and foe. Trade raises its head, and general and lively exchange results. . . .

Muhammad was born into a poor but respectable branch of the Koreish clan. His great-grandfather, Hashim, had previously played an important part in consolidating much of the Meccan commercial empire. He himself was a trader and married the widow of a rich merchant: he did not begin to preach until he had reached the age of 40 or so. At first, he attracted little attention from fellow Meccans, but as he began to appeal to a wider public his strong opposition to polytheism and the worship of idols proved unpopular among the Koreish. These rulers of Mecca may have been afraid that their trading links would be threatened if pagan religious festivals were curtailed. They were also puzzled as to why Muhammad should have been the one chosen by God to receive a revelation, and are reputed to have asked: 'Why could God not choose a bigger man with better means (and a bank balance) at his disposal to be the Prophet . . . ?'⁵

In 622, Muhammad and his followers were forced to flee the city, and it is from the year of this flight and exile, or *hijra*, that the Muslim era is dated. The Muslim refugees sought refuge in Medina (*Medinat-un-Nabi*, or 'city of the Prophet'), where Muhammad found military and spiritual support for his aims and assumed an important role as arbiter of disputes.

The Prophet was a skilful politician and military leader, and began to combine raids on the caravans of the Koreish with the exertion of economic pressure on Mecca. Trade links between Mecca and Medina also helped to increase the influence of Islamic ideas, and in 629 some 2,000 Muslims even managed to undertake a lesser pilgrimage (*umra*) to the city.

By 630 the city of his birth had given in to Muhammad's military and political pressure, and such success was codified in ritual and doctrine. Islam's enemies were treated with mercy, but the idols of Mecca were destroyed and the Ka'ba purified. A traditional story from the time of the Prophet, recorded in the eighth century by Ibn Ishaq of Medina, provides an interpretation of these developments offered by a Muslim defending his faith to the King of Abyssinia:⁶

. . . O King, we were plunged in the depth of ignorance and barbarism; we adored idols, we lived in unchastity; we ate dead animals, and we spoke abominations; we disregarded every feeling of humanity, and the duties of hospitality and neighbourhood; we knew no law but that of the strong, when God raised among us a man, of whose birth, truthfulness, honesty and purity we were aware, and he called us to the unity of God, and taught us not to associate anything with Him, he forbade us the worship of idols; and enjoined us to speak the truth. . . .

Thus, non-believers were prevented from entering the Ka'ba, and in the spring of the tenth year after his flight to Medina the Prophet performed another pilgrimage to Mecca. These actions, accomplished shortly before his death in June 632, confirmed Mecca as the holiest city in Islam, with the Ka'ba as its most sacred point. Muhammad's last pilgrimage was also to prove a model for future Muslim practice. To perform the *hajj* was to follow in the footsteps of Adam, Abraham and, above all, the Prophet himself.

Under Muhammad's successors the Arab tribes conquered large parts of North Africa, the Holy Roman Empire, Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan. United for the first time, they were able to penetrate frontiers that the Roman and Persian empires had grown too weak to defend. In the words of one commentator, Islam became 'a composite civilisation, as well as a religion and social order'.⁷ Key to such success was the creation of an Arab consciousness based on common faith rather than tribal loyalties.

In AD 660 the political capital of the Muslims was shifted from Medina to Damascus, and Mecca itself remained a town of relatively modest proportions. It was prevented from expanding too far because it was surrounded by mountains, and never saw the construction of great buildings – perhaps because these would have been seen as too much of a challenge to the predominance of the Ka'ba. Yet, as the following quotation indicates, its significance as a site of worship was to prove decisive:⁸

Mecca was a frontier town, raw and unfinished, a commercial boom town that would likely have soon become an urban ghost had it not found a new and extraordinarily successful export item of its own manufacture.

The history of the Hijaz has seen numerous generations of Muslims (and European Crusaders) attempting to appropriate Mecca's economic

wealth, use its religious status to bolster their political authority, or even redefine its spiritual significance. From the earliest days of Islam, local political leaders were eager to exploit the profitable pilgrim trade, and some were even prepared to claim descent from the Prophet to bolster their authority. In 1201 the sherif, or ruler, of the port of Yanbu, situated to the north, sent his son to attack Mecca, and took the town easily since the Amir of the city had, with a lamentable sense of timing, taken all his men away on a minor pilgrimage. The descendants of this sherif, who could claim descent from the Prophet himself, reigned as nominal rulers of Mecca until the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Such apparent authority did not prevent them from being subject to the 'protection' of rulers in Cairo, including the sultans of the Ottoman empire from the sixteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth.

More subtle ways of obtaining political and religious status from association with Mecca and Medina have been available to ambitious Muslims. The Malaysian government has recently decided to take over the organisation of the *hajj* on behalf of its citizens – a way of identifying the nation-state with Islam. Other forms of patronage have enabled the powerful to cement a reputation for generosity, piety and influence. The 'Mosque of the Footprints' at Damascus lay along the highway leading to the Hijaz, Jerusalem and Egypt, and became the recipient of many gifts, including endowments for people to take up the route to Mecca on behalf of those who could not go themselves. In the thirteenth century an Egyptian sultan made a pilgrimage to Mecca bringing with him a *kiswah* (a silk covering for the Ka'ba) embroidered in gold with verses from the Koran.⁹ This action indicated not only reverence for the building but also the sultan's authority within the city, and the covering was subsequently replaced by Egyptian rulers every year. Status could also be gained by having one's name mentioned in the Friday prayers delivered at Mecca, and this fact provided a useful source of funds for local sherifs, who could be persuaded to adapt their spiritual inclinations for monetary gain. It is easy to understand the origin of the Meccan saying: 'We do not need any agriculture – God has given us the pilgrims as our annual crop.'

Mecca has also provided an important arena for competing definitions of proper Islamic practice. In the eighteenth century, uncompromising Sunni Muslims known as Wahhabis succeeded in forcing much of the interior of the Arabian peninsula to adopt their version of the faith through a combination of proselytisation and conquest. They did their best to restore the piety of pilgrimage by banning musicians and prostitutes from caravans, and made their presence felt in the Holy City itself, as the following historical account indicates:¹⁰

At the hajj . . . of 1800 Mecca saw hordes of Wahhabi warriors, accompanied by their women and children, swarming through its streets like streams from the hills following rain and praying with unaccustomed fervour at the Holy Places.

The doctrines of the Wahhabis have been compared with those of Calvinist Puritanism in Christianity because of their asceticism and suspicion of all forms of idolatry. Indeed, these Muslim puritans took on the role of iconoclasts and destroyed the graves of the Shi'ite saints in the

holy town of Karbala (Iraq) – an action shocking to much of the Muslim community. In 1802 they actually blockaded Mecca. The commander of their forces had had a dream in which the Prophet appeared and warned him that he would die within days if he took so much as a single grain from the Holy City by force. Thus, instead of attacking directly, he simply cut off the water supplies from Arafat, literally severing Mecca's lifeline. Subsequently, the sherif of the city was obliged to obey Wahhabi codes of dress and behaviour, and the Meccans themselves – outwardly at least – adopted more ascetic practices, even setting their tobacco on fire to satisfy the new invaders. In response, Mehmet Ali, Pasha of Egypt, spent much of the subsequent two decades directing military campaigns against the Wahhabis. In victory, he proved relentless. A bounty was declared for every Wahhabi head brought to him, and their impaled bodies were placed before the gates of Mecca.

However, after the fall of the Ottoman empire, control of the Hijaz was finally surrendered by the Turks. They had thrown in their lot with the German army during the First World War, and met resistance from the British (including T. E. Lawrence), allied with bedouins and local Arabs. Such developments ironically created a new opportunity for Wahhabis to spread over the Hijaz during the 1920s.

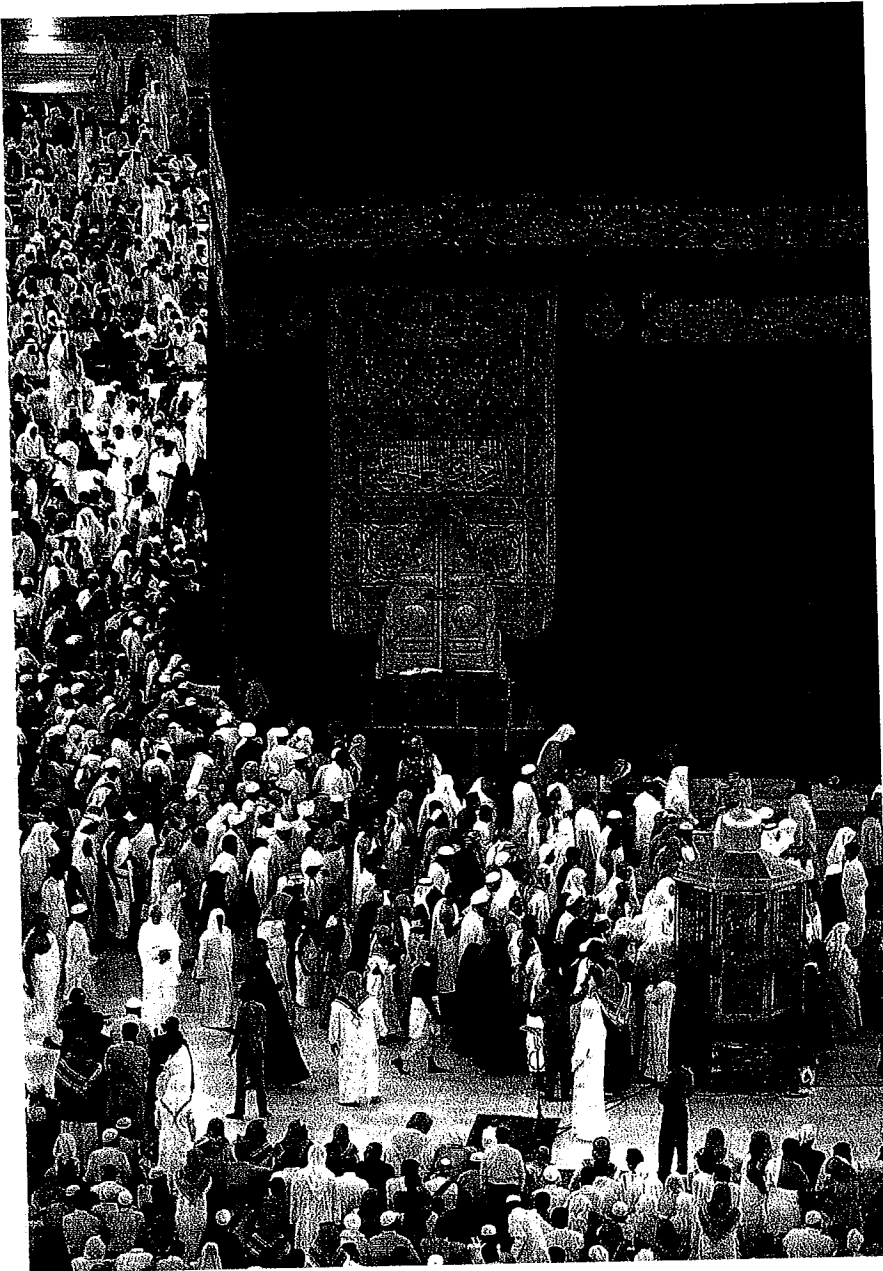
Since the Second World War, the nature of the pilgrimage to Mecca has changed enormously, not least because the number of pilgrims today constitutes perhaps up to five or ten times that of a century ago. The discovery of oil in the region during the 1930s has turned the Saudi Arabian state into a world economic power. Yet pilgrims are still expected to respect 'puritan' standards of behaviour, avoiding alcohol and all unseemly forms of dress. Despite the efforts of Mehmet Ali, the Wahhabi legacy is still evident in the performance of the *hajj*.

PILGRIMAGE IN PRACTICE: THE RITES OF THE HAJJ

The *hajj* is carried out between the eighth and the thirteenth days of the twelfth month of the Muslim year. Thus, it occurs at the zenith of the annual calendar, bringing it to a close. Like Christian pilgrimage to Rome or Jerusalem at Easter, it draws the community of believers together not only in a single place but during a single, sacredly charged time. A journey to Mecca undertaken at some other time is seen as a 'lesser' pilgrimage (an *umra*, or 'visitation'). As a practice enshrined in the Koran, but also influenced by earlier, pre-Islamic traditions, the pilgrimage is made up of a series of formal rites, with specific injunctions for each of its stages.

First, the Muslim identity of the traveller must be established. Nowadays, pilgrims run a gauntlet of walkie-talkies wielded by Saudi guards, as well as producing identity cards and special passports. Such secular safeguards of the sanctity of Mecca are reinforced by religious practice. Before pilgrims even pass the boundary stones that mark the edge of the holy territory of Mecca, they prepare themselves by vowing to abstain from worldly actions during the pilgrimage, including the development of emotional or sexual ties. Men put on robes made of two plain white

MUSLIM PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA



19 Pilgrims
circumambulating the Ka'ba
at Mecca.

sheets, while women wear plain dresses, and it is frequently believed that pilgrims will present themselves at the Last Judgment dressed in the clothes they have worn at Mecca. All personal adornment, including signs of wealth, is forbidden.

Rites of purification include ritual washing and the cutting of hair and nails, actions which will not be repeated until the end of the pilgrimage. Since many pilgrims now come to Mecca by plane, such preparations may actually take place before they board the aircraft. On arrival, pilgrims are entrusted to guides whose task is to see that the appropriate rites are

carried out correctly. The central point of Mecca for the pilgrim is the Ka'ba. However, this building is only some 43 feet (13 m) high and 36 feet (11 m) square. It is thus much too small to allow collective worship within its walls, and rites are therefore carried out around its exterior – a vast and enlarged courtyard of about 180 by 120 yards (164 × 110 m). Even in their daily lives at Mecca, pilgrims may wish to be near this area, and rent is high for accommodation near the mosque, even if it is of inferior quality by comparison with apartments located further away.

The *hajji* soon acquires a sense of the sacred geography of Mecca: he or she traverses the boundary of purity that surrounds the city itself, before reaching the courtyard and finally encountering the House of Allah, and it is as though different zones of sacredness lead in concentric circles towards the Ka'ba. Objects that touch the latter are imbued with some of its sacred power – whether they are the black cloth that covers it, the rainwater that falls from its walls, or the whisks of brooms used to sweep its floors. John Lewis Burckhardt, a traveller in the eighteenth century, noted that holy men of his day were said to settle near the Ka'ba, and some went on the *umra* twice daily, as well as performing a sevenfold circumambulation of the shrine seventy times a day. The Ka'ba even held attractions for those who could not sleep:¹¹

Men are seen, in the middle of the night, running to the mosque in their sleeping-clothes; here they perform the walk round the Kaba, kiss the black stone, utter a short prayer, drink the water of Zemzem, and then return to their beds.

The present Ka'ba has been restored from the original seventh-century building, and incorporates the famous black stone (a meteorite), embedded in a wall about two feet (0.6 m) from the ground. This may originally have been a *betyl* – a sacred rock embodying the deity which, before the birth of Muhammad, was moved around according to the movements of the bedouin (rather like the Ark of the Covenant of the Israelites). The fixing of this stone in the Ka'ba reflects a 'sedentising' of the faith, and is a firm statement of the close and permanent association between Islam and Mecca. In the tenth century, a Shi'ite sect called the Carmathians actually attempted to assert their authority by carrying the stone away and keeping it for twenty years as a form of ransom. Despite its probable pre-Islamic connections, the stone has been redefined to accommodate Muslim beliefs. According to some traditions, 'it is a relic from Adam or Abraham, and was kissed by the Prophet himself. There are also Muslims who say that it was sent by an angel of Allah to record deeds which will be examined on the Day of Judgment. One theory states that it was originally white but has been darkened by the sins of humanity.

During the *hajj* itself, after arriving at the courtyard, the pilgrim kisses the black stone; indeed, over the centuries part of the stone has been worn down by the kisses of these pilgrims, eager to copy the action of the Prophet. If, however, it cannot be reached in the mass of bodies, pilgrims call out a salutation to it from afar. They also swirl in a continuously moving circle round the Ka'ba. The ritual of walking round it seven times is said to have been invented in imitation of the angels who circle the throne of Allah. Then, the pilgrims must run between two hillocks, in

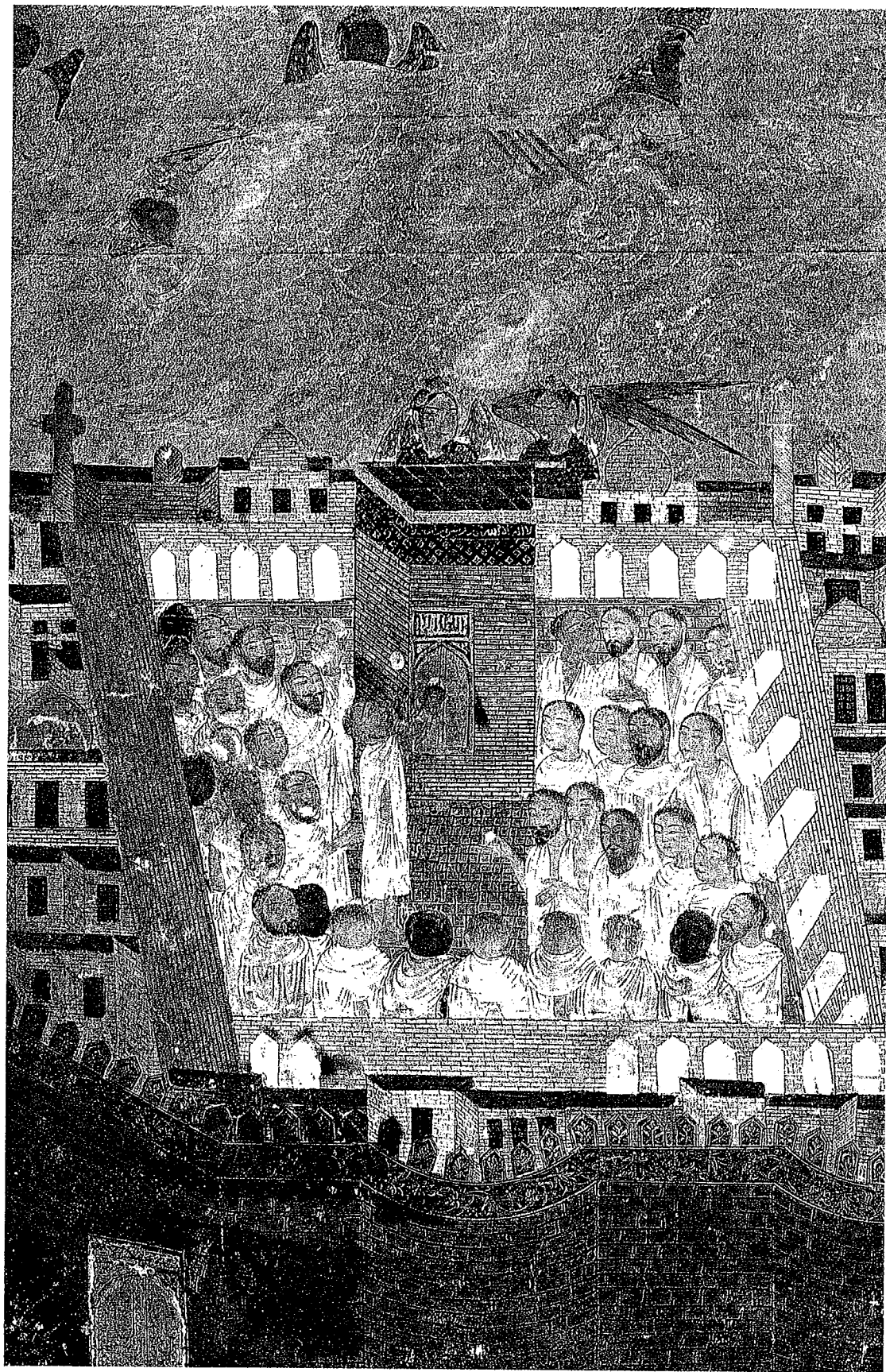
commemoration of the actions of Hagar (wife of Abraham), searching for water for her child, Ishmael. Water is still present in the courtyard in the shape of the well of Zam Zam, believed to have been miraculously created, which has no formal place in the rites but provides bottled souvenirs to take home after the pilgrimage. Pilgrims also try to drink its bitter water after completion of the rites, and – according to some accounts – a sprinkling of it is believed to make the sins of pilgrims ‘fall away like dust’.¹²

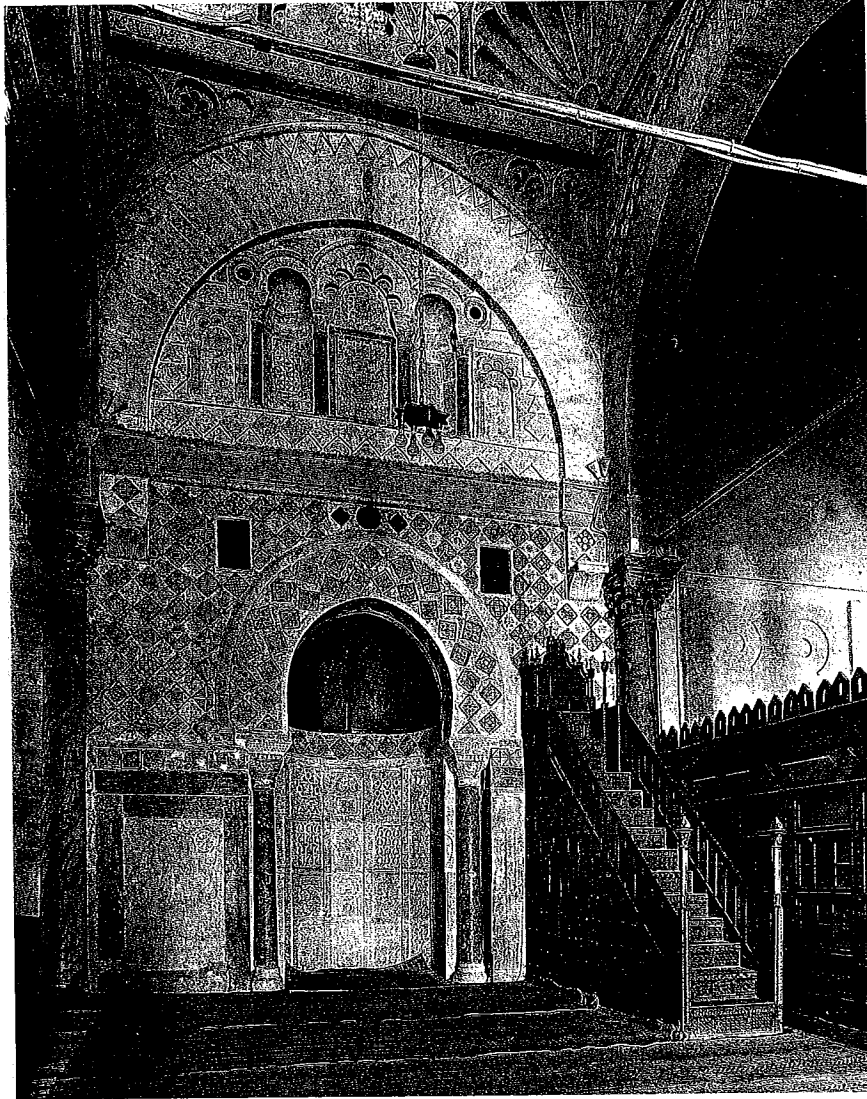
Then follows one of the most important parts of the *hajj*. This is a journey to the Mount of Mercy at Arafat, situated some twelve miles to the east. Here Muhammad is said to have addressed his followers for the last time, and a whole day of sermons and prayer is devoted to this site, called the ‘day of standing’. At sunset, however, as soon as the ceremonies are over, such relative calm is transformed into great activity, as pilgrims go as quickly as possible to gather materials for the next day’s event, the stoning of the pillars at a place called Mina. Speed on this occasion is often a matter of some pride, and in the past fights might break out between caravans, anxious to move faster than other pilgrims. Burckhardt noted, for instance, that ‘. . . two hundred lives have on some occasions been lost in supporting what was thought the honour of the respective caravans’.¹³ The stoning itself is not mentioned in any text of the Koran, but stems from a popular tradition that tells how Abraham hurled stones at the devil when tempted to disobey God’s command to sacrifice his son. Each pilgrim throws forty-one stones over a period of three days at three pillars, which are taken to represent Satan.

Even today, carrying out the pilgrimage can entail considerable sacrifice for the believer, who may have had to endure great economic costs and physical hardship to come to Mecca. The next part of the pilgrimage symbolises such self-abnegation, as well as invoking Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son on God’s command. A sheep or other animal is ritually slaughtered, and even if the meat itself does not reach Allah, it is hoped that the righteousness thus expressed by the believer will do so. Chapter 22 of the Koran states:

For every people We appointed rites of sacrifice, that they might pronounce the name of Allah over the quadrupeds of the class of cattle that He has provided for them. Remember then that your God is One God, and submit yourselves, therefore, wholly to Him . . . eat thereof yourselves and feed the needy, those who are content and those who are distressed. . . .

Finally, pilgrims have their hair cut and return to Mecca, possibly also visiting Medina and the Prophet’s mosque there. In the latter town, the second holiest in the Muslim world, notices forbid visitors to prostrate themselves before the tombs of the Prophet and his successors. The presence of such signs hints at the difficult balance the *hajj* must strike between the abstract piety expressed in the Koran and the tangible, physical reminders of faith expressed in rites associated with pilgrimage. The former runs the risk of losing its appeal in the real world of feeling, sensation and need; the latter, however, can come dangerously close to idolatry.¹⁴





20 OPPOSITE Illustration of pilgrims at the Ka'ba, from a *Miscellany* prepared in AD 1411 for Iskandar, Governor of Fars, modern-day western Iran. The pilgrims are wearing ritual costume, made of two pieces of white cloth. One touches the black stone.

21 Interior of the Great Mosque of Sidi Okba in Kairouan, Tunisia, showing the *mihrab* (concave niche placed in the qiblah wall, which points the worshipper in the direction of Mecca) and *minbar* (high seat or pulpit from which orations are delivered). The same site has been used for a succession of mosques ever since the city was founded in the 7th century AD. One of the holiest cities of Islam, Kairouan was a major centre of medieval Islamic culture.

The *hajj* is likely to be a unique act in the life of the believer. Even as it brings followers of Islam into a centripetal process, converging on the Ka'ba in body as well as mind, it has implications that are far more centrifugal in character. The notion of union with others beyond the Holy City is expressed most powerfully at the time of sacrifice, since it is not only Muslims participating in the *hajj* who kill an animal, but ideally all Muslims in the whole of the *umma* at exactly the same time. Thus all believers, no matter how distant, can share vicariously in the actions of the pilgrimage. However, the process of reaching the object of religious longing, embodied in the Ka'ba, also contains a curious irony that is keenly felt by some believers. Once they have reached the House of God itself they are denied, for once in their lives, an orientation for their worship. Pilgrims can no longer look towards a distant city, an object of desire that up to that moment had always been located far beyond the

horizon. They have, in a very real sense, achieved their highest goal on earth, but in doing so have deprived themselves of a fixed direction for their prayers.

TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRANSITIONS

I set out alone, finding no companion to cheer the way with friendly intercourse. . . . Swayed by an over-mastering impulse within me, and a long-cherished desire to visit those glorious sanctuaries, I resolved to quit all my friends and tear myself away from my home. As my parents were still alive, it weighed grievously upon me to part from them, and both they and I were afflicted with sorrow.

These are the words of Ibn Battuta,¹⁵ a theologian born in Tangier in 1304, who devoted so much of his life to journeying through Asia and Africa, tracing the contours of the Muslim world, that he became known as the 'Traveller of Islam'. However, again and again, he was to return to Mecca, making pilgrimage after pilgrimage to the Holy City. His description of his first *hajj* introduces us to the theme of this section: a discussion of the perceptions and reflections of pilgrims as they journey to Mecca.

Any account of the *form* of the *hajj* – its activities and rituals – reveals little of the way it is *experienced* by its participants. If the pilgrimage is supposed to be an expression of the unity of the *umma*, how does this work in practice? Do pilgrims feel a sense of communion with those of the same faith but another nationality? To what extent do they 'see' Mecca through radically different cultural spectacles? And what about the experience of the journey as a whole? After all, arrival at Mecca is only the centre-point of a process that can take weeks, even years, for the traveller to fulfil. The examples below attempt to explore some of these questions. They cannot be 'typical' of the *hajj*, since no standard pilgrimage can exist, but they examine the experiences of people whose thoughts are oriented in some way towards Mecca, even though they come from societies that are worlds apart in perception and motivation.

The 'hac' among Turkish villagers: pilgrimage as an image of return

Villagers who live on the Central Anatolian plateau do not live lives of exceptional piety or devotion. Yet their assumptions, their ways of understanding the world, are nevertheless pervaded by Islam. Furthermore, the pilgrimage is an important part of their experience of faith. It offers a glimpse of the future world that will be their final home after death. Carol Delaney, an anthropologist who has studied these villagers for many years, writes:¹⁶

Unlike notions of pilgrimage that have influenced the Christian West, notions in which the movement is perceived primarily as a 'going forth', so that even life itself can be construed as a pilgrimage, the Muslim notion embodies an image of return, a return to place of origin.

The image of Mecca is a constant presence throughout the lives of these villagers, and the famous *ezzan*, the call to prayer, beckons them not only to pray, but also to turn to the Holy City itself.¹⁷

... the call is inescapable ... that sound, repeated five times a day every day, every year, all of one's life, makes inroads on the brain. One begins to adjust one's own rhythm to the call and not the clock, adjusting also to the intervals between calls ...

and the object is Mecca:

... that point on the horizon that speaks so eloquently of things unseen and organized orientation in space as well as time. ...

The *hajj* is usually performed by older villagers, who see the journey as an important part of their life-cycle, a conclusion to lives of activity and effort. Trips are organised by local travel-agents who gather people from the same area and take them directly from Turkey to Mecca. This means that the same group of fellow villagers can be guided round the Holy City together, having taken provisions from their village as well as the prayers and petitions of those who have remained in Turkey. Just as the ties to home are maintained by pilgrims as they walk together through the streets of Mecca, so those left in Turkey maintain vivid memories of their absent friends and kin. Delaney notes that 'our thoughts and prayers automatically travelled to the absent villagers'.¹⁸

On their return, the pilgrims act as channels for the blessings of Mecca. The myrrh, frankincense and jewellery that they bring home retain some of the lustre of their holy journey. Ever after, pilgrims are treated with deference by others. Men seem actually to enter a new stage in life, symbolised by the growing of a beard, not only echoing the unshaven state required in Mecca, but also as a sign of age and wisdom. They may also spend much of their time sitting in the precincts of the village mosque. Indeed, Delaney remarks: 'They seem to desire to transform their own space back home into an image of Mecca or the "other world"'.¹⁹

The *hajj* is a kind of quintessential journey that orientates the lives of these villagers, even in Turkey. Indeed, it is striking that the metaphor of the pilgrimage pervades the way in which they perceive other journeys in their lives. Those villagers who have temporarily emigrated to rich European countries such as Belgium come to see their return to Turkey as a minor echo of the *hajj* – a return to a longed-for country, a vital centre far away. Yet the pilgrimage to Mecca also contains a surprise for villagers, and one that has the potential to alter the way they view their faith. They expect it will be the ultimate expression of Muslim unity; indeed, they presume they will be able to understand other pilgrims and share essential customs and practices. However, Delaney reports that, on reaching Mecca, they are confronted by myriad peoples speaking many different languages and actually feel shocked that they cannot understand fellow Muslims. Thus, we see how the juxtaposition of Muslims from around the world may not reinforce a sense of unity: rather, it may make it seem impossible ever to achieve. Such a conclusion is reinforced by past incidents in the Holy City, where conflicts between pilgrims of slightly different faiths or practices have occasionally led to violence and even death.

Admittedly, the consequences of cultural displacement are not as



22 Contemporary Egyptian wall painting of the Ka'ba and a man on a horse carrying a sunshade, indicating that the owner of the house on which it is painted has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

serious for the Turkish villagers as such incidents would suggest. On returning home, they seem happy to tell stereotypical stories of the journey, designed to conform with and confirm fellow villagers' expectations. In this way, the conventional image of Mecca is maintained, and the experiences of the few not allowed to interfere with the aspirations of the many.

Malcolm X: pilgrimage and the transformation of the self

Malcolm X has a controversial place within the political mythology of the 1960s. Like John Kennedy or Martin Luther King, he is known as a man who fought for and ultimately was assassinated on account of his beliefs. Born in the United States, the son of a Baptist preacher, he spent much of his life in the Nation of Islam organisation as an advocate for black rights and the principle of separation from a white society seen as inherently racist. His pilgrimage to Mecca, unlike that of the Turkish villagers described above, was essentially that of an individual, travelling alone, to the holiest shrine of a religion that he had consciously embraced. He made his journey in 1964, and the experience is recorded in his autobiography and correspondence.

Malcolm made an unpromising start to his *hajj*, since he reports his discomfort at arriving in Jedda and being forced to wait as pilgrimage authorities examined and checked his unconventional history as a Muslim. He was, after all, an American, and on hearing of the presence of a pilgrim from the United States many of his fellow travellers at Jedda presumed he must be Muhammad Ali, the boxer. However, he finally managed to make his way to Mecca, and recorded the impact of the journey thus:²⁰

I think that the pilgrimage to Mecca broadened my scope probably more in twelve days than my previous experience during my thirty-nine years on this earth.

For Malcolm X, leader of a struggle for black autonomy in the United States, the pilgrimage raised the issue of identity, and more especially race. In a context where all appeared to be reduced to the same level – eating, sleeping and praying together – he found himself living with people who in his own country would have been considered white. By voluntarily undertaking the *hajj*, he had to face the fact that the faith made no distinction between people other than that between believer and non-believer. He wrote on a postcard:²¹

I have just visited the Holy City of Mecca and witnessed pilgrims of *all colors*, from every part of this earth, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood like I've never witnessed during my entire life in America. It is truly a wonderful gift to behold.

White people could no longer be seen as irredeemably racist. It was as though the experience of Islam and the *hajj* not only stripped 'the white' from their minds, but also forced Malcolm X to rethink the assumptions on which his life had been based.

What is striking about the juxtaposition of Malcolm X's journey with that of villagers from the Anatolian plateau is that they appear to see two entirely different Meccas. For Malcolm X, accustomed to living as an outsider in a country of conflict and fractured identities, the rites of the *hajj* provided a brief experience of unity, expressed through common allegiance to Islam. For villagers whose everyday lives are characterised by the assumption of common belief and practice, both in their home and in the Muslim community as a whole, an encounter with others of the same faith but other cultures is disturbing in a radically different way – one in which the unity of the *umma* is not affirmed, but begins to be questioned.

Permanent pilgrimage: the journey that never ends

For both Malcolm X and the Turkish villagers, the *hajj* provides a temporary interlude in lives devoted to many other concerns. The situation is very different for the final group of Islamic pilgrims we shall consider – West African Muslims, who often devote their whole lives to the pilgrimage.²² Muslim pilgrims have come from this part of Africa since the arrival of Islam around the eleventh century. Members of royal families could combine pilgrimage, trade and diplomacy as they moved between courts and palaces along the North African coast. Indeed, at times, residence in the more advanced centres of learning appeared to be almost

as important as the *hajj* itself in enhancing the status of the returning pilgrim. By at least the nineteenth century, more humble Muslims began to undertake the journey. So bad were the conditions in pre-colonial times that pilgrims were not expected to return home: even if they were not enslaved, they might succumb to combinations of disease, thirst or violence. (However, it was and still is considered by many Muslims to be a sign of grace to die in or near the Holy City. Suffering on the journey itself may also increase the spiritual merit gained.)

Most West African pilgrims can now take the train across the continent to Mecca, but others follow the long tradition of overland travel, with whole families making the journey in lorries, on camels or perhaps on foot. At times this has truly constituted a society on the move, and even the efforts of the Sudanese government in the 1960s to close its borders to them did not prevent the illegal movement of thousands of people. Conditions of travel are not helped by the habit of some lorry drivers of stopping repeatedly and demanding extra money before restarting. It has even been known for local inhabitants to erect tables at arbitrary points on the route, intercept parties of pilgrims and charge for bogus entry certificates into the Sudan. As one writer has put it:²³

To travel with the pilgrims is to experience a paradoxical world with the ascetic, aesthetic and religious intermingled with the secular, pragmatic and immoral. Some of the most pious behaviour and exacting religious practice exist alongside appalling squalor . . . such are the compromises of the pilgrim road.

The colonial period in West Africa saw an improvement in the infrastructure of the area, making travel easier. However many inhabitants of Nigeria fled their own country, embarking on a form of exodus to be free from the colonial powers and nearer to the home of the Prophet. These migrants of the early part of this century have formed the nucleus of the West African population that is still located in the Sudan and Chad, having found large areas of agricultural land available to them. The result of these developments has been a cultural phenomenon that appears, to the outsider, to be extraordinary. Many Muslims now live lives of permanent transition, half-way between their countries of origin and Mecca itself. Northern Nigerians may remain for generations in seemingly temporary pilgrimage camps in the Sudan without ever going to Mecca. They give many reasons for having stopped, ranging from the pragmatic (the demands of family, or debts) to the spiritual (such as the unpropitious nature of the time, or the will of God).

Such 'pilgrims' deny that they have settled, and see themselves as being permanently on the road. Thus, they may work for years as farm labourers for Arabic-speakers without ever learning much Arabic. Although they earn money, they do not invest in local banks since they see such funds as devoted ultimately to travel to Mecca. Their villages, frequently set apart from surrounding communities, are constructed from ephemeral mud and straw, rather than the traditional brick of the Sudanese. They are frequently viewed with considerable suspicion by local populations in the Sudan, and may be seen, like so many immigrant populations, as criminal and threatening. However, their lives of

devotion to a religious ideal and separation from mundane existence can also give them an air of sanctity. Some choose to become a fakir, a holy figure believed to have special powers and knowledge because of a life-long devotion to the Koran. It is believed that people who give alms to such a person gain *baraka* or blessing from God.

Despite their somewhat ambiguous reputation, these pilgrims regard themselves as superior to indigenous Sudanese since they are 'purer' Muslims. Their lives are made up of work and prayer, and devotion to holy men. Children are educated in Koranic schools, which help keep them away from the Sudanese, who are materially more successful but seen as a corrupting influence. They are taught to see pilgrimage as the ultimate virtue, frequently learning this from people who themselves have never been on the *hajj*. The finest greeting one can offer is 'May God send you to Mecca'. Occasionally, a village leader will actually make a return trip to the Holy City, and this will be the cause of considerable celebration, as though the *hajji* has acquired grace on behalf of the community as a whole. The majority of these West Africans may never, unlike Malcolm X or the Turkish villagers, reach the Holy City, and yet it casts a shadow over their lives that is just as powerful as its influence in the lives of the true *hajji*.

SAINT AND SUFI: ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO THE SACRED

All the world religions face common problems in the distribution of religious authority. Is it to be concentrated in particular places or texts, or regarded as omnipresent? What role can special functionaries play in defining or even embodying the sacred authority that comes, ultimately, from God? Islam is a faith that, in its 'scripturalist' forms, mistrusts all forms of worship that detract from the centrality of the Koran in defining the relationship between the believer and an infinitely powerful God. Unlike the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the divine attributes of God are held to be remote from human nature, so that according to orthodox teaching no person can be closer to God than any other. Mecca and Medina are, ideally, revered not because they represent the birth- and dwelling-places of the Prophet, but because they are reminders of the original revelation granted to him.

Yet for many Muslims, both Allah and Mecca are very remote vehicles for divinity. Traditions have therefore emerged which attempt to mediate between the high points of faith and the concerns of the ordinary believer by locating spiritual power in more tangible or localised forms. Indeed, the sacred topography of Islam consists of pathways which lead to places other than Mecca or Medina, and numerous forms of travel apart from that of the *hajj* have emerged, ranging from journeying for scholarly purposes to visiting local shrines of important holy figures.²⁴ The Prophet himself saw Jerusalem as a holy place, and during the first years of his influence he and his followers actually prayed towards this city. However, after he quarrelled with the Jews of Medina, the object of prayer (or *qibla*) was changed to Mecca. Even today, many Muslims rank

Jerusalem as a pilgrimage centre second only to Mecca and Medina in importance. Muhammad is even said to have ascended to heaven via a ladder leading from the sacred stone in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a mosque dating from the end of the seventh century. Ibn Battuta describes his visit to the city thus:²⁵

We then reached Jerusalem (may God ennoble her!), third in excellence after the two holy shrines of Mecca and Madina, and the place whence the Prophet was caught up into heaven. . . .

Shi'ism has provided a powerful sectarian movement within Islam for centuries, and one which has also had some effect in moving the emphasis of worship away from Mecca and Medina. In the early days of Islam, a number of disputes emerged as to the location of religious authority. Some insisted that the political and religious leader of Islam had to be a descendant of Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet himself. Ali was said to have been directly nominated by the Prophet as his successor, and to have received secret knowledge which was in turn handed on to his male descendants, known as Imams. This doctrine originally provided a powerful means of protest against the Ummayyad dynasty of Caliphs who had assumed authority in the Muslim world. It has continued to be influential in Islam, not least by maintaining the notion of allegiance to a divinely appointed and sinless spiritual leader – even if at present such a leader is apparently invisible to the material world. Shi'ites believe that the Mahdi, or 'Guided one of God', will return, restore true Islam and bring their perceived oppression to an end.

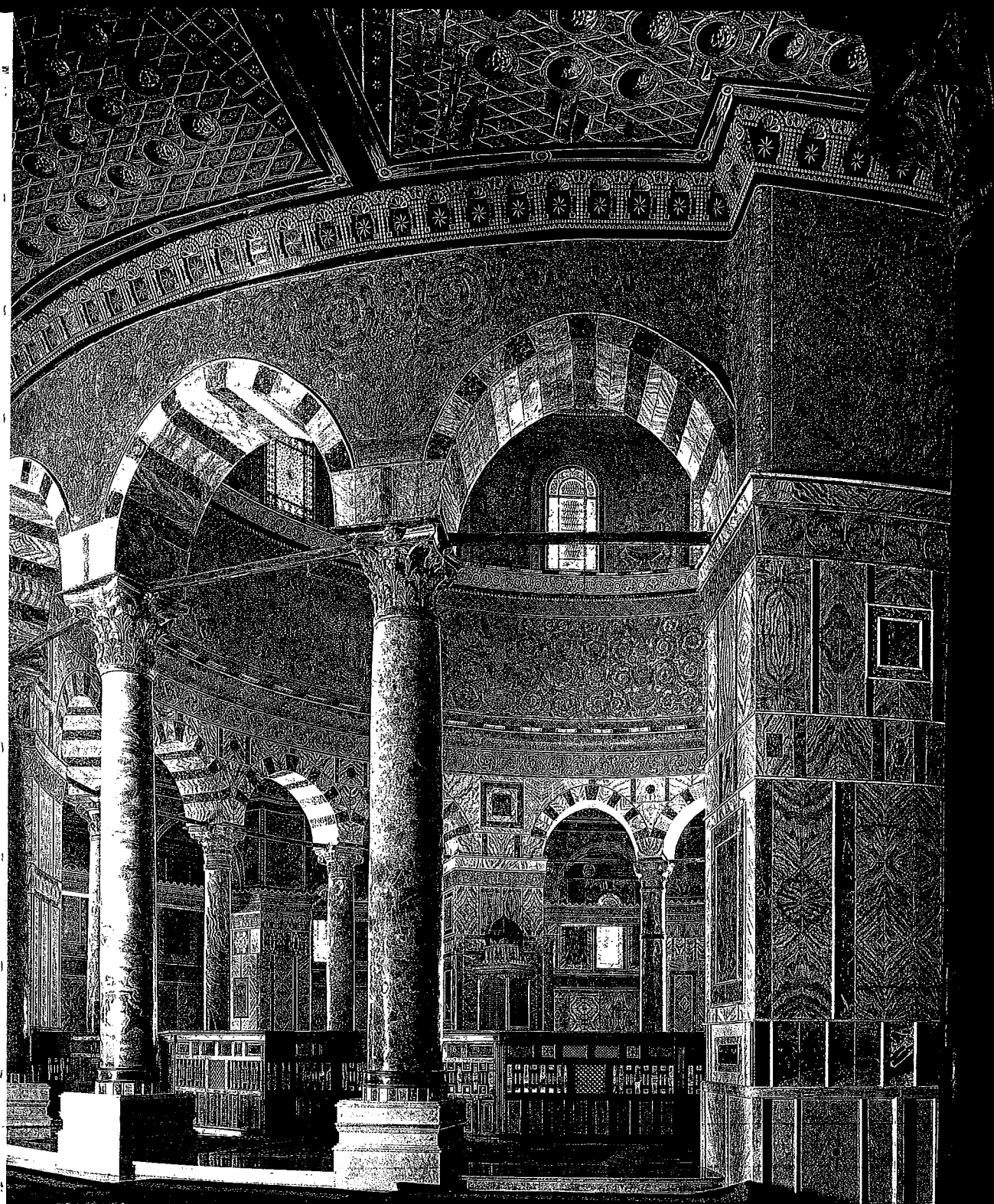
The visiting and worshipping of tombs of the Imams and other holy places occupies a central place in Shi'ite religious practice. These are seen almost as extensions of Mecca and Medina, so that visits to them are considered almost as meritorious as going on the *hajj* itself. Indeed, shrines at Najaf and Karbala, the location of tombs of important Shi'ite martyrs, have considerable political importance in so far as they represent alternatives to Mecca (and Sunni domination) as sources of sacred power.

Islam has provided still other means of locating spiritual power within specific holy figures. Muhammad al-Kittani, a scholar writing in the late nineteenth century, argued that a devotion to Muslim 'saints' accorded well with the letter of Islam. *Baraka*, or grace, could be seen as legitimately transmitted to earth through them:²⁶

Without [saints] the sky would not send rain, the earth would not cause its plants to grow, and calamity would pour upon the inhabitants of the earth.

Sufism has for many centuries represented a powerful alternative source of such power. Originally, it was a reaction against over-legalistic formulations of Islam, and stressed the importance of developing a powerful inner conviction of faith, a personal religious experience that could even lead to ecstasy. Sufis themselves have tended to be mystic ascetics who try to come closer to God through spiritual exercises and contemplation. (The word *suf* possibly refers to the coarse, woollen material worn by early adherents as a sign of renunciation.) They claim a deeper knowledge of the Koran than can be obtained from accepting its

23 OPPOSITE Interior of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, completed for Abd al-Malik in AD 691–2.



external meanings at face value, and some have evolved the notion of an 'inner way' or 'spiritual itinerary' to God made up of stages of development. The sufi Abu Sa'id, born in AD 967, actually recommended that his followers avoid the *hajj*, on the grounds that they should concentrate on mystical experiences rather than mere devotional exercises. When asked why he had not been to Mecca, Abu Sa'id is said to have replied:²⁷

Why have I not performed the Pilgrimage? It is no great matter that thou shouldst tread under thy feet a thousand miles of ground in order to visit a stone house. The true man of God sits where he is, and the Bayt al-Ma'Mur [celestial archetype of the Ka'ba] comes several times in a day and night to visit him and performs the circumambulation above his head. Look and see!

According to the story, all those present could indeed see the vision of the Ka'ba described by the sufi ascetic.

This dramatic emphasis on the notion of 'internally inspired' pilgrimage is echoed by the following lines, originally in Persian, taken from the work of an eleventh-century sufi poet called 'Abdallah al-Ansari:

Know that God Most High has built an outward
Ka'ba out of mud and stone,
And fashioned an inward Ka'ba of heart and soul alone.
The outward Ka'ba, Abraham did build,
The inward Ka'ba was as the Lord Almighty willed.

Although often in tension with orthodox Islam, sufism has proved attractive within more 'popular' versions of the faith. By developing elaborate spiritual concepts as well as introducing music, dancing and seances into worship, it has sometimes even threatened the position of the mosque as the centre of religious life. Its mystical figures have also provided alternative locations for pilgrimage, since they have come to be seen as mediators between the divine and everyday worlds, and their tombs have become tangible objects of reverence after their deaths. It is as though the charismatic authority they embodied during their lives can be retained in material form after their demise.

The story of Sidi 'Abd al-Rahman illustrates this phenomenon in a remarkable way.²⁸ He was a *hajji* and sufi scholar who was born in the early part of the eighteenth century and educated in Algiers and Egypt. The expanding sufi order which grew around him in Algeria aroused the enmity of local Islamic authorities, not least because he drew rural clients away from their patronage. When he died in 1793 or 1794, government employees were instructed to steal his body from its tomb and take it to the capital, to safeguard against the possibility of the corpse becoming the object of pilgrimages which could resist centralised political control. However, local people claimed that, by divine miracle, his corpse actually remained within its original tomb. Thus, the *baraka* of the saint was, in effect, appropriated by rival locations simultaneously, and his followers bestowed on him the title of Abu Qabrayn, 'the man with two tombs'.

As this story indicates, figures who are granted great spiritual power may combine it with authority in more mundane matters. In North Africa generally, holy persons called *marabouts* often performed key religious and political roles, and thus came to be viewed with some ambivalence by

sultans, who perceived them as alternative sources of authority. *Baraka* has often been seen as transmitted along chains of marabouts, leading in a sacred genealogy from Muhammad himself. One scholar who has worked in Morocco reports a conversation with a man who attempted to explain to him the role of the marabout as mediator between humans and God:²⁹

If you need a paper from the government office, which is better? Do you go straight to the official and ask for it? You might wait a long time and never receive it. Or do you go to someone who knows you and knows the official? Of course, you go to the friend, who presents the case to the official. Same thing with *baraka*. If you want something from God, you go to [the marabout].

In considering this example, we are perhaps reminded indirectly of the potential significance of the *hajj*. We see how a pilgrimage for all believers can represent a powerful principle of universal allegiance and practice within a religion whose impulses can so easily be diverted into localised and parochial expressions of the faith.