

*The Islamic Hajj - Pilgrimage: Some Lecture Notes*  
Sacred Journey CORE 166

**Pilgrim's Journey Diagram**

Whether it be an individual or group pilgrimage, the fundamental structure that orients a pilgrimage is that of a “**rite of passage**,” albeit, framed within a *journey* over a specific *landscape* to some particular *sacred place*.

In fact, a pilgrimage is **typically defined** as “travel to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion.”

Nevertheless, in the context of any rite of passage, a pilgrimage is also framed within **four universal structural components or phases**.

**1. Spiritually Orphaned: the Goals and Primary Purposes**

- the primary purpose of a pilgrimage involves the general obligations and needs relating to **filling a void - as if spiritually orphaned, and incomplete:**

a - a pilgrim is of course responding to **Allah’s commands**, a Muslim carrying out a *hajj* to Mecca to **renew one’s spiritual commitment** - to “surrender” to Allah’s will and garner the peace that results

b - but accompanied by a **specific individual need** to fulfill a personal vow or seek a cure or answer to a unresolved question. Pilgrims travel to seek a cure or to refresh their spiritual lives or to fulfill a vow made when ill or for someone else’s illness. It might be an “**inner search**” for meaning and fulfillment, or **personal redemption**. It might be to realize an ideal society and set of values, seeing Islam in action, e.g., ethnic inclusivity and tolerance. It might even be a prayer for that “perfect spouse.”

c - in addition to the primary purpose linked to **reaching a specific place**, the **journey itself**, and what is encountered and experienced along the way is also part of the purpose - the pilgrims’ wanderings, albeit toward a particular destination, served as an allegory for **personal growth** and the **desired passage through a healthy and bountiful life**

d. in a larger sense, in participating in the hajj, a Muslim **commemorates the actions of Muhammad** himself and is **transported to the time and place of Muhammad’s unfolding first hajj, as well as to the birth of Islam, with Abraham** - you are there at the inception of Islam, as near to God as any human

can come. You travel with Abraham and Muhammad, experience their challenges and joys as they converse with God.

## 2. Rites of Separation, Journey and Sacrifice: in a Liminal State of “betwixt and between”

a - **the destination** (be it the “goal itself” of the pilgrimage or the justification for doing a “journey”) is defined as a “**sacred place**,” - **Mecca** and **the Ka’ba**,

- the ancient cross-roads of Arabic trade - a **human-made environment**, oriented and linked along major **commercial travel** routes, such as a building, temple, mosque, shrine, a monastery, or even city itself.

- but more critically, Mecca is a revered spiritually-endowed a place, where Mircea Eliade (the eminent scholar of religion) calls an “**heirophany**” - a shining through of the sacred, a place where God speaks and is heard, and an “**axis mundi**” - a spiritual center of the cosmos

- thus a **theologically defined environment**, where the prophet Abraham journeyed with his son, Ishmael and wife, Hagar. Place were God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, and where goat replaced sacrifice, and where Abraham built the **Ka’ba** on God’s command. The most holy structure in Islam situated in Mecca, the relative approximation of which orients the direction to which you pray 5 times a day, and is according to Islam the center of the world). Today draped in gold-embroidered verses from the Koran on black silk cloth. Renewed each year, costing millions of dollars.

The angel Gabriel brought down a **black stone** to place in its southeast corner of the Ka’ba. The stone was white, but turned black on contact with the sinful world.

- of note: Before Muhammad consecrated the Ka’ba in 630, it had severed as a holy site, via Abraham but over the years, an assortment of over 300 other deities added to it. After Muhammad consecrated the Ka’ba to the one God, he retained the idea of its guardian deity, Hubal, whose statue is kept inside the structure. And also veneration of the black stone, which surprised his followers.

b - what distinguishes a pilgrimage from other forms of rites of passage is that a pilgrimage involves the **act of traveling** to specific place. **Both** literally as well as symbolically a journey.

- **when to travel:** though a Muslim may visit the holy places in Mecca and Medina at any time during the year, the pilgrimage itself may be performed only on the eighth, ninth and tenth day of the last month of the Islamic lunar calendar - the **pilgrimage month**, *Dhu'l-Hijja*. (Because the lunar year is 11 days shorter than the solar year, pilgrimage season cycles back through the solar year.)

- so unlike other pilgrimages (Hindu, Christian or Jewish), the hajj is a series of ritual actions performed together, simultaneously by all Muslim pilgrims for that year. **Two million Muslims all at the same time!**

- **why travel:** pilgrim is made that much more meaningful as a **replication and commemoration** of the Prophet Muhammad's actions, "**following in his footsteps**," of first his fleeing to Medina in 622, and later his successful and triumphant return to Mecca in 630. Upon his return, the Prophet rededicated the Ka'ba to the one God, to Allah, and consecrated it as Islam's geographic center. **Walked counterclockwise around it seven times.** This migration is known as the **first Muslim hajj**.

- in addition, several years after Mohammad had fled Mecca the **angel Gabriel revealed** the **duty** of all Muslims to make the journey - one of the **Five Pillars** of Islam, one of the *rukns*, and hence in Koran:

The first house established for the people  
was that at Mecca, a place holy, and a guidance to all beings,  
Therein are clear signs – the station of Abraham,  
and whosoever enters it is in security.  
It is the duty of all men towards God to come  
To the House a pilgrim, if he is able to make his way there. (Koran 3:90-92)

- **act of separation:** which necessarily entails a symbolic and physical **separation** for the ordinary, the mundane, from your current social and spiritual status and identity

- you got to **leave home** and do some serious traveling. Not done in comfort of your home. So today, annually, over 2 million Muslims, from over 60 countries (largest numbers coming from Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, Yemen, Iran, Indonesia and Iraq, but also Europe and America) of which 80% are non-Arabs, take part in the hajj.

- weeks or even months before arriving in Saudi Arabia, pilgrims have been gathering from villages, towns, and cities all over the world. In

Indonesia, as in many other countries with large Muslim populations, each group receives an **official send-off** from the local government officials.

- **ihram**: travel, whether by land, sea or air, is for much of the way a **secular affair**. Only when approaching the port or airport of Jiddah must pilgrims take steps to enter the **state of consecration** or **ihram**. Embracing the values of respect, humility, tolerance, patience, etc.

- **ihram** includes: each pilgrim discarding his or her everyday **cloths** and wearing special religious-oriented clothing that distinguish them on this special journey, for men, two large towels. The cloths mark the fact that all pilgrims are **religiously equal**. As Muhammad's grandson Husayn stated, "The pilgrim offers himself to God as a bagger." Ordinary status is left behind.

- with only Arabic prayers and greetings being shared, pilgrims for different nationalities rub shoulders with each other for the first time, all as equals. The American Black Muslim leader **Malcolm X** (in his *Autobiography of Malcolm X* 1973: 339) was shocked by this universalism, as he wrote in a public letter to his mosque in Harlem, "For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of *all colors*."

- men renounces shaving. Cutting hair. Sexual intercourse and changes of clothes. And for many men, the **shaving of the head**.

- during the hajj men leave their **heads uncovered**, and **women must not have cloth** touching their faces. Some pilgrims even ride roofless buses once they approach Mecca. Each of these measures maintains an **unbroken physical link** between the pilgrim's head and God, and signals his or her surrender to God.

- **Liminal State**: **Thus** leaving home and traveling a great distance, wearing identical clothing, renouncing normal relationships to their bodies and concentrating their lives on worshipping Allah, marks and distinguishes you and others as you are on your special mission, but of also blending you into the collective, as non-distinguishable for others. It defines the pilgrims position as in a state of **liminality**.

- You are between ("betwixt and between") your previous life, your occupation, your ethnicity, nationality, wealth, status, **and** that which you anticipate becoming, your redemption, where women and men are equal,

where class and ethnic distinctions are gone, where everyone lives in the bliss of the peace that comes from Allah.

c - **sacrifice**: typically some sort of **hardship** and self and collective **sacrifice** - pilgrimages are not suppose to be “luxury vacations,” with all the conveniences and comforts

- in ancient times, exceeding difficult, full of challenges, outlaws, thieves, storms, distance and time, and may not return

- providing **alms** to the needing along the way

- often **food** restrictions, what can no longer be eaten while on the pilgrimage, as well as restrictions on **sexual** intercourse

- simply the **cost itself to travel** the great distances require huge personal sacrifices, months and years of saving up for the journey

- as an extension of your own sacrifice, **animal sacrifices** might be offered, such as while on a Islamic *hajj* a sheep and camel sacrifice in memory of Abraham’s submission to God and willingness to offer his son. Each pilgrim to offer a sheep or eight one camel = 800,000 lbs of meat distributed to poor around the world.

d - the Hajj is actually made up of a series of **mini-pilgrimages** embedded within the entire pilgrimage - retracing the path taken by Muhammad. The hajj ritual procedure, with events occurring only **on prescribed days**, occurring between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> day of the last month of the Islamic calendar - five days in all. (not listed in daily order here):

1. **Tawaf**: Upon arriving at Mecca, pilgrims make seven lefthand (counter clockwise) circles (*tawaf*) around the **Ka’ba**. Indeed, the root meaning of hajj is “**to describe a circle.**” Huge masses move slowly, each trying to kiss or touch the **black stone** set in the southeast corner.

- The Iranian scholar Ali Shariati (in *Hajj* 1977: 31) described the experience of the *tawaf* as that of “a small stream merging with a big river. . . Suddenly, you find yourself floating and carried on by this flood. You have become part of this universal system. Circumambulating . . . Allah, you will soon forget yourself.”

- of note: the circumambulation, also called the *umra*, can be performed separately at anytime of the year, called a “little hajj” or “umra package” by travel agents, who book trips to Mecca. Simply circle the Ka’ba and visit the holy sites, without the elaborate sequences of the normal hajj.

2. **Sa'y**: After the *tawaf*, the pilgrim does the *sa'y*, “running,” which consists of simply running (or older people walking fast) back and forth seven times along the street in Mecca between Marwa and Safa. The running covers about two miles, with older people walking fast and some being pushed in wheelchairs.

- It commemorates the time when **Hagar** was abandoned under a tree at Mecca by Abraham. When her food and water ran out she began to run wildly between two high points, pleading for help from God. When Ishmael raised his hand, Gabriel interceded and created a well, which became known as the well of **Zamzam**. The well marked the spot where Mecca was then built. Pilgrims collect water from the well and bring it home; often diluted with rainwater, it will be used to heal or bless others.

3. **Plain of Arafat**. Pilgrims travel to plain of Arafat by sunrise on the ninth day of the month. It is at Arafat, a barren plain about two miles from Mecca, that **Adam and Eve** were reunited after their expulsion from heaven. Here too, **Muhammad** delivered his **final sermon** in 632, in which he set out most of the details of the hajj. A vast tent city is erected on this plain by the Saudi government, where pilgrims are assigned quarters by nationality.

- at Arafat, pilgrims spend the ninth day in **prayer and meditation**, gathering around the Mount of Mercy at the edge of the plain.

- **Wuquf**: After performing the midafternoon worship, the millions gather together stand, awaiting the sunset, shouting cries, “God is great.” This standing (*wuquf*) is the **central event** of the hajj proper. The special status enjoyed by this rather unspectacular (relative to the *tawaf* that preceded it and the sacrifices to follow) event comes from the role in **replicating Muhammad’s final sermon**, and from the shared sense pilgrims derive from it of showing **humility before God**.

4. **Muzdalifah**: pilgrims then disperse and begin return to Mecca, stopping to spend the night in the city of Muzdalifah, where they **rid themselves of all resentments** toward others. There too, they collect pebbles, which they will use the next day to throw at the three pillars near Mina, on road to Mecca.

5. **Animal Sacrifice**: pilgrims then carry out a sacrifice in memory of Abraham’s submission to God’s will. In place of his son, Ishmael, **God substituted a goat**. Usually they buy a goat on the spot and arrange to have its throat cut. The over 800,000 lbs. meat is immediately frozen on the spot and distributed to the poor world-wide by the Saudi government. The day after this event is called the *yaum*

*an-nahr*, day of sacrifice and is celebrated throughout the Muslim world with similar sacrifices.

6. **Rajm**: near Mina is the stoning, *rajm*, of the three pillars, representing devils. There is no mention of it in the Koran, as there is no mention of the veneration of the black stone at the Ka'ba, but as Muhammad performed it, so too do the pilgrims. As interpreted by most participants, it commemorates Abraham's resoluteness to obey God, for it was on this spot that he prepared to carry out God's command to sacrifice his son. The devil appeared to Abraham, and tried to instill doubt in his heart about the sacrifice. **Abraham stoned the devil** until it fled. The crowding and rushing during the stoning, lasting a couple of days, also undoubtedly releases tensions.

7. Pilgrims gradually return to Mecca, perform another counter-clockwise circles circumambulation of the Ka'ba, and collect Zamzam well water for the return trip.

### 3. Acquisition of Power, Redemption, and/or Divine Knowledge

- the direct encounter with the **heirophany**, be it retracing the steps of Muhammad, kneeling before and touching the sacred relics, the Ka'ba, the gold door or the black stone, consumption of the sacred waters that saved Hagar while alone desert, can bring spiritual transformation, gnostic and esoteric knowledge, enlightenment, revelation, visionary experiences and redemption.

- you may **become**, for an eternal instance, the object of the quest - the sacrament, the deity, the divine personage

- touching the Black Stone at the Ka'be in Mecca will confer a *baraka* - **divine blessing** upon the pilgrim -

### 4. Rebirth, and Spiritual and Social Affirmation

- **Hair and Eat**: after complete final circumambulation of the Ka'ba, pilgrims gradually return to normal social status and life.

- They begin by **cutting** some of their **hair**. Women snip off just a bit, but men often have their heads shaved. Signifying new status and completion of the hajj. Now all prohibitions lifted.

- They are urged to spend several days I "eating, drinking and sensual pleasure." This urging emphasizes that the pilgrims are now leaving the state of consecration and returning to normal life - **the rite of passage has ended**

- **Name and Status:** pilgrims return home immediately and are called *hajji* (male) or *hajjiyah* (female), as someone who had made the pilgrimage. Many now wear white for everyday activities or when they attend the mosque to signal this new status.

- **religious status** changed, as your experiences and possible visionary insights increase your understanding and awareness of your changed place in the spiritual world - a void is filled as you enter a new spiritual status - feeling of bliss and renewal, of redemption and purification.

- **social status** changed, as looked upon with heightened favor by others in the community - being elected to public office, obtaining a bank loan