Enes Karić

# THE BLACK TULIP

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Impressum

ENES KARIĆ

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# INTRODUCTORY NOTES

***Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim***

Praise be to God, Creator of all the worlds, Who prescribed for us the pilgrimage to the Haram ash-Sharif, the Holy Mosque in Mecca, and who explained to us, through His prophets, how to perform the hajj.

I utter with gratitude the name of the Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, and I recall with humility his noble sayings about the hajj, Mecca and Medina.

❖

As fate would have it, I was unable to perform the hajj until December 2007, when I was in my fiftieth year (I was born on 16 May 1958). I had often performed the lesser pilgrimage, as some people in Bosnia call *'umrah*. Many of these occasions were political, arranged for me by my hosts in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia when I visited those countries in my capacity as a minister in the Government of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 1994 to 1996.

I again performed *'umrah* in September 2005, when I was invited by Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, to attend a three-day seminar on inter-Muslim understanding. On that occasion my wife Ajša accompanied me. And twice, eight and nine years ago respectively, I performed *'umrah* from Riyadh, while spending two months there collecting reference works for my

*Rječnik Kur'ana*, Qur'anic Dictionary, in Bosnian. The first time was in October 1999, when for the first time I visited the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and the second time in February 2000, when I spent a month at the same centre with Dr. Mustafa Jahić, head of the Gazi Husrev-bey library in Sarajevo. On both occasions I was assisted in performing *'umrah* by my friend Senahid Bristrić, who was at the time Bosnia and Herzegovina's ambassador in Riyadh.

I recall that we drove for hours from Riyadh to Mecca, resting along the way in that vast desert, drinking tea or coffee amid the oceans of sand, and eating Bosnian food prepared by Medhija, Senahid's wife. When prayer times came, too, we prayed in the infinite, mysterious desert. On our return from Mecca to Riyadh, we went via Ta'if.

❖

But *'umrah* is one thing, and the hajj is quite another. The hajj is a pulsating mass of humanity reaching as far as the

eye can see. It is an occasion to marvel: is it possible that so many people believe in God? It is a constant test of endurance amid so many people, in those holy places of Mecca and Medina.

This is what this little book is about – that immense shared appeal to God organized by people on this earth at a specific place and time. I saw this for myself between 6 and 24 December.

❖

There are many people whom I should like to thank for making my journey and the hajj itself such a wonderful experience. The Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Prof. Dr. Ismet Bušatlić, initiated matters for me, making it official at a session of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina held in early November 2007.[1] My thanks go to Dean Bušatlić.

Before our departure, many people wished Ajša and me a safe journey and a successful stay in the holy places. It is with gratitude that I name many of my friends: Haris Neimarlija, Muharem Hasanbegović, Hilmo Neimarlija, Nedžad Grabus, Bogić Bogićević, Nusret Čančar, Hurija

1 By way of record only, I should like to note that the cost of the hajj in December 2007 was 2,350 Euro per head, for those Bosnian hajjis who travelled by air. That year too a better-quality sheep for the sacrifice cost 150 Euro. If others should read this book many years later, it will be easy for them to compare their prices with what we paid in 2007.

Čančar, Ismet Veladžić, Mustafa Spahić, Halid Genjac, Sead Duraković, Rifat Fetić, Adnan Silajdžić, Eniz Karić (my brother), Smail Kasumović (my maternal cousin), and many others. Hajji Sulejman Duraković, my father-in-law, expressed his best wishes for our hajj and asked us to give his salaams to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The staff of the Faculty of Islamic Studies saw me off and said a *du'a*, a prayer, for our safe journey and still safer return. My thanks go to all of them.

When we set off from Sarajevo airport in the morning of 6 December 2007, boarding the first aircraft of the Tunis-based Novelair, Reisu l-ulema Prof. Dr. Mustafa Cerić wished all of us on board a safe journey and a pleasant hajj, that fifth pillar of the Islamic faith.

During the hajj I was often with many delightful people from Bosnia, and remember with pleasure spending time with hafiz Ismet effendi Spahić, deputy Reisu l- ulema, and Shaikh Siriya Hadžimejlić. It was also a pleasure to spend time with the Mufti of Sarajevo, Husein effendi Smajić, the Mufti of Travnik, Nusret effendi Abdibegović, and his team of hajj leaders, among them Rasim Brković, Nasih Karavdić, Ahmed Pašalić and Salih Indžić. I also recall with thanks the many Bosnian students studying in Saudi Arabia, particularly Aldin Hodžić and Jusuf Horozović, who helped us out on several occasions.

❖

Our Bosnian hajjis were divided into smaller groups, each with its own guide. Dervo effendi Hodžić was responsible for the group to which Ajša and I belonged. Dervo effendi Hodžić helped us generously on various occasions. I should also like to mention Ferid effendi Dautović, chief imam in Sarajevo, and Mensur effendi Pašalić, chief imam in Fojnica. I remember some very agreeable conversations with them in the holy places.

❖

Readers will see that I make frequent mention in this book on the hajj of His Excellency Ahmad Khattab, Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ahmad Khattab and his high-minded wife Umayma travelled with the Bosnian hajjis to Medina and Mecca, and spent the whole time there with us in our hotels. I shall long retain the precious memory of Ahmad Khattab speaking to us in pure Arabic about the values of the hajj (fada'il ul-hajj). We marvelled at his immense erudition in the traditional Islamic teachings. Ambassador Khattab also talked to us about the Egyptian folk customs on how to perform the hajj.

❖

As readers will see, I also refer by name to many of the men and women whom I met in Medina and Mecca, and I take this

opportunity to thank them all. Particular thanks go to Mujesira Zimić-Gljiva and Zehra Alispahić, assistant lecturers at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. We happened to perform the hajj together, and I asked the two of them, as well as my wife Ajša, to read this book in manuscript and help me to make sure I had everything right and in its proper place.

I am grateful to Aziz Kadribegović, chief editor of *Preporod*, for publishing this booklet in his weekly paper. After reading some of the seven chapters, many people called to say that these essays had attracted their attention. This encouraged me to offer the book to Tugra, a publishing house in Sarajevo. My proposal was kindly accepted by Nevzeta Mahmutović, director of Tugra, and by Ismet Veladžić and Dževad Hodžić, who helped to produce it as an attractive edition.

Last, but by no means least, I should like to record that I often remembered my late parents, my father Emin effendi Karić and my mother Sabiha, while I was on hajj. I should have liked them to have lived to be with me in those holy places of Medina and Mecca. But God's decree takes precedence.

While on hajj I also remembered my teachers, Husein effendi Đozo, Kasim effendi Hadžić, hafiz Ibrahim effendi Trebinjac, hafiz Kamil effendi Silajdžić, Dr Ahmed Smajlović, Nijaz effendi Šukrić, and Ibrahim effendi Džananović. All

of them have passed away, but I learned a great deal from them, including about the hajj. I record with particular respect their advice that one should perform the hajj while still in one's youth. And I in turn pass on this good advice to our young Muslims.

While in Medina and Mecca I also had occasion several times to remember Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose books and studies have taught me much about the spiritual dimensions of the rituals of the hajj. I hope that Professor Nasr will enjoy this book when I publish it in English.

And finally, my wife Ajša and I were together the whole time in Medina and Mecca. Ajša took care of all our day-to-day needs, without which it would have been impossible to perform the major rituals of the hajj. Thank you, Ajša, may God reward you.

The following pages were written initially as notes on the flight from Sarajevo to Medina, in Medina itself and in Mecca, on the journeys between Medina and Mecca and Mecca and Arafat, at Arafat and Mina, and at Mecca and Jeddah. Some were added during the flight from Jeddah to Split. All date from between 5 and 24 December 2007.

# FEET

## *The variety of human feet*

No two human feet are identical. I observed this in the mosque of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, may peace be upon him in Medina, from 6 to 13 December 2007, and then in the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, from 13 to 23 December 2007.

I saw thousands of human feet – thousands of barefoot people. The feet of the human biped, barefoot men and women, feature occasionally in Persian miniatures, where they seem to me to be an incidental subject. Some seventeen years ago I saw a fine postcard in the British Museum in London, a barefoot Hazret Khidr, walking shoeless through water as on dry land. I remember quite clearly how the Persian artist had drawn Hazret Khidr's somewhat cracked feet. I imagine he wanted to show that not only do we leave our footprints on the earth; the earth also leaves its mark on our feet (and on our faces, of course).

Most of these Arabic and Persian miniatures of Sufis, zahids and dervishes are barefoot (and bareheaded), suggesting the moment of birth, when we are without sin.

We learn from Sura Ta Ha (XX:12) that Moses, the Prophet of God, may peace be upon him, was told to put off his shoes when he entered the Holy Valley of Towa.

The Messenger Muhammad, peace be upon him, was barefoot on his Night Journey (*isra*) and Ascent to heaven (*mi'raj*).

They say that imam Malik ibn Anas did not want to walk around Medina with his shoes on.

The bare feet of the human biped, removing one's shoes before entering a place of prayer where we prostrate ourselves, our forehead on the floor, on a mat, on a carpet, or on plain white or grey marble – the moment they touch a place of worship these bare human feet become a beginning, the point where we stand erect. Then, as we bow, we begin to form the outline of a circle, and when our forehead touches the marble or the carpet, the circle is closed.

The bare feet of the pilgrims, the split and cracked heels of both men and women (I saw with sorrow, in Medina and Mecca, thousands of such feet), reminded me of the remote cottonfields, paddy fields, sugar cane plantations and all those other unknown fields where the Muslim ummah walk barefoot, waiting barefoot for day to break and night to fall.

The pilgrims I see today (7 December), passing before me in lines, must surely be from Egypt, from the fertile fields by the river Nile.

I have seen the Nile several times, walking along its banks in Cairo, sitting in Menyel (which means "the place of the Nile"), and once from the air, when I watched it for a

long time (it looked as though a medium-sized sea was flowing towards the Mediterranean).

But it was not until I saw the cracked feet of the Egyptian pilgrims that I saw the toil of working in the cottonfields.

## *Pilgrim footsteps in a holy place*

As I observed those thousands of pilgrim heels in the Prophet's mosque in Medina, I saw and realized for the first time in my life what I shall describe in the following passages.

When men and women walk, first to touch the ground – the path, the road, the soil – is the heel.

The heel is the first point of resistance when we walk. I feel bad that I did not know this before, and had not learned this sooner.

The heel is the entity from which each step begins. The outside of the foot then presses close to the ground, and the suppleness of the movement shifts to the toes. The toes, of which there are five, then give stability and a certain distinction to the entire body, both to the step just ending and to the one that is to come, for which the heel of the other foot is prepared.

Most of the pilgrims have outspread toes, as if marvelling at the soft carpets and rugs in the Prophet's mosque in Medina. There are people with huge toes, incurled toes, big toes the size of a good big potato.

The best artists in the world should paint the pilgrim feet of the Muslim ummah.

I remembered Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes and the commentary on the painting from the pen and spirit of Martin Heidegger in his *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Van Gogh made several paintings of a pair of peasant shoes. Heidegger wondered whether there was all that much to see in them. Everyone knows what shoes are made of, he says: unless they are wooden clogs or a picture of shoes, they will have leather soles and uppers, joined together by stitches and nails. Their purpose is to cover the feet. But then Heidegger adds that peasant women in the fields wear shoes, thus referring them to the earth on which we walk and our connection with the earth.

In Van Gogh's painting of the pair of peasant shoes, Heidegger writes: "From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumu-

lated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind." She feels the "silent call of the earth," writes Heidegger, "when she takes off her shoes late in the evening, in deep but healthy fatigue, and reaches out for them again in the still dim dawn, or passes them by on the day of rest."

What did I really see in Mecca and Medina on the horrifyingly and yet astonishingly large number of pilgrim feet of the Muslim ummah?

## *The cracked bare feet of Muslim women*

I saw what is an almost natural feature of the barefoot Muslim man and woman. In every time zone, the "silent call of the earth" comes to them too, but a poor Muslim woman, unlike Van Gogh's Christian, cannot remove the leathery skin of her feet before going to bed, the way the peasant woman in Heidegger's exposition of Van Gogh's painting removes her shoes. Poor Muslim men and women go to bed with their horny heels and soles, sleep in them and rise at dawn with them.

And the cracked heels and coarse, horny soles of Muslim women, like Van Gogh's shoes, are "pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death." It is in their cracked heels, not their shoes,

that there "vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain."

The blackness of the earth, dark as night, is ingrained in the coarse skin of their cracked heels.

I know that these are pilgrims from Egypt: I recognize their faces from my vivid recollection of the Egyptian faces I memorized when I spent a full half-year in Cairo in 1983. Among Egypt's pious poor, the heels of both men and women are cracked; but sadly, I have to add that the women's heels are more deeply cracked, I am sure, and more painful.

## *Sore, cracked feet and the memory of the paddy fields*

The cracks in the heels of Muslim men and women from Nigeria are red inside, as I observed on several occasions, but the brightest (and probably the most painful) blood red is in that single large crack on the ball of the foot.

Today (8 December), I saw blood that had only just clotted in those painful cracks, the just congealed toil of working in the sugarcane or soya plantations. This congealed pain finds ease in the embrace of Medinan piety.

I spent hours observing the feet of Muslim Uyghurs from China. They are tiny, so small I might almost say that they are the soles and heels of elderly children. Their ankles seem to glow yellow, and their frail feet give off a whitish yellow light; I don't know how their bones don't snap like

icicles as they walk. And yet I see that the tendons of their feet will not break, as I watch them today (16 December) continuing their circumambulation of the Ka'ba.

Today I saw here, as I did a few days ago in Medina, a number of people from the Caucasus – Chechens, perhaps. Dear God, what feet, knobbly and lumpy, like gnarled underpinnings to their legs and their great stature.

For days I also observed the black feet of black Africa. Sudanese heels are cracked, and so are their soles, but harmoniously somehow, as though some invisible embroidery had been lifted from the hot fields and imprinted on their heels. On these completely black feet, the friction of the soil had raised blisters and cracked areas, which showed through whitish-yellow.

## *Pilgrim heels remember the innumerable forms of the soil in their Muslim homelands*

I often refer to heels because it is them I recall most frequently, having seen them more often than anything else.

While you bow and sit in the sequence *at-Tahiyyatu li llahi* (the Salutation to God), you observe or you yield to the many heels in front of you. Those performing the prayer sit on their heels as if those heels were the foundation of the entire foot, or the visible root of the person.

But I also observed the feet of Muslim men and women from above, during the *qiyam* (standing) sequence, and this

is what I saw; both feet have a callous on the top of the foot, on the outside, but the callous on the right foot is bigger and hornier. I remember those lumps or callouses; I saw those whorls of hardened skin on my mother Sabiha (who died in late October 1999) and in Azem's late wife (Fatima or Tifa); this deeply ingrained callous is the result of praying, of sitting during the sequence of the Salutation to God. But such callouses could also have been caused by sitting for hours at the table, making paper-fine filo pastry.

Many Muslims from Thailand, Burma and Indonesia have a line above the ankle, perhaps indicating the water level in the flooded paddy fields while they were planting rice.

So many heels, so many feet, so many paces, so many different routes. The leathery unshod feet of the Muslim ummah have for centuries been defying the slopes of Mount Atlas, the thorns of Kurdistan, the stones of the Hindu Kush, the desert sands of the Sahara, the flooded fields of Java...

All those bare feet long ago took on and still carry the stamp of countless features of the earth's ancient soil. Most of the Muslim ummah still goes barefoot. Just as it did centuries ago, the ummah experiences our primordial connection with the earth by walking barefoot. This primal connection, going back to the dawn of time, with the taciturn mystery of this earth, is one that the Muslim ummah experiences with its bare soles, cracked heels and bleeding feet.

How many hundreds of millions of bare feet have visited the Prophet's mosque in Medina and the Haram ash-sharif in Mekka during Islam's more than fourteen centuries? And

how many specks of dust did each of those feet bring with it, leaving its own trace and imprint – like a seal? Did those feet find brief respite, on the marble of Medina and Mecca, from their fields and crops, their meadows and harvests, their paddyfields and scorching hot paths? In fact, what I want to ask myself and others is: is the highest form and fullest expression of freedom experienced nowadays by Muslims in fact in piety?

### *Post Scriptum 1*

I saw in Medina, and then in Mecca, that the most exalted station in the ritual prayer is the *sajdah* or prostration, when we lower our forehead to the ground among all those countless feet, all those heels, toes and soles. I saw this and I remembered the Persian poet saying of the earthenware

pitcher that it had perhaps been made of the head of a king and the feet of a slave, which the winds of thousands of years and the whirlwinds of time had mixed into mere dust. It is good to recognize this when we breath in the dust we were made of as we take part in the grandeur of prayer with millions of others in Medina and Mecca.

### *Post Sriptum II*

I shall never forget the thousands of down-at-heel slippers on the shelves in the Prophet's mosque in Medina and the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca.

White, grey, black, red, yellow, blue; slippers, mules, leather sandals, flipflops, rubber galoshes, moccasins, canvas deck shoes, strappy sandals; piles of shoes of all shapes and sizes.

During prayer times, there were tons of them; and when the prayer ended, each pair of slippers found its own pair of feet. Slippers are easy to kick off, but the calloused skin on the feet of the Muslim ummah is there to stay.

### *Post Scriptum III*

I saw a girl (or perhaps a married woman) in the north portico of the Prophet's mosque in Medina, a Moroccan, with hennaed feet and heels. The different colours, brown, green and red, formed stripes and curves, with dots of different colours between the patterns. This woman's heels were not cracked.

# FACES

## *No two human faces are the same*

No two human faces are identical. I saw this as I spent hours, day after day, in the Prophet's mosque in Medina and then in the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, looking at the white, yellow, red and black faces of the men and women of the Muslim ummah.

I saw that white people are not really white, the yellow races are not really yellow, and black people are not really black. There are darker-skinned white people, yellow-skinned people with rosy cheeks, and black people with quite light complexions. Dear God, what oceans of diversity.

There are thousands upon thousands of differences, of shades, of gradations, of shadows, of vibrations, of blurred edges, and all that on every part of those faces: their foreheads, eyes, eyelids, cheeks and lips. Dear Lord, is it possible to observe these hundreds of thousands of faces and think in stereotypes, in generalizations? Is it possible to speak of recognizable paths in this broad and muscular river of human faces?

This is how I reflect as I look at the faces, the foreheads, the cheeks, the chins of men and women from Caucasian

and Transcaucasian nations, and then I see those from central Asia, and I am reminded me of an actor, Anthony Quinn, who played Hamza, uncle of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, may peace be upon him, in the film *Muhammad, Messenger of God* (in Arabic, *ar-Risalah*; retitled *The Message* in the US).

The jutting chin and lower jaw of the figure of Hazret Hamza in the film, and the prominent, sometimes slightly degenerate lower jaw of these men's faces from the Caucasus and central Asia, betray their boldness and an irresistible, gracious courage. The bones show through both cheeks, like two apples, concealed (and barely at that) by a less-than-

week old beard, overhung by the forehead like a mythical crag over an abyss. The forehead is there to draw attention to the two large, light eyes, which seem to me to be piously mournful and wistful in sanctity. In those eyes, I imagined rather than saw the vast expanses of the central Asian steppes, and could almost hear the *adhan* sounding through the silences of these great faultlines; I imagined those remote dawns of theirs, and the clear, deep blue skies.

In Medina and Mecca I spent days watching tall, stooped men with large heads, with prominent jaws (like those of the rather more successful illustrations of the archetypical Neanderthal man in biology textbooks); I looked in wonderment at their tanned faces, and concluded that they could well be rough types.

But on countless occasions I saw tears on those faces, and when they were thus affected, they looked dignified but moved.

## *The black chadors and unassuming faces of Muslim women from Hamadan*

One day (12 December), in Medina, I saw more than a hundred Iranian women; some of their chadors bore the legend that they were from Hamadan, a city in north-western Iran (where Ibn Sina, known in the west as Avicenna, is buried). There the winters are bitter and the summers hot but short.

All these Iranian women were in black, with just the occasional white band of fabric, a kind of hairband, as gleaming white as untrodden snow.

These handsome Shi'ite pilgrims from Iran conjured up two memories for me. The first goes back to my primary school days, a long time ago. It was when I moved up to fifth grade, in the 1969/70 school year. I was living with my grandmother Fatima, in the village of Podovi near Travnik, so as not to have to walk from my native Višnjevo all the way to school in Han Bila, ten kilometres there and ten kilometres back. Every Sunday I saw Catholic women, young and old, the older ones in black and quite often the younger ones too. They were from the villages of Podovi, Pušelje, Zastinje, and they were going to church in Brajkovići, or sometimes in Guča Gora.

I remember wondering why these Catholic women from the Travnik region wore black headscarves and dresses, and why the Muslim women of the region wore brightly coloured, patterned headscarves; even their hairbands were often brightly coloured. Yet I saw the signs of piety on the faces of both Catholics and Muslims, each expressed in their own way.

In those days I believed that black was not only an entrenched custom for Bosnian Catholics, but a Christian principle, incumbent on every Christian woman the world over. But now these Iranian women in black, and in Medina at that, completely overturned the conclusion I reached all those years ago, and their faces and black garments remind-

ed me that in many parts of the world the Muslim ummah opts for black. It is practically impossible to see the Muslim ummah in simplistic, stereotypical images.

The black chadors of the Muslim women from Hamadan come to perform the hajj shows how their black clothing is so entirely practical in the dry climates of the Middle East, but also reveals something else, something new. The great mosques and sanctuaries of Medina and Mecca gleam with bright, light colours: the black of the women's abayas, caftans, manteaux, chadors, veils and headscarves form the perfect contrast, seething, swirling and pulsating as the women mill around the great, spacious atria and colonnades of the mosques.

I cannot imagine a finer purpose for those black veils than to accentuate the light and the pious, fervent brilliance of those women's faces.

These Iranian women from Hamadan are no exception in wearing black chadors. Many Turkish, and particularly Arab, women seem to vanish into and emerge from their black veils, looking like waves from a distance, and to be seen everywhere: when proudly hastening to the grave of Muhammad, peace be upon him (to weep convulsively in the *Pure Garden*, the tears running down their faces and bedewing their black veils), and when circumambulating the Ka'ba or coming down from Mount Arafat to Muzdalifah and then making their way, in great rivers of pilgrims, towards Mina.

## *The clothing of Malaysian and Indonesian women – the pale yellow of the rising sun*

Pilgrim women from South East Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia, though, mainly do not adopt black. Their wraps and headscarves are chosen from the lighter, brighter colours of the spectrum. (During the hajj I saw a special female invention: a white headscarf so long that many of the women wear it like a cloak reaching to below knee-level. This scarf-tunic, or tunic-scarf, covers wide, elegant trousers.) Below these bright or pale veils are the faces of Malaysian and Indonesian women, in all the pale yellow tones of the rising sun.

The women of black Africa, like the men, also prefer all the bright flower colours. Clear shades of blue, yellow, red, mauve – these are the colours that flow over the faces of African Muslim women, in the rivers of African pilgrims.

The east is an east of religions above all, world religions with millions of adherents, the east of piety in its many forms. It is an afflux of piety, welling up and spilling over from the triangle of which the points are Mecca, Jerusalem and Medina. In all these different garments worn by pilgrims, on that multitude of faces, I saw an incalculable wealth of demarcations of saintly rapture, and blending, and miraculous transitions. It was as if I was seeing an unbelievable number of different homelands of sanctity and piety.

On the faces of men and women pilgrims, the sacred gradually opens out from its universality into diversification, acquiring its distinct, personal expression as it descends onto the face of each man and woman.

## *Sudanese turbans*

The only pilgrims who move with almost as much dignity as the Iranian women of Hamadan are the Sudanese – I mean the men (of whom I saw many in Medina and Mecca).

I watched them for hours, on several occasions. I don't know whether the tall Sudanese are tall so as to reveal their dignity, or dignified so as to display their tall stature and manly build.

Almost all of them are a full head taller than the men of Indonesia and Malaysia, and twice that in some cases. (But in human stature, what is taller and what is shorter? What valid criterion of comparison is there. Height and build are

not in themselves a sign of honesty and decency. Honesty is good works, and decency is godliness.)

And those white or bright blue, beautifully wound turbans of the Sudanese! A cape, a headscarf, a shawl, a turban play the part of a shell, and then their role ends, and the head is a pure pearl. The cloaks and mantles of the Sudanese, too, are white or bright blue, or sometimes lilac – that shade of lilac that one sees on the just emerging, still closed petals of the delightful mauve flower that comes up under the snows of Bosnia as it vanishes with the last few days of April.

But the Sudanese women are beautiful too.

On 10 December Ajša and I had dinner with our friend Zehra Alispahić in the *Mat'am Abu Khalid* restaurant in Medina. And there, in the restaurant, was a Sudanese woman, bare-headed, tall, her hair held in place with dozens of hairpins, especially at the back (the whole restaurant turned to look at her, but she looked at no one), going with that dignified Sudanese walk into her own private dining room.

## *Andalusia and Morocco – Europe's route to Africa*

It is hard for us to look at anything or anyone without seeing, to some small extent at least, in the light of our memories, of what we saw long ago, of what we achieved or acquired, of what we have become accustomed to.

Whenever I saw men and women from the Maghreb in Medina and Mecca, I saw something of Europe in their faces, reading in them Europe's long journey through Andalusian Spain into northern Africa.

At the time of hajj you will see in Medina and Mecca how thin and frail, how barely noticeable is the European strain in that ocean of pilgrims – so few are Europeans that it is as if there are none. If the Indo-European Muslim river were not there to swell the European rivulet, one would not see it at all; it would be as if a dozen bees had gone missing from the swarm.

India is a cauldron, a reddish-black melting-pot of many Muslim peoples. In Medina and Mecca alone, I saw so many

faces of Muslim pilgrims from India, and from the Indopakistan subcontinent, that resembled Mahatma Gandhi. Many of them were even wearing spectacles like his. As I observed thousands of their thin, saintly faces, I remembered the face of Ben Kingsley, the actor who played Gandhi in the film of that name.

The Indian pilgrims are either thin and clean-shaven, with thin, seemingly fragile and weak legs beneath their ihram and mantle, or bearded, with faces and foreheads like those of Buddhists: in fact, Buddhists look like Indian Muslims. I saw these thin Muslims from India as a distinct entity

in our Muslim ummah today, as a strange, modest and pious echelon of ascetes, hermits, vegetarians, mystics, Sufis and dhakirs of all imaginable kinds. If there were such things as monks in Islam, these people would be ideally suited to the monastic life, to the life of an anchorite.

## *Black faces from darkest Africa*

And then you again look at those black faces, and you rightly conclude that they are from deep subsaharan Africa, from those countries far south of the Sudan.

Some of those faces bear symmetrical scars across both cheeks, clearly not a birth defect. I listened to a conversation between two of our hajjis:

"What are those scars for?"

"They're tribal scars, like a sign of their tribe. They cut them when they're born."

Africa is a continent that has given Islam many tribes, many nations, many languages. The Arab Muslims, from the Nile to the Euphrates, are a minority compared with African Muslims, although it was the Arabs that introduced Islam to Africa – and not only to Africa.

A friend of mine told me that a few years ago he heard the tom-toms beating during the hajj, right in the middle of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. He turned round to see a group of Africans performing some tribal ritual of theirs – a ritual that Islam had adopted.

The mufti of Sarajevo, Husein ef. Smajić, told me that on early in the morning of 14 December, during this hajj, he saw a group of twenty or so young Africans in the Masjid al-Haram, faces aglow, dancing a magic dance after the *tawaf*, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba.

During the hajj, one so often comes across some custom from remote lands that has been brought right into the midst of the universal Islamic ritual worship in Medina and Mecca.

As I reread these notes in the cold January days of 2008, here in Sarajevo, I find myself in difficulties. The further I am from the Prophet's mosque in Medina and the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the harder it is for me to remember, to single out, any particular face, even though I observed many hajjis from the great Muslim peoples and lands far away from Bosnia only through the mass of faces, all individual, irreplaceable and unique.

## *Bony Albanian and Balkan hajjis*

In Medina, as I observed Albanian hajjis from Kosovo, western Macedonia and Albania itself, I felt as though I was attending an unusual march-past of thin, bony people from the Balkans. Every one of them looked to be more than sixty years old. I saw that the Albanian hajjis were thin but big-boned.

Their faces reminded me of the Albanians I saw for the first time in 1973, in Sarajevo, standing in the freezing cold

near the Sebilj in Baščaršija, and then again often, over the next few years, in late autumn and winter, carrying saws and axes: they were day-labourers and migrant workers, working around Sarajevo as woodcutters.

## *The blossoming tree of Islam on the faces of the pilgrims*

Turks, Malaysians, Indonesians and Iranians often turn out in groups of a hundred or two, sometimes even more, I would say – even in groups of several thousand; especially on Eid morning when the pilgrims come down from the heights at Arafat to Muzdalifah and then to Mina to perform the *jamarat*, the rite of stoning the devil for three days in a row.

In my notes, I called these groups *pilgrim galaxies*. I saw these constellations of Muslim humanity from afar, in uncertain parts, three or four times, amidst the pious swell of voices, the murmuring, the laborious spelling out and invocation of the immemorial words of the Qur'an with which they were addressing God.

These human constellations merge into one another, and then separate out again, and all that symphony of sounds and utterances from thousands and thousands of faces reverberates in elliptical circles from right to left in the great courtyard of the Masjid al-Haram. (In Medina these pilgrim galaxies are not so clearly differentiated as in the Masjid al-Haram.)

When the pilgrim galaxies circumambulate the Ka'ba, crying out *labbayka-Llahumma labbayk* (at Thy service, my God, at Thy service), the millions of pilgrims are reenacting the ritual evocation of those very words uttered by our remote ancestor Abraham, Prophet of God, who settled his family – his wife Hagar and his son Ishmael – in Mecca, and who thus settled with them in the "valley where is no sown land" (Qur'an, *Abraham*, XIV: 37) and restored to life the tree of Islam itself, which bursts into leaf and blossom on the faces of these millions of men and women, growing lush and bearing fruit in their hearts – indeed, those rivers of pilgrims are that very tree.

## *God's creation as a constant rendition of diversity*

And when the glow of these diverse faces in the pilgrim constellations come together in the Mecca Valley (encircled by the hills of the Tihama range), three or four million of them, and gather in the confined area of the Masjid al-Haram and its surroundings, we are as close as we shall ever be in this life to the veils concealing the unattainable mysteries that enfold the questions of God's creation.

Why creation? What is it for, where does it lead, and why? Why did God create us for this brief, yet so long, life on earth? Could it be, without this life here, and what would it be without it? Could the mystery of creation be understood as a constant creation of diversity?

It is there, on the diverse faces of the pilgrims in Medina and Mecca, that the ineradicable seal of the omnipotence of God's creation has its abode.

The hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, often reminds us that it is impossible to say anything worthy about the Creator from the position of His creature. Perhaps the main thing expected of a pilgrim creature is the willing recognition of the Creator, the *'ubudiyyah*, the worship of and perfect obedience to the Creator.

In Mecca this submission to the Creator is felt far more in the intensity of emotion on the faces of the men and women, in the power of the yearning (often tearful or mournful) for the Source, in the vigour of piety, than in the quest for proper responses, corroborated by the clarity of the intellect and the irrevocability of reason.

### *Post Scriptum I*

I repeat, but in a different form: when, in the sajda or prostration in the sequence of the ritual prayer, the head and face find themselves among heels and soles, and when they are intermingled, it is good to wonder what happens to the dust and mire of the earth as they are uplifted to reemerge as feet and faces.

Almighty God calls the dust and mire, and they respond faithfully to Him, in His Act of Creation, to reappear as the handsome faces of pilgrims: an Iranian woman in her black chadors, a German convert with a blue headscarf, a Bosnian women in her fine *šamija* head-covering, an Afro-American in her linen hat. All these can be seen in the Mecca Valley.

And whatever we may say about the pulsating spectacle of the Muslim ummah with its mass of faces, it will be all too inadequate.

### *Post Scriptum II*

No two human faces are identical. Backs might be more or less identical, and so might bellies. But faces are quite another matter.

We cannot smile with our backs, or show our sense of shame or embarrassment on our backs or bellies.

That is why the face is there, to be God's true gift to all men and women. It is a one-off, unrepeatable, uncopied, uncloned, a gift to each of us so that we may smile and weep, show our sense of shame or embarrassment, and speak face

to face. If it were possible, on the hajj, to see each one of those four or five million faces, I am sure we would discover in each of them an incalculable number of outpourings in human creatures through which, even if only a little, our human soul is revealed.

### *Post Scriptum III*

While men are wearing the *ihram*, wrapped in those two comfortable ritual white sheets, they must go bareheaded. But one does not spend long in the *ihram* while on hajj.

In Medina at all times, and in Mecca too once the hajj is over, one sees the most amazing line-up of headcoverings worn by Muslim humanity. Twists of silk or cotton fabric, turbans (white, blue, black ...), berets, baseball caps, straw hats, linen hats, fezzes (black, green, red ...), brightly patterned Circassian caps, Sufi bonnets, the tall pointed caps of dervishes... an incredible spectacle. If all those different headcoverings were to be removed and left at the many entrances to the mosques of Medina and Mecca, there would be tons of them. But just as I remarked that every pair of feet finds its own pair of slippers, so, I have no doubt, would each head find its own cap, turban, fez or hat.

# RAWDAH

## *Birdsong in the Prophet's Mosque*

As I re-read my notes from Medina and Mecca, snow is falling thick and fast in Sarajevo: it is 1 January 2008. Though Ajša and I are tired after our long journey, we both say we would do it again. I tell her that Mecca and the Haram ash-Sharif are described in the Qur'an as places *towards which people's hearts yearn* (see Sura *Abraham*, XIV, 37) and that people gladly go there.

I remember the sounds of birdsong from the little birds that flew with incredible speed in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca. There were more of these birds when we performed *umrah* in mid September 2005 (at the invitation of Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference). And Ajša says that there were many more toddlers, and that they cried a lot more, that September 2005 in the mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque. Many parents are reluctant to take small children on hajj, when there is such a crush from the millions of pilgrims, I reply.

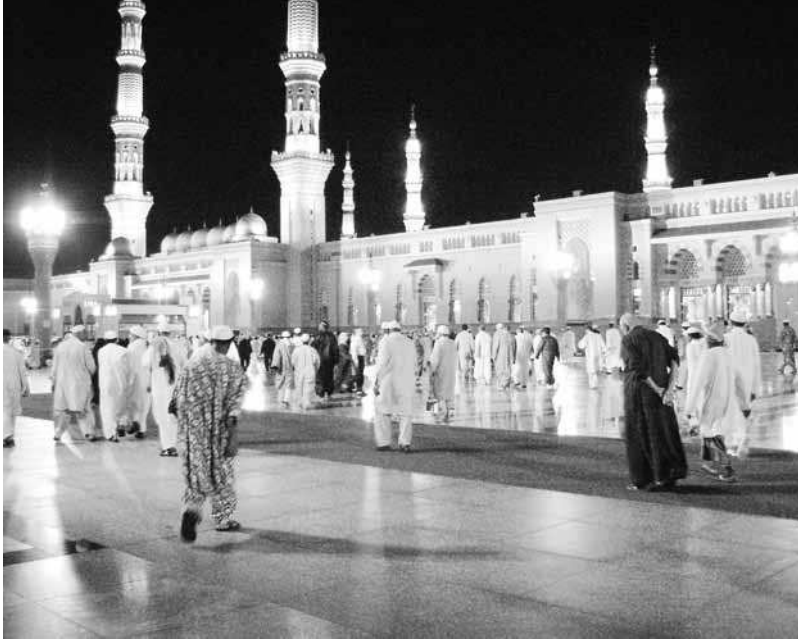
## *The Prophet's Mosque in Medina – with room for nine hundred thousand worshippers*

The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, *al-Masjid an-Nabawi*, has room for almost nine hundred thousand worshippers, men and women. Its domes are in fact glorious great bridges. As soon as you enter, it is as if you are walking through a city; the crescent-shaped arches between the countless gilded columns (if I saw right) and all those sliding roofs immediately strike the eye.

I don't know how long it takes for those nine hundred thousand worshippers to make their way into the Prophet's Mosque, but it takes more than twenty minutes to leave through the more than fifteen or twenty great doors – or so it seemed to me. The doors themselves (most of which are in fact great gateways) are each decorated individually with some handsome, painstakingly worked silvery metal.

The entire floor of the Prophet's Mosque is spread with expensive carpets, and everything is perfumed with a fragrant blend in which amber and *ud* are the dominant notes, with somewhere in the distance a discreet smell of disinfectant. The mosque is immaculately clean, as are all its courtyards and colonnades. There are cleaners wherever you look, all armed with the latest models of almost silent vacuum cleaners.

The Prophet's Mosque is completely surrounded by these great courtyards, all paved with white or dark grey marble, and I would guess that about another million people



could pray there. In fact, just before leaving Mecca on 13 December to perform the hajj, I saw all the courtyards of the Prophet's Mosque packed with worshippers. Wherever you looked, both inside and around the Prophet's Mosque, there were men and women at prayer. When that sea of pilgrims went down in *sajda*, a murmur, or perhaps one should say a rumble, of a million sounds and quiet movements could be heard, composed first of the sound made by the various, usually soft, thin fabrics moving through the air, and then of the cracking of joints, mainly knees but also ankles and elbows. Then came the rustle of the gentle touch of palms and faces on the carpets, or on the bare marble. There was too, of course, the breathing of the worshippers, and the odd quiet sob.

On the days before hajj, all the prayers in the Prophet's Mosque are a magnificent, spontaneous spectacle of pious humanity, of men and women. Every time, the prayers are accompanied by an enigmatic hubbub. At first, before the *adhan* is called, it is quite loud, like the distant roar of some strange force seven wind or the grumblings of a storm, but one that will cause no damage or flood. The subdued tones of dozens of different languages can be heard (I overheard some that seemed to me like the chirpings of birds, but slower, as if all their sounds were formed only on the lips). Then the voice of the muezzin soaring to the clear Medinan skies hushes the babble of voices, and all that can be heard is the footsteps of those about to pray, the contact of slippered feet on the marble slabs, followed by the sound of their bare soles.

Another thing I saw several times here was that whenever people pray in the courtyards of the Prophet's Mosque, there are those who keep on arriving right up to the end of each prayer. They may have missed the beginning, but not the whole prayer; they would have been somewhere nearby, in the shops and markets of Medina or in their hotel rooms, or the hot Medinan sun kept them indoors, or perhaps there was too much of a crowd at the many places where the ritual ablutions are performed. But the effect is that men and women keep coming, right up to the end of the prayers, and you can hear and sense them striving earnestly to be quiet and unobtrusive, and yet they are obtrusive as they hurry to compensate for what they have missed. Their footsteps in-

trude on your silence, that gentle patter of feet, followed by their whispered prayers and murmurings as they offer their own personal supplications.

Something I heard several times in Medina and in Mecca, with delight, was the primordial words of the Qur'an on the lips of all those hundreds of thousands of people. I could hear those closest to me uttering every letter, every vowel, long or short, slowly, as though it was in their lungs and their throat, and then on their palette, their tongue, their teeth, their lips, making this a special, noble place, striving to make everything just so, to do everything in the proper manner, not letting any word of the Qur'an feel unwelcome in their mouths,

their windpipe, their throat, their lungs – their very heart. I observed this spectacle of spontaneous, unforced piety several times in the north front courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque. (The Qur'an on the lips of these pilgrims aroused in me memories of my grandmother Hanifa, who was more than eighty when she died; I vividly remember those childhood memories, when she whispered the eternal words of the Qur'an at her dawn prayers, and how she complained when she lost her teeth that she could no longer pronounce the words properly, fearing that God would punish her for letting the words of the Qur'an soften on her tongue.)

## *Watch out for headaches on the hajj*

The author of these lines must also sadly report that he was late for prayers (or failed altogether to attend) in the Prophet's Mosque, two or three times. On one occasion, the reason was this. He had treated some hajjis to a bowl of soup in a nearby restaurant, remembering a friend of his in Bosnia who had said to him, as he left for the hajj, "Treat some ordinary hajjis to a bowl of soup now and then." And so he did, though the author is himself a perfectly ordinary hajji. The cost of the soup was negligible, but the good will, and the delightful place where it was manifested, remains memorable, as do the people who accepted the good will.

Another reason for failing to attend prayers was a brief bout of illness and incapacity. That was in Medina, on 9 December,

when suddenly I developed a stomach ache and a headache, and was confined to my bed. As he left my hotel room, the Mufti of Sarajevo, Husejn ef. Smajić, said simply: "Well, how frail is man! He has a stomach ache, and can't go out. It might be his arm, his leg, his back, his ear, anything – he just has to lie down, he can't go anywhere. That's man for you."

(It is no bad thing to remember that headaches and diarrhoea are the hajji's worst enemy. And if you get them both at once, there is nothing for it but to consult your doctor, and the sooner the better.)

There are several references to headaches in the Qur'an, and one (Sura II, 196) specifically mentions them as a particularly unpleasant misfortune to befall one on hajj (*adhan min ra'sih*).

## *The Prophet's Mosque – a masterpiece of Islamic architecture*

When you pray in the north courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque, your back is turned towards Syria, Turkey, Bosnia and Europe, for you are, of course, facing south, towards Mecca and its Ka'bah, looking forward with keen anticipation to setting off to perform first *umrah* and then the hajj. While I was in Medina, it struck me that when we pray in (and from) Bosnia, we are facing all three of the great holy sites of Islam: first comes the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, then the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and finally the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca.

The Prophet's Mosque is best seen in all its magnificence from the north courtyard. "If today's Kings of Arabia had built nothing but this mosque, they would still have achieved something splendid," Mufti Smajić said to me on 8 December.

The main frontispiece of the Prophet's Mosque, as seen from the north courtyard, seems to me to be more than fifteen metres high, though I merely hazard a guess at their true height. Near the top of these splendid walls are rows of windows with lace-like screens, seemingly carved out of

some solid material, some precious white stone or solid ivory-coloured tufa. Whatever they may be, those windows remained latent and unformed in that fine stone, waiting to be quarried by stonemasons and carved into that astonishingly fine lacework. From a distance, all these windows strike one with their beauty, delicacy and transparency, and the notion that this world, sadly (or perhaps happily) is transient, a shifting thing, a shadow cast for a while in stone or moving with the clouds, the rivers, the ocean waves, and on the faces of all these people.

The gateway and side doors of the front of the Prophet's Mosque are topped by canopies like those of al-Andalus, clad with green tiles, and then there are all those great windows, with gold (or perhaps gilded) latticework. Above many of the windows I observed were the words *la illaha illa'Llah, Muhammadan rasulu'Llah* (There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet), the Shahada, inscribed in fine calligraphy. I did not see all the windows – it would take two or three days, or perhaps even longer, to commit all these splendid details to memory and take them with me.

Above each window are blue tendrils, as it were, clearly but subtly visible. All this – the lacy carved windows, the Andalusian canopies, the (probably) gilded latticework, and the stone, ivory-coloured or with a faint wash of grey – suggests to the eye a purpose from afar, but also an inner, unambiguous suggestion: the Prophet's Mosque is a masterpiece of modern Muslim architecture. Beauty, delicacy and yet magnificence, too, inhabit this great edifice. That is why

it is important to pray *salah* and to offer our own supplications (*du'a*) to God in an aesthetically designed space. The purpose of such a space is to take us out of ourselves, to lead into a state of exaltation then to ease us into one of tenderness and fullness of heart before again illuminating us with rapture. The circle is then closed by heartening and encouraging us.

Great mosques, great traditional places of worship of all the world religions, every monumental shrine or sanctuary, are often constructed as small worlds, designed to represent the cosmos, for such is the purpose of a religious edifice. The Prophet's Mosque in Medina is one such, and prime example at that, an architectural world in miniature. Its lamps remind us of the stars, its carpets of the open plains, its pillars of impassable mountain chains, its sliding roofs – often open – of clear skies, the wonderful deep azure of the heavens.

As I stood outside the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, my thoughts turned sadly in another direction, perhaps to reach some remote destination. I wondered whether, if it is possible for Muslims to build such a fine mosque, one that we admire so much, is it possible too for us to begin to admire Muslims elsewhere, in other parts of the world. Is there anywhere today where we could congratulate Muslims on having turned their political mind to building a good, just social system? Are Muslims capable of exercising *ijtihad*, intellectual effort, to achieve a harmonious nexus of individual faith and freedom, social justice, equal opportunity, and a fair distribution of national wealth?

## *The Prophet's grave – lifeline of the Prophet's Mosque*

I took no measurements, photographs or videos, I merely observed, and reached a conclusion. There are three crucially important historic parts of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The first and oldest is known as *ar-Rawdah al-mutahharah* or the Pure, the Immaculate Garden, beside the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. It also contains the tombs of Abu Bakr and Umar, the first and second caliphs. The place where the tombs of the Prophet and the two caliphs are located is symbolically known as *al-Hujrah al-mu'attarah*, or the Perfumed Bower, and is close to the room belonging to that noble lady A'ishah, the Prophet's wife and Mother of the Believers, in which Muhammad, peace be upon him, passed into a Better World in 632 AD.

The next part of the mosque, which can still be clearly seen, was built by the Ottomans, and displays the architectural influence of Istanbul, with something of the light of the Blue Mosque (*Mavi Cami'i*) of Sultan Ahmet. And the third part of the Prophet's Mosque is the largest and newest, with the stoutest columns and highest walls. It was built just before or during the reign of King Fahd bin Abdu l-'Aziz.

I referred to *ar-Rawdah al-mutahharah*, or the Immaculate Garden. Hajjis – and Bosnian hajjis in particular – simply call it Rawdah. For me, that unforgettable Rawdah is the heart of the Prophet's Mosque, and of Medina as a whole.

## *The yearning for Rawdah*

As soon as they reach Medina, one can hear our hajjis from Bosnia murmuring: "Tonight I'm going to try to get to Rawdah." And indeed, after a day or two, some of our hajjis began to boast that they had managed to make their way through the thousands of Turks and Iranians and Nigerians and so on to Rawdah, that special place where the teeming crowds are at their thickest, in the tens of thousands.

Many say they managed to pray, two short rakats, a memory that they then carry like an invisible spiritual trophy pinned on to their satisfied chests. One night our Bosnian women managed to get to Rawdah. About six hundred of them set off, led by Zehra Alispahić, Mujesira Zimić-Gljiva, Fatima Halilović, Šuhra Terzić and others. Zehra was carrying the national flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, so that our lady hajjis would be able to identify her. But when a Saudi policewoman tried to wrest the flag from her, Zehra resisted. "This is no ordinary bit of cloth, this is my country's flag." The dispute was resolved by Zehra's leaving the BH flag in the policewoman's office.

Zehra Alispahić, Prof. Fatima Lačević and a few more ladies had been to Rawdah the previous night, on a recce, and saw a large group of Iranian woman, all in a trance. They had effectively taken over Rawdah that night, it was theirs and nobody else's, those proud Iranian women in their veils, and there were endless waves bowing towards the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, sobbing, the tears

flowing freely. The next day our Bosnian hajjis told us about that sea of Iranian womanhood; among them, our Bosniacs had been as invisible as the proverbial needle in a haystack.

There are nights when it is hard to set foot on the green carpets marking the site of Rawdah. But some of our lady pilgrims, Mujesira Zimić-Gljiva and her coterie, managed it.

### *Prayers and tears by Rawdah*

I visited Rawdah with the Egyptian ambassador to BiH, Ahmed Khattab, Mufti Smajić, and the Mufti of Travnik, Nusret Abdibegović, on 10 December at about half past ten

in the morning. The visit took us through a number of human eddies of circling hajjis from Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Azerbaijan. The four of us forced our way through these ramparts of pilgrims from Asia, and we made it. Indeed, when they saw us in Rawdah, the Kyrgystanis even moved up to give us a few feet of space to pray two rakats.

Then we took another few steps, and found ourselves right next to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and those of the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar. The words *As-salaam alayka, ya rasulallah* (Greetings to you, O Prophet of God) are inscribed on the handsome latticework by the Prophet Muhammad's tomb.

After I had completed my two short rakats, the Mufti of Travnik, Abdibegović, found another small space and said, "Come on, pray another two rakats for your late father, Emin effendi." This is a place where feelings come before thoughts.

I write this as it was. As I stood and prayed there, by the Prophet's tomb, nothing from the distant-seeming outside world nor from the remote history of Islam came to mind; rather, my heart was filled with the emotions of Bosnian *mevlud*s, the eulogies of the Prophet that are performed at home, in congregation, or at weddings in my leafy homeland of Travnik. I can say with perfect certainty that I first learned about the Prophet Muhammad at the age of two or three, at those Bosnian mevluds.

Standing next to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, crammed in among that mass of humanity, and needing to stay only two or three minutes,

I remembered those long-ago mevluds of my homeland. They were usually held at night, by the light of candles and oil-lamps. All of us, children and adults alike, would be on our knees, our right hands on our right knees and our left on our left knees. The mevlud would be recited, facing my late father, Emin effendi, and the children would recite, the women would cry, the men would choke back the lump in their throats (just look how well they recite, you can't help being moved), the girls would hand around sherbet beverages, a young man in a fez would get up two or three times to perfume us all with drops of Ka'bah perfume, and a girl would do the same in the women's room. The highlight would come when we all rose to our feet to greet the coming of Muhammad, peace be upon him, into this world, that noble son of the Arab nation and land. And as we awaited him, rose to greet his coming, and then were seated again, it was as though the Prophet of God himself had joined us in our Bosnian congregation to stay, not only until the mevlud was over, but all night, remaining until dawn among those Bosnian hills and valleys. (I do not easily shed tears, the 1992-1995 war made weeping pointless, but even so a few tears came to me from Bosnia as I stood by the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.)

And there, in the middle of Rawdah, I remembered Konjević Polje near Vlasenica, and a mevlud that took place perhaps more than forty years ago. It was proceeding as normal in the Muminović family house in Konjević Polje, with everyone listening to the reciters in that homely atmo-

sphere, paying careful attention to every detail, and then one of them began to recite the famous episode from the mevlud of the late Rešad Kadić describing the moment when the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was on his deathbed, and bade farewell to his companions, asking them all for their blessings.

*Minberu je prišo, jecajima praćen.*
*O, kako je bio bolešću ispaćen*
*A onda je ime Boga spomenuo,*
*I vaz dirljiv vjernim o smrti držao.*

He went to the mimbar, to the sound of sobs.
Oh, how he was haggard with sickness
And then he mentioned the name of God,
And preached them a touching sermon on death.

*Okren'o se zatim pa vjerne pitao*
*Je l' ikome išta krivo učinio,*
*Il' je možda nekom šta dužan ostao?*
*Nek mu sada kažu dok nije krenuo*
*Pred Tvorca svjetova, života i ljudi,*
*Pred kojeg se nosi tek srce iz grudi.*

Then he turned to the faithful, asking them
Had he done anyone any wrong,
Or did he owe anyone anything?
If so, they should say so before he departs

To meet the Creator of the worlds and of life,
To whom all one takes is the heart in one's breast.

And then, as Kadić's poem relates, one of the Prophet's companions, Ukash by name, stood up and said that long ago Muhammad, peace be upon him, had hit Ukash, with his whip, and although the blow was unintentional, he, Ukash, still remembered it, and the place where the blow landed was still sore. This is how Kadić's *Mevlud* tells the tale:

*"Poslaniče Božiji tvoj bič još me boli.*
*Kod Tafe si mene s deve udario,*
*Nehotice bješe, al' me zaboljelo!*
*Pravedno bi bilo kad bih ti vratio,*
*Udarac udarcem kad bih naplatio!"*

"O Prophet of God, your whip still hurts me
You hit me near Tafa, on camel-back,
It was not done on purpose, but it hurt!
The fair thing would be for me to hit back,
To pay you back with a blow for a blow."

When the reciter in Konjević Polje came to this passage, one of the Muminović youths stood up and said loudly that he could not allow Ukash to pitch into Muhammad, peace be upon him (how could he do that to the Prophet, for heavens' sake?), and demanded that the recitation stop.

So there I was, in Rawdah, remembering that long-gone event in Konjević Polje, and remembering how it was there, in Rawdah, that Muhammad, peace be upon him, did indeed bid that touching farewell to his Companions. And I repeated to myself, in Rawdah, the rest of Kadić's verses:

*Džamija zabruja, gnjevan žagor ču se*
*"Sram te bilo, Ukaš, vječno stidio se!*
*Zar ne vidiš da je Pejgamber nam bolan,*
*Zar ćeš ga bičevat', zar si i to voljan?"*

The mosque buzzed with angry murmurs
"Shame on you, Ukash, eternal shame!
Can't you see that the Prophet is sick,
Would you really hit him, could you do so?"

*Pejgamber ih smiri i sa tugom reče:*
*"Čuli ste Ukaša, udarac ga peče.*
*Bič mu donesite, jer onaj ko zgr'ješi,*
*Udarac će primit' grijeha da se r'ješi."*

The Prophet calmed them and sadly said:
"You heard Ukash, the blow still stings.
Bring him a whip, for he who sins
Shall receive a blow, to expiate sin."

*Kad bič donesoše, Ukaš opet zbori:*
*"Poslaniče Bož'ji ti si u košulji,*

*A t'jelo je moje onda golo bilo,*
*Zato me je dvaput više zaboljelo!"*

They brought the whip, but Ukash spoke:
"Oh Prophet of God, you're in a shirt,
But I was bare-backed at that time,
And it hurt me twice as much!"

The late Rešad Kadić reaches a brilliant climax at this point. The Companions of the Prophet (like our young Muminović from Konjević Polje) looked at him in disbelief: was Ukash really going to lash their Prophet, a man dearer to them than anyone else?

*Uzdah se otrže, digoše se ljudi,*
*Kad Pejgamber smače košulju sa grudi,*
*Pa Ukašu reče, bolno k'o da moli:*
*"Bičuj, bičuj Ukaš, nek' i mene boli!"*

They sighed and got up to their feet at once
when the Prophet took the shirt from his breast
And said to Ukash, as if in prayer:
"Beat me, Ukash, and make it hurt!"

*U trenu se onda ovo dogodilo:*
*Ukaš zajecao, Vjernog zagrlio,*
*Pa ozaren srećom kroz suze grcao:*
*"Poslaniče Božiji, uv'jek sam žudio*

*Da naslonim glavu na mubareć grudi,*
*Da osluhnem srce koje tol'ko ljubi!"*

And in a split second, this took place:
Ukash sobbed, embraced the Prophet,
And aglow with joy said through his tears:
"O Prophet of God, I've always yearned
To rest my head on that blessed chest,
To hear the heart that I love so much."

As I recited from memory Kadić's *Mevlud*, I moved towards the latticework and railing around the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, wanting to touch them, even if I could not embrace him. But I failed. The mass of people around me pushed me aside like a broken reed. Abdibegović, the Mufti of Travnik, had only told me to give my salaams from a distance of three or four metres.

And that was what happened, though I was sorry.

### *Post Scriptum 1*

Every prayer time in the Prophet's Mosque is followed by the janaza, the funeral prayers, for deceased men and women, and often even of children. The muezzin simply announces: *As-Salatu 'ala l-amwati wa t-tifli, yarhamukumullah.* (*Janaza of the deceased, and a child, may God have mercy upon you.*) But if several children have died, he says: *As-Salatu 'ala l-amwati wa l-atfali, yarhamukumullah.* (*Janaza of the deceased and children, may God have mercy upon you.*)

The muezzin's voice reminds one (in a casual monotone, as if announcing the most mundane or incidental matter) that this world is transient, that we all die, including the residents of Medina, and pilgrims too. So children die too, if such is their destiny.

### *Post Scriptum II*

The Prophet's Mosque is never empty. There will be people reading the Qur'an, leaning against the walls or pillars, their voices rising up among the lamps and swirling around the thousands and thousands of light-bulbs, turning into a kind of supra-voice like the humming of bees; others, though are simply sitting and reflecting, and there are even some who are sleeping.

Medina is a more peaceful city than Mecca; people move around more quietly, drivers are more considerate and respect pilgrims on foot, and the traders and shopkeepers are more approachable, always ready for a chat and a spot of bargaining as they praise their goods to the skies. Often they overdo it; I would say that most of their wares come from China.

# GALAXIES

### *On the way south, to Mecca*

We left Medina to journey south, to Mecca, in the early afternoon of 13 December. At last we are heading for the Haram ash-Sharif, people are saying in our buses, lined up outside the big Elyas Hotel in Medina.

In a moment we shall be leaving Medina the Radiant (*al-Madina al-Munawwarah*), bidding farewell to the Prophet's City that welcomed us, a week ago, with its clear blue Mediterranean skies and its hot Hijaz sun, and the gleaming walls and colonnades of the Prophet's Mosque. And, of course, Rawdah the beautiful, beneath its great green dome.

There is great excitement in the buses, but some irritation, too. Why haven't we left yet? What are we waiting for? And for whom? All around us is hustle and bustle, people checking lists, counting passengers, looking over the luggage, handing out fresh water – the usual unease and fuss. There are so many buses, everywhere you look, coming and going – hundreds of them, some new, some old, some extremely dilapidated, all with their engines running to keep the air conditioning going, for it gets very hot during the day.

## *Wait, be patient, there's plenty of time*

And just as we think we are on our way, something else crops up to keep us waiting again. One suitcase is too large and won't fit; another is surplus, but someone else's is missing, lost somewhere. (I work it out mentally: if there are four million hajjis, there must be sixteen million bags and suitcases. The number is comforting, and I feel more relaxed, amazed that we shan't have to wait all day to be on our way to Mecca.)

And so we sit in the busses for a few more minutes, five minutes which become ten; and again, a minute, then five, then ten minutes. Waiting during the pilgrimage, unexpected delays; there is a lot of waiting, and one needs to be prepared for it, and patient. And we need to realize that if we were not waiting here, we would be held up somewhere else later. It is impossible for three or four million people to perform a ritual in a place that holds two hundred thousand people only, and for it all to be over quickly.

I heard one esteemed hajji, Ismet effendi Spahić, say more than once, "Patience is a virtue, as precious as gold. It's always precious, but especially during the hajj." Engineer Rifet Fetić, who performed the hajj in 2006, advised me to come to terms with waiting when it came to my turn to perform the hajj; it is easier to put up with the waiting if one embraces patience. When he returned from the hajj in 2006, he said he would like me to go on hajj too and to write this book (and here it is, slowly taking shape). And

he also told me that there are three commonplace things that are extremely important, in addition to the more elevated matters of the hajj that he assumed I would already know from books. The first is, do not worry about your house in Bosnia. If you are on hajj, but worrying about how things are at home or missing the other members of your household, or concerned about what is going on in Bosnia, you will not enjoy the true delights of the hajj. The second thing is time. When you are in Medina and Mecca, in that vast crowd of pilgrims, do not worry about time. It passes anyway, with or without you, above and beyond you. The buses will certainly be late right from the start. And the third important thing is, do not be stubborn about space, fighting for an extra foot or two. Just as everything will be and will pass, so the swirling, crowding masses of pilgrims will ease in a minute or so.

I often had occasion in Mecca and Medina (and most certainly at the Mount of Mercy at Arafat) to remember Rifet's remarks, and the advice to be patient. The rituals of the hajj, however, strengthens not only one's patience, but one's sheer endurance. When you are performing the rituals, it is as if you are surrounded by the sense of some kind of debt, binding you to make a gift of your own time, to dedicate yourself to all those rituals, movements, circumambulations, standing, praying, supplicating – to all those spaces and places, those holy ceremonies, those important details. This feeling brings with it a sense of calm and serenity, which encourages piety.

## *Splendid* ihrams

Another thing that gives you a sense of tranquillity and peace among the millions of pilgrims is the special clothing worn by men, the *ihram*. Without the *ihram*, there is no hajj for men; it is a *conditio sine qua non.*

Every man wears the special "uniform" of the hajj during the most important rituals. One usually dons it while still in Medina (or in one of the places, known as *miqat*, designed by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, that surround the sacred, inviolable space around Mecca like concentric circles). Women do not wear the *ihram*; most are piously and suitably dressed in their long cloaks – black, white, blue or brown.

The *ihram*, the white ritual garb worn by men on the hajj, is an extraordinary, ancient invention. In Medina itself, and at the heart of Mecca, I tried to describe why the *ihram* is the most convenient ritual costume I have ever seen. It consists of two matching seamless, unstitched sheets of fabric. Their brilliant whiteness gives off a sense of sanctity and ceremonial, calming anger, suppressing rage, and arousing a sense of responsibility to the sacred places and time, and the endless crowds of people there.

All this amounts to the main reason why the *ihram* is prescribed as a highly practical ritual garment for men, for the only things one can do without difficulty when in a state of *ihram* is to pray, to circumambulate the Ka'bah (*tawaf*), and to stand in Arafat. It is totally impractical for running or

hard physical labour, and would be a serious impediment to any kind of combat or hostilities. And if one is not constantly on the alert, adjusting one's costume all the time, one could easily find oneself stark naked in all one's shame. The shame would, of course, be all the greater because one would be naked, God forbid, in the holiest of places. Then again, the *ihram* is white, so one has to be careful at all times to avoid getting dirty, so that the costume is always in a state of purity for continuing the rituals and seemly for one's presence in the most sacred places. It would be absurdly cumbersome, unseemly and unthinkably sacrilegious to don a sword or to carry a gun, a lance, a knife or a bludgeon when wearing the *ihram*. That is why the time when violence and war is prohibited by the Qur'an is known in shari'ah law as *al-ashuru l-hurum* (the holy month, when it is *haram* to wage war). It is not hard to see the connection between the words *ihram* and *hurum*. The intention is to teach us to distance ourselves from violence, war, anger, hatred and rashness.

The *ihram*, those two white sheets covering our upper and lower body, each more than two metres long, calms millions of men, reducing them to a state of submissive tranquillity, followed by joy and tenderness. There is no doubt that the *ihram* garb is a spiritual discipline for men.

The lower sheet is wrapped around the waist and legs from right to left (the direction in which Arabic, Hebrew and almost all the Semitic scripts are written, and the direction in which the *tawaf* or circumambulation around the Ka'bah, the heart of the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, is per-

formed). The other or upper sheet is draped over the chest, shoulders and back, again from right to left (with the right shoulder left bare during the circumambulation). Apart from those two white sheets of the *ihram*, a man may wear no other clothing: no undervest or shirt, no cap, no underpants, no belt, no socks, no gloves. On his feet he must wear the simplest of sandals, with both toes and heels exposed.

### *An archipelago of pilgrims as far as the eye can see*

I observed all this in Medina or in the nearby *miqat* of Dhu l-Hulayfah: hajjis donning the *ihram*, gradually turning into an endless sea of white, dazzlingly, rapturously white. The women put on clean cloaks in a variety of colours, and it all makes me think of a huge flock of white and brightly co-

loured birds on some great archipelago from which the journey south is to begin.

It also reminds me of the different stories of the origins of the universe, ancient and yet infinite, which is steadily expanding: the stars decided to set off on their journey, and began to swirl into constellations, and the constellations into galaxies, each setting its sights on the Centre that draws them all irresistibly. Groups begin to form, dense masses moving off towards the Centre, to Mecca and the Ka'bah.

Wide eight-lane highways lead from Medina to Mecca, along which hundreds – no, thousands – of buses are travelling. We travel for hours, our backs to the north and northwest, and are provided along the way with fresh water and lunch boxes. God bless them for that.

The sun sets, and there, far to the south, we see the glimmer of the lights of Mecca. The bus journey from Medina to Mecca goes on and on, six or seven hours of non-stop driving and gridlock, but weariness is banished by the eager anticipation of the encounter with the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca. Many of the pilgrims will be seeing this, the Mosque of all Mosques, for the first time. But even those who have seen it before, and who have already performed the pilgrimage, are looking forward to seeing it again, particularly during the hajj, when the Mosque swarms with the oceans of human presence and galaxies of pious Muslim humanity, and all that mass of people, as far as the eye can see, becomes a living jewel, a torrential river with its tributaries of millions of men and women.

## *To the heart of the Haram ash-Sharif*

It was after midnight, in the early hours of 14 December, that we reached our hotel in the al-Aziziya quarter of Mecca, close to Mina and that splendid complex of bridges, and not far from the pillar known as *jamrat*, representing the temptations of Satan, at which pilgrims cast stones during the pilgrimage. Before dawn on 14 December, five of us – Ambassador Khattab, his wife Umeyma, my wife Ajša and the Mufti of Sarajevo, Husein effendi Smajić – entered the Haram ash-Sharif. But we were only just inside the outer rings of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, a great pulsing canvas of humanity on the great courtyards around the walls of the Mosque. It would have been easy if everyone had been going in the same direction, towards the great gateways and walls of the Haram ash-Sharif, or emerging from them, out towards the city, on all four sides. As it was, we were on those immense, marble-paved, fragrant courtyard amid two, three or four hundred thousand people each with his or her own distinct intention, some wanting to go there, some here, others to the right or left, while yet others were sitting there or praying, drinking tea, sleeping, reciting the Qur'an, or taking photographs of each other to capture the memory for the future.

## *The surging river of people*

Step by step, our group of five people advanced carefully, like a tiny meteorite or a barely observable comet amid a mass of great pulsing galaxies, to perform the *umrah* or lesser pilgrimage that precedes the hajj or great pilgrimage, and begins with the circumambulation of the Ka'bah. We had to find a suitable angle to join the human river that was surging in, the tide that was rising around the walls of the Mosque as more and more buses reached Mecca from all directions. The five of us were like a spaceship returning to earth and adjusting its course to the proper angle to re-enter the thickening layers of earth's atmosphere.

We no longer advanced step by step; it was impossible. Now it was foot by foot, slowly moving towards one of the great gateways of the Mosque, into the vast covered colonnades, lit with lamps above and to the sides, and gleaming with *ihram*s and glowing, lit-up faces.

And then we saw the Ka'bah, silent in its mysterious black garb. We raised our right hands, palms facing it, and uttered the testimony of faith, the *shahadah*: There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Prophet of God.

Only then did I notice the image in motion of the human galaxy around the immobile, silent Ka'bah, some hundred and fifty metres from us, around which a white sea of perhaps a hundred thousand men and women were moving. Over that whole distance from the Ka'bah an incredible image reached the eye, something not to be seen anywhere else: it was as

though all those thousands of people were standing on a turntable moving from right to left around the stationary Black Cube of the Centre. And yet, when one looked more closely, one could see that it was the barefoot pilgrims who were moving, each slowly advancing on his or her own two feet.

Then, after gathering one's thoughts, it was the sounds and voices in and around the Haram ash-Sharif that began to overwhelm one. The loudest sound, a surreal choir of human voices, was coming from the Ka'bah itself. One might compare it to the humming of bees, the drumming of rain, the roar of a river, the soughing of the wind through dense,

leafy forest. But whatever natural phenomenon one chooses, whatever impression one has, will be at least partly right.

We found a suitable place and the proper angle to begin the first of our seven circumambulations. We joined the river, the sea, the galaxy, the universe of pilgrims already performing the *tawaf*, the seven circumambulations around the Ka'bah. We were borne along from right to left, managing to join the swirling mass of people, the five of us like a negligible comet, a tiny tributary, a drop in that vast river or galaxy of humankind.

We advanced foot by foot, or occasionally step by step. Far off to the right is a large green neon light, by which it is easy to number off the circumambulations, from one to seven. While you perform the *tawaf* or circumambulation of the silent Ka'bah you look at the back of the man's head in front of you (men must go bareheaded) or the headscarf, if it is a woman. You look at that mass of people, and the ones behind you are looking at the back of your head, and your back. You keep going, advancing in that circular orbit.

The Muslim ummah circling the Ka'bah is grouped into nations and tribes. I observed this on three occasions during the eleven days I spent in Mecca, at various times though always by night, as I performed the seven-part *tawaf* – a total of twenty-one circumambulations of the Ka'bah. Malaysians, seven hundred; Iranians, two thousand; Nigerians, three thousand; Turks, four thousand – and so on, other groups in their thousands, from the many Muslim nations.

## *Circumambulations, and then walking in straight lines*

Thus it is with the *tawaf* or circumambulation of the Ka'bah, in its silence. There, people are not separated into participants and onlookers; everyone is both participant and observer at the same time. I would say that this is the particular appeal of the scene around the Ka'bah. The rituals are like air that everyone can breath. Please, welcome, perform the ritual, breath the sweet air. Everyone is with everyone else, the ritual is yours as much as it is everyone else's. That is one reason why the Haram ash-Sharif is no colosseum. There is a special feeling of belonging there.

Then comes the walk in a straight line along the two broad parallel avenues, several hundred metres in length, between the two hills of Safa and Marwah – there and back, seven times in a dead straight line. The rule of the right-hand side prevails everywhere in the hajj – you begin from the right again, entering the broad, paved right-hand avenue. Now there are hundreds of thousands of pilgrims facing you as you advance, facing those who are on their way back along the other avenue, parallel to the one you are on. This ritual is known as the *sa'y* or running, in fact a fast walk. This is where our ancestor Hagar, the mother of Ismail and wife of Ibrahim, peace be upon him, ran to and fro as she looked for water for her son to drink.

The *sa'y* may be performed on one of three storeys, and it seems to me they are building a fourth. I compared the

forms of the *tawaf* and the *sa'y*. As you perform the circumambulation around the elegant Ka'bah, your words glorifying God, your magnificats to the Creator rise straight to heaven, for there is no roof over the Ka'bah. But the dead straight avenues for the *sa'y* between Safa and Marwah have magnificent vaulted roofs. All those thanks, that praise, those magnificats issuing from hundreds of thousands of lips rise to the roof and then back down onto the pilgrims' heads, in a reverberating echo.

It gives one the sense that everything is quivering, flickering, shivering, keen to take off somewhere, to fan out. Here pilgrims take each other by the hand, several hundred of them, and then the soft voices of women utter the *takbir*. I saw Indonesian women in their thousands on several oc-

casions; the symphony of their *takbir*s and *talbiyah*s is amazing. The voices of these choirs ascend to the domed roofs and return, in an astonishing ringing hum.

Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pilgrims are marching in step, to and fro, and all those groups are offering their own distinct prayers in a sweet choir. As long as the ritual lasts, the groups draw nearer, pass and move on, like clusters of stars in the sky. As they draw nearer to you, their voices gain strength, only to fade as they pass, and dissolve into other, advancing voices.

Here too the metaphor of the comet holds good. If you are alone, or with just two or three other people, you pass through the universe of the Haram ash-Sharif like a lonely comet, pass huge constellations – Turkish, Iranian, Malaysian, Nigerian, Arab, Ural-Altaic, Indian and more – and disappear from sight on your lonely path.

There are some Muslim nations that now display themselves on hajj in their traditional manner, in their pride, their politics, their views. They want to be seen and heard, they want you to retain their image, the spectacle they present. Once, too, this happened. I was with Ajša when we were surrounded by a mass of Iranian pilgrims. I knew they were Iranian from their faces, and also from the fact that when naming Allah and Muhammad in their prayers they added the name of imam Ali, the fourth caliph. The symphony of their galaxy formed a triad: *Allah, Muhammed, Ali... Allah, Muhammed, Ali!*

Ajša asked me: "Shall we do the same?"

"Yes, let's", I replied.

Ahead of us as leader was a tall Iranian, saying out loud, in Arabic: "Thanks be to God who sent Muhammad, the Prophet, and who made Ali be our imam." And behind him his entire galaxy repeated after him, word for word.

This went on for two rounds, and then, breaking free from the Iranian galaxy, all of a sudden we found ourselves among Berber Sufis – Sanussis, I would say. And with them we glorified God Almighty, and Muhammad, peace be upon him, and then the four rightly-guided caliphs, in order: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali.

## *Beautiful Lebanese women*

One day, on the avenues between Safa and Marwah, I saw about a hundred and fifty, maybe even two hundred slender girls, all tall, all wearing yellow peaked caps and tunics where the main colour was orange, and all apparently marching in step. My wife and I wondered what kind of a religious rally this could be. I repeat, they were all tall and slender (and beautiful, if I may say). They were headed by their commander, a frontman who was a girl. Theirs was clearly a select female galaxy, and the way they marched sent out a message. I approached them and asked one of them where they came from.

"From Lebanon. We are *hizbullah*."

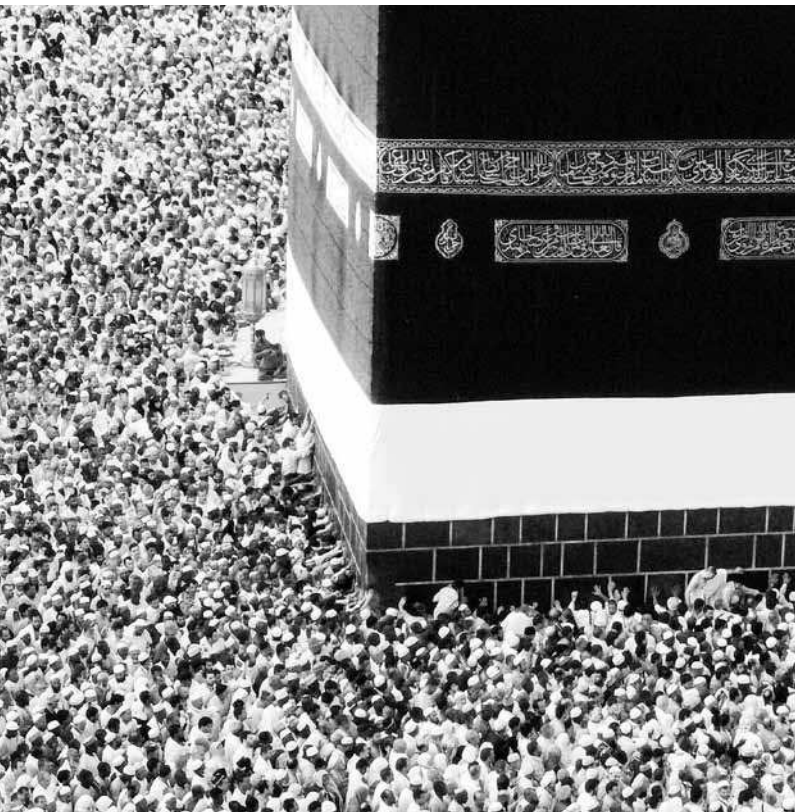
Their combined *takbir*s and *talbiyah*s, the refrains of their *ilahiyah*s, and the echo of the sounds reverberating

back below the vaults, produced an extraordinary symphony. It is the absolute truth to say that the light marching in step of these Lebanese girls generated a rhythm that seemed to come from some spiritual drum-beat beneath them. *A-llaaah! A-llaaah!*, they repeated, but it was a heavenly music, like a celestial song or a marching anthem (Ahmed Adilović told me later that he had seen these Lebanese girls, still in their orange peaked caps, circumambulating the Ka'bah in exactly the same way).

### *A blend of swirling grains of wheat, corn, barley, rye, oats, rice...*

On the fourth and highest storey of the Haram ash-Sharif, with Ajša, Zehra, Muhamed Delalić and Reuf Softić, I watched with the naked eye that sacred, rapturous circumambulation of the Ka'bah as if with the eye of a swallow, a sparrow or a hoopoe, from on high, about three or four hundred metres away. Below, around the elegant Ka'bah, all was brilliantly ablaze with human faces and the colours of all those circumambulations, between the yellow light of candles, the pale tones of wax or the light of the full moon and the colour of the hills of Mecca and the mountain massifs of Tihama. Those waves of humanity around the Ka'bah brought to mind some amazing blend – whether anyone has ever made such a blend, I do not know – of swirling grains of wheat, corn, barley, rye, oats and rice.

I sent a text message to Dževad Hodžić: Salaams to you, Aida and snowy Sarajevo. I am in Mecca, watching the people below us around the Ka'bah, from on high. The Invisible Hand of the Creator, the Almighty, the Eternal Potter is mixing this human dough from above and below, from every quarter of the world, unseen but ubiquitous; one senses the presence of Jibreel the Strong all around, pouring pitchers of clear water from the Flowing Source. Somewhere nearby, too, is the angel of death, Azrail the inexorable, marking off time and lifetimes from one side, to see which man or woman, which old person or child, he will catch with his crook of death.



### *Post Scriptum I*

On the subject of *ihram*, while we were still in Medina, longing for the ceremonial departure for Mecca, there was talk among our hajjis of an event that took place a few years ago. Our guides and instructors were helping one of our hajjis, an old Bosniac, to don the *ihram* in the prescribed, ritually valid manner, but he resolutely refused to remove his underpants. Finally they said, all right, have it your own way, but your hajj won't be valid, you'll have come all this way for nothing and wasted four or five thousand marks. And when it came to the money, the old man submitted to the requirement to remove any sewn garment.

### *Post Scriptum II*

Women performing the hajj are permitted to wear stitched clothing, and most wear long white robes and cloaks, though we also saw many in black mantles and abayas. Neither in Medina nor in Mecca are their faces veiled – no *niqab*, no yashmak, no burqa. I saw only ten or twenty women with veiled faces among all those hundreds of thousands of women pilgrims.

The women of the Muslim ummah, like the men, display an amazing variety of models of Islamic clothing – a term that is indefinable, but functionally recognizable. Functionally, women's Islamic clothing, as I saw on the hajj, consists of covering the hair and body – with the exception of the hands and feet – with an opaque garment made of natural fibres, for health and comfort. Of course, it must

also be loose enough, lightweight enough and of suitable quality to allow the women to feel comfortable in the high daytime temperatures of Medina, Mecca, Arafat, Muzdalifah and Mina. So functionality, comfort and ease are what dictate the lowest common denominator of Islamic women's clothing. Everything else is different: colours, models, materials, cut and so on.

I would say, though, that Muslim women on the hajj do have one common factor – their scarves. The preferred colour of most is white or black, but there are also blue and grey; all setting off the women's faces as the night sky sets off the full moon surrounded by the margins of the night.

### *Post Scriptum III*

If a hajji should feel cold – and the mornings and evenings can be cold, even in Mecca, in December, January and February, especially on the Mount of Mercy at Arafat – he is advised to wear a double *ihram*. When the hajj falls at other times of the year, and even then there can be brief cold spells if the desert wind is blowing on the Mount of Mercy at night, then too men are advised to wear an *ihram* over their *ihram*.

### *Post Scriptum IV*

The circumambulation of the Ka'bah covers the least distance when one is right next to it, but during the hajj it is very hard to get that close, given that at the height of the ritual there are often more than a hundred thousand pilgrims all performing it at the same time. Fortunately, the Haram

ash-Sharif in Mecca now has several storeys, and one can perform the circumambulation on these too, even on the fourth or topmost storey. But this is also the most demanding, since the radius of those seven circumambulations is much greater on the fourth floor of the Haram ash-Sharif.

# THE MOUNT OF MERCY AT ARAFAT

## *Among thousands of the strangest taxis in the world*

For three or four days starting on 14 December, we Bosnian hajjis were conveyed by Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian buses from our hotel in Mecca's al-Aziziya quarter. Our guides had given us instructions to go to the Haram ash-Sharif in this way, saying that all we had to say to the drivers was "Bosnia" and there would be no problem.

Indeed, the transport was on time and free of charge, there and back. The Turks, Iranians and Iraqis were attentive to our hajjis, often giving up their seats to us. The Turkish and Iranian buses were new and clean, the Iraqi ones mostly old. Although the traffic was congested, we lost no time, to our great relief.

But the buses were available for only three days. All of a sudden, to our dismay, they were withdrawn; from about 16 December, thousands of hajjis had to get by as best they could. We began to ponder how to get to the Haram ash-

Sharif and back to our hotel. One of the possibilities was the big pedestrian tunnel. A lot of people used it, wrapping prayer mats or rush matting around their shoulders and back to stop the air conditioning penetrating to their very ribs. But the only people who can use the tunnel are those who are not afraid of catching cold, and who are able to walk a long distance. I saw plenty of our hajjis brought almost to their knees by just one journey on foot through the tunnel, confined to their beds with severe chills. They were treated by doctors, for they had to get better: we were due to set off for Arafat any minute, and the "standing" at Arafat is an essential part of the hajj, the main event of the entire pilgrimage, for the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said "The hajj is staying at Arafat." This is to be understood as meaning that staying at Arafat is an indispensable part of the pilgrimage.

The other way of getting to the Haram ash-Sharif and back to our hotel at al-Aziziya was even worse; I shall remember it for the rest of my life. This is what happened. At about the same time that all those nice Turkish and Iranian buses vanished, as if to order, there appeared on the streets of Mecca an army of trucks, vans, jeeps and minibuses of all ages, the most diverse bunch of motorcycles imaginable, traveller vans, three-wheelers about to fall apart, ancient motor cars and jalopies beyond one's worst imaginings. We had to use these, haggling over the price with the poor of Mecca and beyond who owned this, the most astonishing fleet of taxes I have ever seen, and who had to all appear-

ances come from oases far and near to earn a few riyals by transporting impoverished pilgrims.

There were times when we had to give as much as forty riyals each. To show what an exorbitant price this was, you should know that in Saudi Arabia one riyal buys almost two and a half litres of petrol (three riyals are worth roughly one Bosnian convertible mark). We expressed our dissatisfaction, we complained, but it was the same for all of us, even our Bosnian ambassador in Saudi Arabia, HE Razim Čolić, and the leader of our pilgrim group, Mufti Nusret effendi Abdibegović. They cheered us up, urged us to be patient, and said that we would just have to put up with it. We received the same advice from our other muftis, guides and Bosnian leadership on the hajj; it was no better for them.

We continued to pay for these, the strangest taxis in the world. What we most regretted was the time it took; why should we waste time in the most holy places of Islam? True, we soon got used to it, but we continued to express our indignation, to protest, and at times to condemn their high prices (taking care not to let our disapproval develop into a quarrel, for there are to be no angry words on the hajj). When we said to one driver of a truck,"It's haram to take so much from us," he calmly replied, "It's not haram at all – we did a deal."

True, we did do a deal – we had no choice.

## *The hajj – a multitude of rituals amid a multitude of people*

It is with sadness that I write this, for the sorrow returns whenever I remember all the misery, disorder and suffering of the hajjis, those poor men and women, in the chaos of the journey to Mecca in the days before visiting Arafat.

On one occasion we emerged from some old jalopy close to the Haram ash-Sharif. The *adhaan* was being called for afternoon prayers, and rows were forming in the side streets and alleyways, extending almost five hundred metres from the first colonnades around the Harem in a vast ring of humanity. Everything was white.

We few stood there, trying to find a space. And then this happened: a hajji couple from Morocco called Ajša and me, gave up their place and their rush mat, and stepped back two or three metres, among their own countrymen. We were touched by this gesture, which made things infinitely easier for us: our anxiety evaporated, and we felt cheerful. There are good people everywhere.

Later, after *'asr*, the afternoon prayer, was over, we thanked the Moroccan hajji and asked why there had been such chaos over the transport and why everything was so badly organized. His reply was:

"The hajj is never performed in isolation, nor is it a duty to be performed alone, in an empty place. Hajj is a multitude of rituals in a mass of people. What would we do alone in the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca?"

Well, thanks a lot, I said to myself. I have read so many books and articles about the rituals of the hajj, and perhaps I may have come across some such explanation, but I had to come to Mecca for the hajj to see it for myself.

And yet, I should like to add this: in all that kerfuffle over the transport, it was the worst for ordinary pilgrims – and we Bosnian hajjis were perfectly ordinary pilgrims. We regretted the time we lost over useless haggling, and I often calculated that for every three hours we spent in the Haram ash-Sharif, we spent (or rather lost) at least three hours getting to the Haram and back to the hotel.

I heard all kinds of comments while waiting for affordable transport, amid the elbowing, loquacious crowds. "This would never happen in Europe," some said. "A bunch of ordinary kids could never descend on millions of visitors to the Olympics and drive them around without a licence and without any sort of order," added others. But others again said, "Now, now, it's not really like that. The Islamic world isn't bad everywhere, take Turkey, just look how it's sorted out its roads and infrastructure." To which the response was, "Well, Turkey's partly in Europe, that's why!" And yet others chipped in with, "For Heaven's sake, hold on! Europe may have good roads and public transport, but weren't we Muslim recently victims in our tens of thousands in that same Europe." And there were those who said, "What can you do? This is the hajj, and the hajj is no carnival. Just be patient." (While waiting for a bus on one occasion, I met Nezim Halilović Muderis, who tried to soothe us by saying,

"What can you do? This is the state of our Muslim ummah these days, this traffic chaos is the image of the ummah in miniature.")

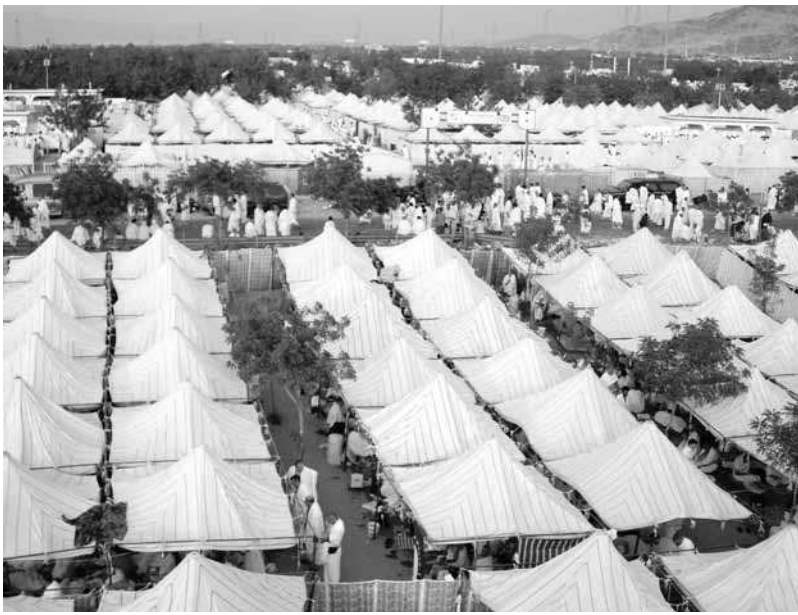
During those three or four days before leaving for Arafat, we listened and we ourselves thought up plenty of arguments, every one of them poor. The main problem with all these wretched arguments is that they are based on a poverty of justification and comparison. "The transport to Mecca, and from Mecca to Arafat, should not be justified by transcontinental comparisons – it simply needs to be organized," one of our doctors said to me. "The attitude towards ordinary hajjis (and, I repeat, ordinary hajjis are in the majority, waiting for hours to do a deal and then to sit or even stand in a dirty, stinking truck) is a true image of the way most Muslim rulers and governments treat their ordinary citizens," I replied, in a learned tone, as if I had made a major discovery.

## *At last we are going to Arafat*

And so, late on 17 December, we set off in ancient buses for Arafat. First we went one way, but then it seemed it was not the right way, so we turned back, set off in another direction, and found ourselves in a serious traffic jam. Then, after driving round in circles for an hour or more, we saw that we were right beside the Haram ash-Sharif – our bus had brought us back almost to our starting point. Many of

us could not helping sighing, "But we were supposed to be going to Arafat."

Despondent and tired, and late as it was, I sent this message to Muharem ef. Hasanbegović: "Salaams to you and your good lady Dr. Šefika. Oh, this ummah of mine. We have been travelling to Arafat for hours in some old jalopies, God knows when we shall get there. Oh, this ummah!"



Muharem ef. Hasanbegović sent me a reply which comforted me with its good wishes, hopes and the suggestion that I write a book of some kind about my experiences of the hajj – and that he expected something worthwhile from me.

## *The spectacle at Arafat is like waking in the Next World*

We finally reached our destination, Arafat, some time after three in the morning on 18 December. In a flash, we were no longer tired, disgruntled, angry, dejected or downhearted. Before us was Jabal 'Arafat, the Mount of Mercy at the end of the plain of 'Arafat.

It was here that Muhammad, peace be upon him, performed his Farewell hajj in 632 AD. It is estimated that there could have been about a hundred thousand people there when he did so. Fourteen centuries later, in 2007, there are between three and four million of us hajjis.

Our first sight of Arafat was at dawn. It was an incredible sight. Rays of light were falling on the Mount, and it was as if we were awakening in the Next World; as if we were waiting for Israfil's trumpet to sound, and the Day of Judgment to begin.

As the new day revealed itself on the eastern horizon, and the white and the black threads of early dawn separated into clarity, as we awaited the sunrise, all that time – around us, below us, and above us on the Mount – there came into view what seemed to our multitude of pilgrims that a universe of galaxies was approaching, preparing for a brief repose among us.

Among all the principal rituals of the hajj, the "standing" at Arafat, and the ascent of the Mount, is the only one that every pilgrim performs at the same time and in the

same place. Hence the vast expanse of Arafat. May it receive on its sacred archipelago the white sea of pilgrims extending as far as the eye can see.

## *The heavenly symphonies of Islam*

Everywhere one looked, there were white reflectors, tents, ihrams and beaming faces. Over to the east, the horizon was also turning white. And then came the *adhaan* for sabah, the morning prayer, amplied by Turkish loudspeakers.

To one side was our little galaxy of Bosnian of about two thousand pilgrims, surrounded by a much larger Turkish galaxy of more than a hundred thousand people. Beyond were Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, and still more pilgrim galaxies of the peoples of central Asia. And there was the *adhaan* resounding from the Turkish loudspeakers; each sequence was repeated four times, each time by a different muezzin. We listened to those heavenly symphonies of Islam at dawn, on the plain of Arafat – four muezzins, or perhaps more, repeating every phrase four times, each with his own cadence, tone and emotion – some with a note of encouragement, others mournfully, and others again in a cadence that awakened hope. Their voices rose to the surrounding heights of Mount Arafat, returning from their brief pause there in their metaphysics, echoing in expanding concentric circles. It was as though the words of the *adhaan* were turning into a breeze strewn with tulips falling about us, formed in the all-merciful compassion of God Almighty.

The rumour spread that these four (or more) Turkish muezzins were from the imperials mosques of Istanbul: the mosque of Eyup, standard-bearer to the Prophet Muhammad, and those of sultans Mehmet II the Conquerer, Suleyman, Beyazit and Ahmet. I was unable to find out if this was true.

When the *adhaan* for morning prayer had faded into silence, our hajj leader Mirsad ef. Mahmutović spoke to us Bosnian hajjis, telling us what to expect on *yawm 'Arafat*, the Day of Arafat. And then Mahmutović invited the Mufti of Sarajevo, Husein ef. Smajić, to be our imam for *sabah* prayers.

## *The scorching sun of Arafat*

I remember thinking, at Arafat, that deserts like oceans of sand, endless seas joined by oceans of water, chill expanses like oceans set in ice and snow, fertile plains and rain forests like oceans of greenery, mountain ranges and peaks like the spine of the earth – this is what forms most of our planet earth.

The plain of Arafat is an upland plain, all sandy desert, surrounded by what must be the most awe-inspiringly ash-en-grey, bare mountain slopes. Nothing grows there except for the trees planted to the order of latter-day Saudi kings (may God reward them for it). These trees have to be kept constantly irrigated; I looked at ten or a dozen of them, and

saw that there is a small pipe beside each one from which life-giving water drips steadily. I can see no reason for not concluding, without checking each one, that the other thousand or more trees is each fed by its own artificial spring.

But when the sun of Arafat reaches its height, even the foliage of those Jerusalem thorn trees, also known as Christ's thorn, is powerless to resist. I say Jerusalem thorn, but perhaps they are some related species. I doubt if there is any tree tall enough, and with a sufficiently dense canopy, to block out the burning, scorching sun of Arafat. This is why it is so easy, at Arafat, to understand the Qur'anic and hadith allusions and narratives about cooling shade, especially on the Day of Judgment.

## *A sea of pilgrims between the mountains*

As I said just now, the plain of Arafat is surrounded by awe-inspiring bare mountains. Never have I seen such formidable mountains and hills. Mount Arafat resembles Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Torah. Sinai is a place where Sufis, hermits, anchorites, ascetes and the pious go to be nearer to God. They say that up there, the body is hushed and the spirit strengthened. It is much the same on Mount Arafat.

The hills of Arafat are huge, and we at their feet, and below in the plain, are so insignificant, like white feathers blown in by the wind. We are called upon there to remember the sacred principles of our faith, and the final revelation of the

Qur'an that took place on this very spot in 632 AD. I repeat, Mount Arafat is awe-inspiring, and its majestic hills looked down unblinkingly on our white sea of pilgrims. It was as if those great hills were the earth's own birth pangs; as though the earth had been carrying a huge burden in its fathomless tectonic deeps, and had ejected it with a great sigh of relief.

I have read about the mountains around Mecca, Tihama, and Mount Arafat. It is said that they are volcanic mountains, created when molten lava broke through and

solidified into igneous stone, to create this unique variant on the desert theme. I repeat, these are the most horrifying mountains, black and ashen grey shading to the illusion of brown and muted yellow. The sun scorches the hills and the sand at their feet, and the hills above us and the sand beneath our feet scorches us.

Luckily, the standing at Arafat is only for one day, and then we return once again to the oasis of life, to Mecca and the sweet potable waters of Zamzam. Another piece of good fortune is that our asbestos tents are thick, and are ivory in colour, so reflecting back at least some of the scorching rays of the sun. And there is abundant water available, to refresh the parched senses.

Refreshment comes at Arafat in the form of prayers and supplications, too. You remember your loved ones, living and dead, and then yourselves. I remembered former generations of pilgrims who spent a day there on the eve of Eid al-adha. Muhammad himself, the Messenger of God, and his Noble Companions were once here, and after them the great scholars of Islam from times long past and more recent: al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, as-Suyuti and others all, in their time, prayed here on this burning sand.

Here too was my late father Emin effendi, in 1979, with his bosom friend the late Ramo effendi Dautović. As it happens, I was on the hajj with Ramo's sons, Ferid effendi and Muharem effendi.

This world is so ephemeral, and how easy it is to reflect on its transience, there on Mount Arafat.

## *Qasidas, ilahiyas, maulids, dhikr, du'as.*

Once day had broken, I moved some distance away from our Arafat abode and saw that national flags were flying above many of the tent encampments. The Turkish flag had been planted on a kind of raised observation point.

As noon approached, I heard from almost every encampment that there was to be some special programme, national programmes of some kind in anticipation of Eid the following day. One could hear the Qur'an being recited in various ways, followed by qasidas, ilahiyas, maulids, dhikr and du'as – and then the takbir: God is great, God is great!

## *Whirls of desert dust whipped up by the wind*

But why does one spend almost twenty-four hours at Arafat; and why does one then descend into Muzdelifa and Mina? And why is it all done in a great procession, a Muslim procession of almost four million people?

The answer may go something like this: everything you see presents to the eye a vivid image of an ocean that decided to become a great river and to flow down, down, back to its confluence, at the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca,

But why Mount Arafat? It is hard to explain the sacred by the rational, but I can at least share one of my ideas. The desert and its sands have always been, for the Semites, the great expanses between their oases and their cities; in short, be-

tween this world, between our familiar human homelands, and what is remote from us, the world of the unknown, the world beyond, the world of the unattainable.

The Arabic language has dozens of synonyms (which are perhaps not exactly synonymous) for sand and the desert, rather as the Eskimos have dozens of words for the different types of snow. Poets of the East, be they Arab, Jewish, Persian, Indian or Berber, have sung since time immemorial of the whirls of desert dust whipped up by the wind.

The eternal Divine Revelation, the Qur'an, presents us with an imperishable metaphor of the sand-dunes of the desert (see sura *al-Ahkaf*, the Sand-Dunes, XLVI). The invisible winds snatch up the visible sand, and this encounter of the Visible and the Invisible creates a new pattern of sand-dunes. The Creator thus gives this world – is it always the same world? – a new face and new features, a new obverse and reverse, with new veils, eternally creating it.

Commentaries on the Qur'an say that the Qur'anic metaphor of the sand-dunes conceals, or rather reveals, a message telling us that God settles human civilization throughout the expanses of this earth; and indeed, there are ruins and the remains of cities all around us. When we see them, it is as if we are seeing some amazing work of the human hand written in the sand in dunes.

These endless desert sands remind one that the same thing returns again and again, incessantly repeated, and of our own journey from the dust, clay and sand of this earth

to the wonderful being on whom was bestowed the fairest stature, as the Qur'an says.

How many generations of hajjis have come to Arafat under the veils of night, spent the day there and then, as the next night fell, returned to Muzdalifah and Mina and then to the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca before going back home, dying and leaving no trace but those of their good deeds. For good deeds are eternal, as God says in the Qur'an (sura *al-Kahf*, The Cave, 46).

One is on Mount Arafat for such a short time. One's stay there is a symbol of our brief, ephemeral life in this world, but also a symbol of our awakening in the Next World.

## *Pebbles for stoning Satan*

We left Arafat for Muzdalifah and Mina in the early hours of 19 December, just before dawn on the day of Eid al-Adha. We waited and waited, then hoped that the buses would come, and then waited again. Patience now, patience.

What a creature is man! A few hours ago we were at prayer, *salah*, aglow with *du'as* and with our Bosnian *mevlud* lead by hafiz Ismet effendi Spahić, deputy Reis ul-Ulema, and Shaikh Sirija Hadžimejlić. And now, as we wait for the buses, almost all of us are downcast, as if in a crucial battle for our sheer survival (these are the sea changes that befall the ordinary hajji during the pilgrimage).

Finally, after a wait of three or four hours, the buses arrived. We soon reached Muzdalifah, lit by thousands of floodlights, and began to collect the pebbles used to stone the Devil. Up there, at Arafat, we were among the great bare hills surrounding the plain; and now, at Muzdalifah, we are picking up pebbles.

We collected them up, counting them carefully – one needs 49 of them, seven pebbles to be thrown each day seven times for three days, and stowed them in the folds of our ihram, in bags, or in the empty bottles from which we had drained all the water on that thirsty day on Arafat.

After combining maghrib and isha prayers, the sunset and night prayers, we set off before dawn from Muzdalifah, heading for Mina, where the stoning of Satan takes place.

Ahead of us were Mina and Jamrat, and beyond, the Haram ash-Sharif. We should visit it again after this, and perform the seven circumambulations twice more.

### *Post Scriptum I*

The bridges at Mina, or more exactly at Jamrat, are magnificent, wide structures with several storeys. It is there that over the next few days Satan is stoned. In the midst of the complex of bridges are three pillars, no longer surrounded by a crush of people of the kind that killed hundreds of hajjis just a few years ago. If one wants to, one can avoid the crowds; all it needs is the exercise of *ijtihad* or effective, constructive or reconstructive thought, and build what one's practical reason decrees. Why should the rituals of the faith be a torment? What is the point of visiting a sacred site if it brings us to the verge of death? Is not Islam the encounter between man and God, the Bestower of life and joy?

### *Post Scriptum II*

I watched from a distance of about fifty metres all those white, black, red, yellow and sunburned pilgrim hands getting into their stride, as it were, and with thousands of movements throwing the pebbles at the stone pillars. That is how the temptations of Satan are stoned, with a surreal sound almost like that of wrought iron.

### *Post Scriptum III*

Well-built Saudi policemen and soldiers, completely unarmed, stand on the bridges of Mina and at Jamrat. They were not only well-built and tall, but also in immaculate uniforms, like NATO troops. I observed that they were speaking several languages, and that there were loudspeakers all around, through which they were issuing quiet instructions to the pilgrims in Arabic, English, Turkish, Persian, Urdu and other languages.

# MEETINGS

## *A meeting of many pieties*

The hajj is memorable for its intensity and diversity of meetings: people with themselves, people and places, people and sanctity, people and sights, people and what they have brought with them from remote places, from the four quarters of the earth, in their faces. Your own piety meets that of others.

The hajj is an intensive encounter with the feelings and emotions of the human race as members of one planet. It is thus also coming face to face with the multitude of feelings and experiences of this great religious scene, this encounter with the original homelands of the Divine message. It all takes place amidst grandiose spectacles reaching as far as the eye can see, under the auspices of the rituals and ceremonials of seeing these holy places and sacred abodes of faith: the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, the Ka'bah in its black mantle, the Prophet's Mosque, Rawda the Pure, Mount Uhud, Mount Arafat, the Muzdalifah and Mina valleys, and more.

It is astonishing how many encounters, some commonplace, but others surprising and precious, you experience

while on hajj. And some take place even before you set off, others during the outward or the return journey.

## Iqrar-du'a *at the Faculty of Islamic Studies*

I recall two meetings here in Sarajevo before we left for the hajj, both of them now precious memories. The first was on Thursday 29 November 2007, and was organized by Prof. Ismet Bušatlić, Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies (the Dean's proposal that I perform the hajj had been accepted at the session of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community held on 1 November). Others who had already applied to go on hajj included our assistants Mujesira Zimić-Gljiva and Zehra Alispahić. We held *iqrar du'a* in the mosque of the Faculty of Islamic Studies for the five of us (Zehra, Mujesira and her husband Hasib, myself and my wife Ajša). The *iqrar du'a* was recited for us by Dr. Hafiz Fadil effendi Fazlić, professor of the discipline of *qira'ah*, the recital of the Qur'an. Afterwards, everyone congratulated us, and Dean Bušatlić handed us gifts (may Almighty God reward him, may he live to a healthy and happy old age with his wife and children, and many grandchildren).

The next meeting was on 5 December 2007 in the Panorama Restaurant, the day before our flight to Medina al-Munawwarah, Medina the Radiant. Bogić Bogićević had invited Hilmo Neimarlija, Sabahudin Hodžić and me to lunch. The reason was rather unusual: he had heard that Sabahudin and I were going on hajj, and wanted to wish us a safe journey.

After lunch Bogićević gave Sabahudin and me an envelope each, containing a hundred US dollars (brand new notes, hot off the press). Smiling, he said it was for our long journey, so we could buy ourselves tea and coffee. He had also written a page for each of us from the passage in the Qur'an about the hajj, in translation, and put them in the envelopes, to remind us to do everything required of us in those holy places, and to make no mistakes.

May God reward Bogićević with good health, happiness and *rahatluk* – peace of mind – along with all his family.

## *The sound of the Qur'an from a Nokia mobile phone*

Then, in Medina and Mecca, amid those human galaxies, it was the turn of more commonplace and out-of-the-ordinary meetings, long to be remembered. On 8 December, just before noon prayers in the Prophet's Mosque, I met an elegant hajji from Egypt who told me his name was Mushir Hassan Ubayd, and that he was a colonel (*'aqid*) and engineer. He was very emphatic about this, repeating it twice as he told me his name. As always before prayers, like almost every other hajji from Europe, I looked for a place in the shade, where I would have plenty of room. In those rivers, those oceans of hajjis, I heard someone reciting the Qur'an in the Cairo style, melodiously, like a heavenly symphony. I turned to see who it was, and almost immediately came upon hajji

Mushir – who was not reciting the Qur'an, but listening to its harmonies on his mobile, which he had laid on the rug in front of him. It was one of those folding Nokias with a good sound system.

As we exchanged a few standard phrases – "Where are you from?" "Egypt. And you?" "From Bosnia." "Well, God be praised, how nice that we have met in the Prophet's mosque." "Certainly." – he pressed a button on his mobile to silence it, then turned it on again.

I listened to the recitation of the Qur'an again; I do not know who the *qari'*, the reciter, was, but I do know it was one of the finest recitations I have ever heard. Afterwards we talked again for a while, and he told me he was good with computers.

After evening prayers in the Prophet's Mosque that same day, 8 December, I met a Pakistani. I could see he wanted to ask me something – he was making his way towards me, and I slowed down. "Where are you from?" "Bosnia. And you?" "From Lahore, Pakistan."

"You must have visited the tomb of Muhammad Iqbal," I said. "Yes, countless times," he replied.

"We in Bosnia are going to mark the seventieth anniversary of Iqbal's death next year, 2008. And we published his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* in translation a long time ago."

The Pakistani from Lahore was an educated man, and was delighted to learn that we in Bosnia know about the poet Iqbal.

## *A hajji from Kashmir rescues a cricket*

After dawn prayers on 9 December, I met a Kashmiri (or I imagine he was from Kashmir) coming out of the Prophet's Mosque, moving slowly in the crowd, and then bending down to pick something up from the marble paving. I thought he must have dropped something he was carrying,

or that something had fallen out of his pocket. But when he stood up again, I saw that he had picked up an injured cricket, which he placed on the railing. And I then saw that the cricket was about to take flight.

I wondered why he had bothered to pick it up when there were hundreds of squashed crickets under our pilgrim feet. But there, the Kashmiri had rescued that one cricket, which flew off into the sky.

That too was a meeting that gave me pleasure.

### *Beautiful Iraqi women in the Qubba Mosque*

On 9 December we visited the Qubba Mosque in Medina. How it happened I do not know, but Ahmed Khattab, Egypt's ambassador in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I strayed into the women's area of the spacious courtyard, and found ourselves faced with a group of beautiful Iraqi women, who said loudly:

"Can't you see where you are? This is the women's area. What are you doing here?"

We apologised: "Sorry, we didn't know. There's such a crowd, anyone can make a mistake."

But one of these handsome Iraqi women insisted we leave right away. And leave we did, shamefacedly.

I told Ambassador Khattab that I wished these Muslim women could say what they think in their parliaments, and not only in the sections of mosque courtyards and prayer halls reserved for them to pray in.

## *A banker from Egypt*

In the evening of 15 December, at *'isha'* (night) prayer time, I was in the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, and chanced to meet a banker from Egypt who said his name was Ahmad Abdul Majid. I asked him how things were in Egypt, and he said the upper class was doing very well, but the people were not. He asked me about Bosnia, and I said that Bosnia was on the way to joining the European Union, which we were looking forward to, but Ahmad Abdul Majid asked me: "Will you pay for being in the European Union?"

"I don't know," I replied, and went on to say that I had the impression Turkey was making progress, but he said:

"We have to see if the villages and the ordinary people are making progress."

To my right was one Mujibur Rahman from Bangladesh, who joined in, telling us that the official number of hajjis from his country was more than 45,000.

## *Meetings happen so one is not alone*

Many more meetings followed, becoming part of your precious memories of the hajj. One meets innumerable people at prayer times, at *tawaf* (the circumambulation), while listening, looking, remaining silent and deep in thought. But they are not just one's own meetings; they belong to others, to the people around one, as well. Perhaps it would be better

to say that everyone joins those meetings, in that unprecedently vast crowd of people, as if in some huge space packed with men and women all there to bear witness to God, Who is so Near and yet Invisible, Present in His Names in hundreds of different languages on the lips of all these pilgrims, and in those pilgrim hearts, all aquiver.

One is both onlooker and participant in all of this, at the centre of one's own attention and of the entire spectacle of the hajj. One is within reach of the Prophet's Tomb, and with luck one might find oneself next to the Ka'bah at some point, close enough to touch its black mantle.

And yet all those feelings, that piety, the rituals of the pilgrimage, all takes on a certain form and personality among those millions of people, those millions of bipeds standing erect, milling around one, with one, in circles and ellipses and great cloud-like masses.

And one realizes, for the umpteenth time, that there have to be meetings, for it is impossible, unthinkable, to be alone in the Prophet's Mosque or the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca. This encounter with the approaching human oceans, seething and pulsing – that is the magnificent encounter brought about by the insurpassable scene of the hajj, with its people, its men and women, as its finest adornment.

As I have said several times already, everywhere one sees light, faces glowing with joy and good cheer, gazing ahead as if at hope.

## *The poor, beggars, paupers, cripples*

But there are also painful encounters and sad sights on the hajj. First, there are the encounters with the poor – and there are no great places of worship without poor people. Their colonnades and courtyards, their iwans and pavilions are places of hope for beggars and the poor. Every religion has its wailing wall. Paupers, the needy, the impoverished, the lame, the crippled – they converge on sacred places in their thousands, hoping to meet tender hearts and open hands, reckoning that sacred places touch the souls of the beneficent.

Islam's greatest shrines, the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, are a meeting place for poor people from all over the world. I wondered how these beggars, paupers and cripples managed to get there in

such numbers. It is hard to give a reliable answer. When one enters modern Saudi Arabia, there are all kinds of checks and controls; one's leaders and guides keep an eye on one, of course, and then there are the thorough checks by the Saudi police and authorities as well. But the poor get there somehow, Allah alone knows how. Perhaps these poor men and women have simply stayed on since last year's hajj, or the year before, or before that even. Or perhaps they come back again, from the great deserts of Arabia and elsewhere and the poor urban quarters of the Middle East.

Be that as it may, all those beggars, paupers, cripples, women and children come with hope in their hearts and hands outstretched, if they have hands, or their legs, if they have any. Dear Lord! The worst is when they raise their eyes to look at one, if they have eyes, and beg for alms, in a variety of languages. But one needs no translation, one knows what they want; one hears heartfelt prayers and mention of Allah, the word most often spoken in Mecca and Medina.

## *Beggars from the war zones of the Muslim ummah*

There are different beggars and paupers, however; they are not all the same. Several times, between 8 and 12 December, I and my little coterie of Bosnians were approached in the north portico of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina by people wearing, not the usual beggar's rags, but long, well-cared-for cloaks. One of them told us, in pure Arabic, that he was a

war casualty from Afghanistan, with no family anywhere, so he had come to Medina, and there he was, as we could see. He had to survive, but he had nothing. We gave him about ten riyals. In next to no time another, similar beggar approached us, saying he was a casualty from Chechnya. His story was almost identical; another war, another tragedy, but the same tale.

This happened several times. As they spoke, we recognized the names of places for which there is widespread Muslim sympathy. I also noted, and record now, that while I was on the hajj not one beggar, man or woman, who approached me said that they were from war zones affected by inter-Muslim skirmishes or conflicts.

## *Lashed by the gaze of poor children*

Particularly saddening are the beggars with several children. I recall, at Arafat, which we had reached before dawn prayers, when day broke a number of women, all in black, accompanied by children, descended upon us. Hasib effendi Kapo asked them nicely to leave and take the children with them; they had already received *sadaqa*, alms, and enough is enough. But the beggarwomen again came into the wide pavilions of the tents to beg; they were everywhere, aggresive and practised at begging.

Others came in, though, who were quiet and modest, and had several skinny children with them. I remember

their begging eyes, their sad but acute gaze. Dear God! One is lashed by the gaze of those children, those little girls. One goes in fear of hell and damnation if one does not give them alms.

I recall to this day that concentration of pain and suffering; one cannot fake the signs of such misery, but I am not sure I would accept this explanation. I averted my eyes, following the advice given me in 2002 in Qom, where an Iranian scholar told me never to look a stranger in the eye; always look down. I was glad of the advice. Even the little that I retain from those fleeting moments when I met their eyes is a sufficiently painful memory.

Cripples, the lame and the indigent are everywhere, from Jamrat where the pilgrims stone the Devil to the first buildings and quarters of Mecca. But beggars approach you even in the lobbies of luxury hotels, or in department stores. On 16 December, I recall, Ajša and I, Zehra Alispahić and Muhamed Delalić took fried fish sandwiches in the Hilton Hotel, found an out-of-the-way place to sit, and ate. We wanted to throw the leftovers into a nearby container, but a well-dressed hajji came up to us and asked us not to throw the food away. He sat down beside us and ate everything. He was of decent appearance, spoke Arabic, and said he was from Nigeria; his name was Abu Bakr. He ate slowly, like a Murabit or Sanussi dervish. He told us he had come all the way from Nigeria by truck. We gave him some small change, something over ten Euros, with which he was delighted.

## *Draw near, O My servants!*

Encounters, encounters, encounters... Some are uplifting, filling one with joy, others make one sad. Luckily, there are fewer of the second kind. But then I remember that the hajj is not a review of the select, not a competition for the rich and the bourgeoisie; it is not a ceremonial that only the chosen few can attend. The hajj is a true sample of Muslim humanity, put together at random, a spontaneous presence, so that one may meet fellow hajjis in joy.

May I then take the liberty of saying that the Islamic pilgrimage, the hajj, with all its rituals, prayers, circumambulations and standings, with all its vibrations and movements, is a barely visible shadow of the Creator, a veil woven and interwoven of millions of people, who form its warf and weft, and who have come there, to Mecca and Medina, to spend two or three weeks there and to bear witness to the One Who is beyond that veil, the Visible and the Invisible, the First and the Last, the Eternal Creator for Whose sake one embarks on that long Journey.

I shall never forget that that great concentration of humanity, millions of people performing the hajj, determines the purport and significance of all those encounters, including those that are not with people: the encounter with the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Mount Uhud, Mount Arafat, the valleys of Muzdalifah and Mina, and so on.

One finds oneself in the midst of a nearness, an intimacy that takes up its abode in one's breast and settles in one's

heart; it is there, within reach, before one's very eyes, and yet remains ultimately unattainable, unpredictable, intangible, inexhaustible. There are, however, two encounters that are more profound, powerful and impressive than all the others. While in Medina, the elegant Prophet's Mosque is within one's reach, its gateways wide open, and through its windows flows the cry of welcome from the Divine, showering upon the heads of the pilgrims: Draw near, O My servants! The other is with the Ka'bah. The people circumambulating the Ka'bah suddenly, when the *adhaan* is heard, turn into a series of concentric circles facing it that form at every prayer time. It is as if time stands still; as if a huge rose with hundreds of thousands of petals around a black pointil, the black tulip of the Ka'bah, were unfurling. Men and women kneel, then sit, and the Ka'bah suddenly seems bigger, emerging from the sea of human piety that bathes it, forming the centre of attention, a focal point, a nest, a sanctuary – both Source and Confluence at the same time.

## *The words of the Qur'an descend on hafiz Malkić from the furthermost heavens*

We hajjis from Bosnia and Herzegovina had our own meetings on two occasions. Both in Medina and in Arafat, we organized a *mevlud*, and in Medina I held a *waz,* a lecture. Hafiz Mensur Malkić always recites the Qur'an beautifully. But when I heard him in Medina, and again at Arafat, I

wrote: Here the words of the Qur'an descend on hafiz Malkić from the furthermost heavens.

### *Unknown star, we have come from afar*

I have already noted so many times in these pages, on various occasions, that time and again on the hajj I saw all around, day and night, at prayer times and between, those faces of good cheer, all different, in waves, in groups, in rows.

At Jamrat, at Mina, everywhere I looked, I saw great rocky outcrops, or huge bare walls of stone and karst that the sea, perhaps, left high and dry eons ago, and I saw too fearsome precipices on either side of the great complex of bridges. And there, on those hills and mountains, I saw clusters of pilgrims

putting up modest little tents, and everything turned white, like the swans in the Bosnian ballad of Hasanaginica.

It was as though the pilgrims wanted their presence to turn all those rocky wastes into a sanctuary. They wanted to encounter the clear Mecca night skies, to see some unknown, unrecognized star; it was as if they were saying, during those nights: Unknown star, we have come from afar to se you from these sacred places.

After returning from the hajj to my beloved Bosnia and Herzegovina, clad in the snows of December, for several nights I dreamed of that kaleidoscope of pilgrim faces, as if in a blur. A myriad images succeeded one another in a sublime whirlpool of memories turned to dreams.

For several nights in a row I found myself, in my dreams, amidst the mass of humanity that had constantly been before my waking eyes during those wonderful days of the hajj, when in the delight of the waking state I looked at the Ka'bah, silent in its central position, clad in its mysterious black mantle, a perfect geometric cube of a building.

At times, half dreaming, I see that endless human presence moving between those rocky hills.

### *Post Scriptum I*

There was one meeting, on 6 December, that affected me painfully. It was in the aircraft, after taking off from Sarajevo for the flight to Medina.

In the aircraft, Ajša greeted another lady warmly, talked with her, and asked after her health. Ajša then told me that

the lady was called Dika Kurtagić, that she was a midwife, and that she had met her in the maternity hospital in the summer of 1995, just after the fall of Srebrenica. It brought it all back to mind: there, in besieged Sarajevo, in tragic circumstances, our son died at birth in the maternity hospital. Ajša herself barely survived the operation.

But life goes on, as I was reminded when the pilot told us in Arabic that we were flying over Greece, approaching Athens, and would then overfly Rhodes, heading for Sinai and Egypt and, finally, Medina the Radiant. It would be less than another three hours' flight to Medina.

### *Post Scriptum II*

On our return from the hajj, I told Professor Dr Omer Nakičević about Bogić Bogićević's gift before we left for the hajj. Professor Nakičević told me a story about a delightful event. During the time of the old Yugoslavia, one of the Hadžibajrić's of Sarajevo went on hajj. In those days the journey was via Jerusalem, and while he was in Jerusalem he asked where the Orthodox church was, went in, and obtained a certificate of his having performed the pilgrimage for one of his friends, a Serbian Orthodox neighbour in Sarajevo, whose shop was close to his own. When our Hadžibajrić came back from the hajj, he took the Jerusalem certificate to his Orthodox neighbour, and a ceremony was held to mark the performance of the Orthodox pilgrimage.

# A FEW SKETCHES

## *"Getting into the Qur'an" between Bosnia and Medina'*

In Medina, on 8 December, I met Izet Mušanović, a Centrotrans bus driver originally from Foča. He was an interesting man, who had learned the Qur'anic script on the journey from Bosnia to Medina, taught by Vehbija effendi Makić – he had "got into the Qur'an" during that strange six-day training course. Carefully, from the moment of leaving Bosnia, the driver Mušanović memorized the letters, one by one, coached by imam Makić, the lessons taking place at each overnight stop. Sometimes, too, he would check his pronunciation of the Qur'anic text on the way, in the afternoon, while the other hajjis were dozing and the bus ate up the kilometres. Later, Vehbija effendi Makić told me that the way back to Bosnia, Mušanović had begun his first *khatma*, a complete reading of the Qur'an, in Damascus, and that he had finished it in two months.

## *Refugees paid for his hajj*

On 15 December I was in Mecca with some of our hajjis, among them Sulejman effendi Čeliković and hajji Muharem Kruško. Hajji Kruško treated us to a delicious meal in a local restaurant. Also with us was Mulo Gračo, a hajji from Zenica born in 1934. He told us an interesting story. In 1992, he was preparing to perform the hajj, after having spent a long time saving the money out of his earnings, and in 1992 he had finally saved enough to perform the hajj, the fifth pillar of the faith in Islam. But then the war broke out, and his house was full of refugees, whom he helped selflessly. All the money he had saved for the hajj was spent.

But God helps good intentions to come true, some time or another. The war came to an end in late 1995, the refugees went back home, and many of them found jobs. More than ten years later they remembered their benefactor, Mulo Gračo, and decided to thank him by sending him on the hajj. In Mecca I asked hajji Salih Smajlović, a journalist with *Preporod*, to write a piece about this, and it is with great pleasure that I do the same in this small book.

## *Bosnian* **mevlud** *in the heart of Medina*

In the evening of 9 December, in Medina, the leadership of our Bosnian hajjis invited us to a *mevlud* (the mawlid) celebration.

We were a considerable crowd, men and women, in an unfinished section of our hotel, the Elyas, not far from the beautiful Prophet's Mosque, and about seven hundred metres fronm the Prophet's tomb. It is a long time since an official *mevlud* celebration has been held in Medina.

I want to record this Bosnian *mevlud*, because it was something precious to me, reminding me afresh that the universality of a faith is especially visible when it has a diversity of local expressions. And the Bosnian *mevlud* is one such, an example of how Islam is translated from a universal message into the specific features of remote places.

Many of us spoke: hafiz Ismet effendi Spahić, deputy reisu l-ulema, Razim effendi. Čolić, Bosnia's ambassador in Riyadh, Mirsad effendi Mahmutović, Sulejman effendi Čeliković, and Mufti Nusret effendi Abdibegović. Hafiz Mensur effendi Malkić recited the Qur'an most beautifully, and sang some *ilahiyas* with the young people.

The *mevlud* began in the customary Bosnian manner, and then there was a wonderful *dhikr*, with Sheikh Sirija Hadžimejlić and his dervishes giving the whole event a particular flavour.

I also spoke briefly at our Bosnian *mevlud*. I remarked that this religious of ours, Islam, has spread throughout the world, to every human race – black, white, yellow – and that it had done so in all time zones, saying that Muslims today speak just about every language of the major linguistic families. I believed, I told my companions, that we must preserve our Bosnian Islamic tradition, with its flavour of the village

and the mahala, where faith is felt as honouring God, as an ancient obligation, but also as a ceremonial custom; and where we therefore hear Islam as a faith of which we sing in our pious *mevlud* songs.

I said all that in Medina, and now I recall the sequences of the *mevlud* in the Prophet's own city, where I felt the sublimity of the scene as a transient celebration and, in a way, as sublime sorrow and grief. As hafiz Mensur Malkić's enchanting voice recited the Qur'an, following by ilahiyas and qasidas, I wrote this note: There is part of Islam, a twentieth part at least, that Muslims themselves create over the centuries. Is it blasphemous to say? I do not think so. The songs and verses of the *mevlud* that many Bosnian poets have sung are also a kind of creation of Islam, spreading Islam, in an élan that has helped Muslims greatly whenever it has been present. Blessed are all those who have spread Islam along the earth's peaceful paths, and those who spread it with pious songs.

Another memory from the Bosnian *mevlud* in Medina is this: as I spoke, I observed ten or a dozen Bosnian students studying in Medina, and saw that they had unusually long, conspicuous beards. They were listening to what I was saying as if their minds were wandering. It was not until the following day that I had proof that much of what I had said had touched their hearts. Those Bosnian students of ours pursuing their education in Medina invited me to their own ceremonial, held in the same room, and gave me several volumes of Ibn Taymiyyah's works. They also gave me some delicious ambergris perfume.

## *Zehra and the Yemeni shopkeeper*

I recorded this incident on 22 December. Zehra Alispahić was buying herself a watch as a memento of Mecca, in a shop run by a stylish Yemeni in the pavilions of the Hilton Hotel. There was everything there – gold, gems, platinum, pearls; necklaces, bracelets, earrings, pendants; and everything in that Yemeni shop was gleaming and sparkling with wealth, in all the colours of the rainbow. First Zehra wanted this watch, then that one, and then changed her mind again. Then she said she liked a bracelet; but went off that too, and in fluent Arabic asked the Yemeni to show her another watch, the one to the left behind glass. Now it turned out that this was rather an expensive watch. And so it went on, all in Arabic – I'd like this one, no, not that one, I like this one, my word you are expensive, it's the time of hajj, why haven't you reduced your prices? I was observing all this with my wife Ajša as we drank the coffee they treated us to in the shop.

And then I saw a Yemeni, a young man about Zehra's age, taking down at least fifteen women's watches from a shelf, and handing them to her one by one, and hajji Zehra trying out all those watch straps, the Yemeni helping her, adjusting them to fit Zehra's wrist. I could see that the Yemeni was beaming with delight as he looked at hajji Zehra's white hand, doing up the watch strap; his eyes looked like Tom's in the Tom and Jerry cartoons, when he sees a tasty titbit.

Ajša got up and said to Zehra: "Buy away, go on, haggle away! It's time to go to another shop. And it's almost time for *'asr* prayers."

## *The battle of the hotels and the hills*

In Mecca the air is light and dry, the rays of the sun seem bright, by day the skies are clear, and the hills seem to have been newly created, as though washed clean after waking from sleep. In the valleys between the hills in the suburbs of Mecca, hotels are springing up everywhere. Wherever you look, concrete structures are going up, surrounded by giant cranes and the sound of drills biting into rock, with great lorries carrying away the spoil. If you happen to be in that part of Mecca, the dust almost blots out the clear blue sky.

Whenever I had to wait for one of those minibuses, trucks or taxis to take me into the centre, I would watch that relentless battle between the hotels and the hills. There was constant tension, as if they were in a wrestling match.

Where, a year or two ago, a hill had been removed to make way for three hotels, just beyond those new hotels were another two hills, but also the need for more hotels, and so ad infinitum in this battle of the hotels and the hills. Dear Lord, how far can it go?

Over there, too, close to the Haram ash-Sharif in Mecca, huge hotels and business centres are going up. I was particularly struck by two immense skyscrapers, as if this were Manhattan, not the Arabian Hijaz. When one stands by those awe-inspiring skyscrapers, one feels as though one is at the huge feet of two Cyclops, two colossi. But I noticed that the cranes were still taller than the hotels. And I remembered an Arabic saying: men build that they may demolish, and work that they may spend. And so on, in an incessant round.

## *Put to the test at Arafat*

The day before the departure for Arafat all the pilgrims were in a state of pious tension, wondering if they had packed some headache pills, and those pills that quickly settle the stomach, in their hand luggage; wondering, too, if they had enough water and sandwiches, or if they had forgotten their soap and towels or those refreshing wet-wipes. What about this, what about that – is everything as it should be?

All was bustle in our hotel. The Iraqi pilgrims with whom we were sharing one of the hotel pavilions let us take as much of everything as we want: sandwiches, water, soft

drinks. And then Ahmad Khattab, Egypt's ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, told us this tale. God, our Creator, put our forebear Ibrahim, peace be upon him, to the test in several ways. The Qur'an suggests that he was put to the test with his life (*bi nafsihi*), his property (*bi malihi*) and the sacrifice of his son (*bi waladihi*). His life was put to the test when the accursed ruler of Babylon, Nimrod, cast him into the fire. He was put to the test with his property when he treated his guests to a calf "tender and good." And the third time he was put to the test was when he was ordered to sacrifice his son Ismail, peace be upon him.

The trials faced by Ibrahim were immense, and so too was his patient endurance. We should all remember this when we go to Arafat, His Excellency Ahmad Khattab told us. Whatever our sacrifices on Mount Arafat, they will always be far less than those of God's prophets.

## *Patience, patience...*

We keep learning all our lives. On hajj I learned – I became profoundly aware – that patience is a great virtue; but a demanding one. On hajj one has many and diverse occasions to show one's patience and endurance; with space, with time, with oneself, with others, with the heat, with all sorts of smells pleasant and unpleasant from perfumes to halitosis and body odour.

For three days starting on 19 December we stone the Devil. We went from the outskirts of Mecca to Jamrat, and

some stretches of the journey ran past tons of garbage; we tramped over bottles, rags, old sandwich wrappers, left-over fruit. Who could have left all that litter, and in this holy valley? Could all those pilgrims whose faces, glowing with happiness, I had seen in the Prophet's Mosque, the Haram ash-Sharif, and at Arafat, have done such a thing?

There were lorries there, with men collecting up all that stuff. But they simply could not keep up with those mountains of rubbish. And I remembered a saying of Friedrich Nietzsche's: " Where the people eat and drink and worship, there is usually a stink."

Faith is also about cleanliness - "cleanliness is next to Godliness." Our belief in God came to cleanse us, to clean our hands, our steps, our intensions, our souls, our deeds. But it would seem that the pilgrims cease to care when they perform the final rituals of the hajj, of which stoning the Devil is one.

After throwing their pebbles at Satan, many hajjis begin to throw away bottles, rags, wrappers and left-over fruit, dropping them in the streets, the alleyways and under the bridges. I was saddened to see it.

## *The Bosnian halva of our lady hajji Šida*

In the afternoon of 19 December, the first day of Eid al-Adha, there was the aroma of halva in our hotel. Our lady hajji Šida Trako and her team of ladies treated us all to halva and

sherbet. Hajji Šida-hanuma told us that all the Bosnian ladies on the hajj had gone to get flour, and some had brought oil, sugar and spices. They found all they needed in next to no time in the shops in Mecca's al-Aziziya quarter.

I tucked into the halva and looked out of the hotel window, seeing a scorching hot day and the hot sun of the Arabian Hijaz. I remembered Bosnia, and our snowy Eids. For some reason, I always associate Eid with winter and the cold. The reason is that I remember Eid as a child. I was born in the 1950s, in spring, at a time when both Eids were falling closer and closer to winter, another ten days forward every year.

May the good Lord reward hajji hanuma Šida Trako for reminding us, amid the heat of Mecca, of the joys of Eid in the villages, lanes and mahalas of Bosnia.

### *Pray, and then shop till you drop!*

In Medina, on 10 December, we did the proper thing and dedicated the day to shopping. There were shops and big department stores everywhere, goods at every step of the way. And as I noted earlier, most of them seemed to be from China. Is there nothing people will not make, not sell – and not buy?

Buying and selling is turning the world into the exiguous: the whole world is multiplied into a million, a billion small things. Maybe one cannot grasp a handful of the

ocean, but one can hold a pearl from the ocean depths in the palm of one's hand. And so it is with shopping. When one buys a lovely thing, one feels as pleased as if the whole world is in one's hand. This for a grandchild, that for the daughters, things for a brother and sister, not forgetting the aunts, and of course something for oneself, as a memento of Medina the Radiant.

On and on it went for hours, in the afternoon, at night, until our heads were spinning from all that haggling, counting money, lugging heavy carrier bags. Then one looks at one's purchases at least twice – once in the shop, and again back at the hotel.

What a marvel is man! Always wondering whether one could have bought things more cheaply, or whether one left the better goods back in the shop. At time the hajj turns into a vortex, spinning from mosque to shop and back again, from prayers to shopping and back.

## *Ancient Greek statues*

I referred earlier to the *ihram*, the ritual garment of the hajj; and also noted that the *ihram* turns us for a while into something from ancient, classical times. It reminds us of the dawn of humanity, of the time before Noah and Abraham, of the expanses of time between them and Adam and his wife Eve, when there was no such thing as complicated fashions in clothing.

While I was in the *ihram* I often observed myself from chest to slippers. The bare shins show below the *ihram*, and bare feet below the shins – shod only in slippers. Under the slippers are the sandy paths, marble paving and stairways. Often one is barefoot when circumambulating the Ka'bah. At every step one is reminded of the steps taken by the noble bare feet of Muhammad himself, peace be upon him, in these seven circumambulations of the *tawaf*. And I thought that time is not behind us, it is beneath our feet.

But I also wrote this: in the Mecca valley, those thousands and thousands of men in *ihram* and thousands and thousands of women in bright abayas resemble those graceful statues carved in ancient Greece, with their long, flowing cloaks and mantles. I know that Islam does not look favourably on statues, but for all that, what I saw, in those ancient Greek statutes, was dignified, graceful garments. If the ancient Greeks had been Muslims they would have been able to pray in those clothes.

## *The cave of Hira and the lights of the Haram ash-Sharif*

I did not visit the cave of Hira, which I regret. I was too tired, and fearful of the climb up the cliff. But many of our Bosnian pilgrims did go there, in small groups. Late in the evening of 16 December, Mujesira, her husband Hasib and

their little group set off for Jabal an-Nur, the Mountain of Light. It took them much of the night, and they prayed the dawn prayer there on a small area of level ground.

Mujesira's impressions are interesting. From the entrance to the cave of Hira one can clearly see the lights of the Haram ash-Sharif. So in the years before the Qur'an was first revealed to him, in 610 AD, Muhammad, peace be upon him, guided by Divine Providence, found peace of mind and spiritual refreshment in the cave of Hira, and turned his benevolent gaze yearningly to the Haram ash-Sharif.

God's prophets have preached faith in God as culture, too. Many of them started out in caves, but led humanity to temples and cities: to faith, culture and civilization.

Mujesira told us that the path to the cave of Hira is a slow and demanding one, over dizzying crags, and once at the top one sees that a there is a sheer precipice on the other side, too. For part of the way, the path is cut with improvised steps, and there one comes upon beggars, standing or sitting there, claiming that they made the steps and charging one to use them. When they told one beggar that they would pay, but they only had a 100 riyal note, he replied: "Give me the hundred, I'll give you the change." And so he did, keeping his ten riyals or so.

Finally, the surrounding rocks are occupied by a kind of civilization of monkeys. One has to keep an eye on one's bag, one's clothing, one's camera – if a monkey gets hold of the, one is done for.

## Debeli *rahmet*

Our Bosnians certainly know how to turn Arabic words and names into something they can recognize. The Mount of Mercy at Arafat, known in Arabic as *Jabal ar-Rahmah*, is often turned into *debeli rahmet* – literally, dense or thick mercy. And I would say they have a point, because what is a true mercy there is thick shade, or absolute cool.

One of our Bosnian ladies visited Mount Uhud, where the grave of the great Muslim hero Hamza is located. When she was asked where she had been, she said: "To Spirit Mountain." She had confused the name *Uhud* with the Bosnian word *duh*, meaning ghost or spirit.

## *Looking for Ilidža at Mount Arafat*

As I have already noted, it is hot at Arafat, and the sun is scorching. But the piety is intense. One of our hajjis fell into a trance there, and came to the end of the tent pavilion, where he cried out, "Let me go!" "Where to?" they asked. "To Ilidža, Ilidža's just round the corner," he shouted. He wanted to be back in Sarajevo, at the source of the river Bosna in Ilidža, maybe the most beautiful place in Bosnia.

They managed to calm him down for a few minutes, but he sneaked out of our pavilion and wandered around Arafat. It seems he first went to some Russian hajjis, and made himself understood somehow; they helped him to come to

himself again. Then he eluded them and came upon some Albanians, who took him to a clinic. But he managed to escape from the clinic too, and was not found until later, utterly exhausted.

I shall never forget the adventure of this hajji of ours.

## *Fog over Sarajevo*

We left Mecca for the airport at Jeddah in the evening of 23 December. It was time to bid farewell to the Haram ash-Sharif. It was not until about noon on 24 December that we left Jeddah, and when our aircraft was over Sarajevo, the airport was shrouded in thick fog.

The pilot said we would be going to Split. More misery – it would mean travelling to Sarajevo from Split by bus. In Split there was a convoy of nice clean buses waiting for us. It took us almost seven hours to get to Sarajevo.

I remember that when we reached Sarajevo, the city was still wreathed in thick fog; it was bitterly cold, and fine snow was falling. We had left behind the Mediterranean warmth and sunshine of Medina and Mecca.

*Zehra Alispahić, Ajša and Enes Karić*