The Hajj: a journey into history while contemplating the future

Photos: Bilal Rauf

Bilal Rauf
State Chambers

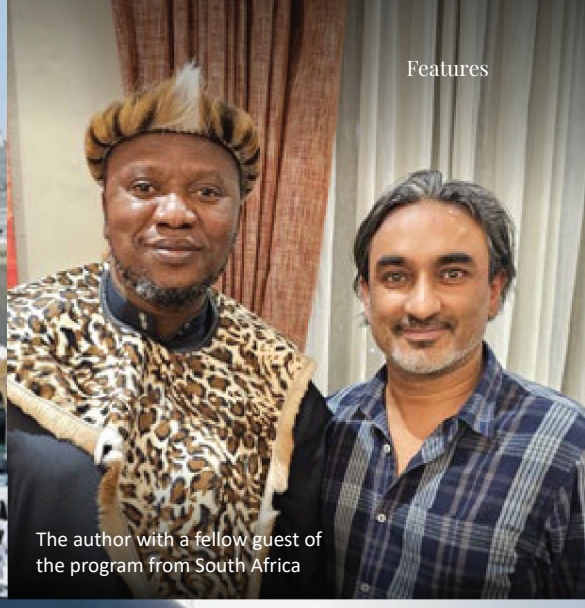
Late in the evening of 15 June 2023, I received an unexpected call from the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Australia. Four days later, I was on a flight, travelling to what is referred to as the spiritual trip of a lifetime. For my part, none of it was expected, let alone planned. It just happened. I am grateful that it did. That spiritual trip, the Hajj, is one of five pillars of the Muslim faith. (The others are belief in God, fasting, charity and prayer). 'Hajj' is an Arabic word meaning 'to intend a journey'. It connotes both the outward act of a journey and the inward act of intention. The Hajj is a sacred journey, a gathering of a spiritual community united in common cause in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Every Muslim who is able to is required to undertake the Hajj once in their lifetime.

I had little to no understanding of the rituals. I had not contemplated undertaking the journey anytime soon, but the offer was too good to refuse. Ordinarily, one applies to make the pilgrimage and one's name may be selected from a vast group via a lottery. Then there is the cost: anywhere between $15,000 and $30,000. In my case, I received an offer to attend as a guest of the Saudi Arabian King's guest Hajj program. All I had to do was turn up at the airport. So I did.

The invitation is typically extended to guests from various countries based on their community contributions. My name had been put forward by the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC), an umbrella organisation consisting of over 250 Muslim imams, clerics and scholars across the country. It represents the wider interests of Australian Muslims and regularly facilitates collaborative initiatives with other community- and faith-based organisations. I had been undertaking voluntary work for ANIC as a spokesperson and adviser since being approached around the time of the horrific murders in Christchurch, New Zealand.

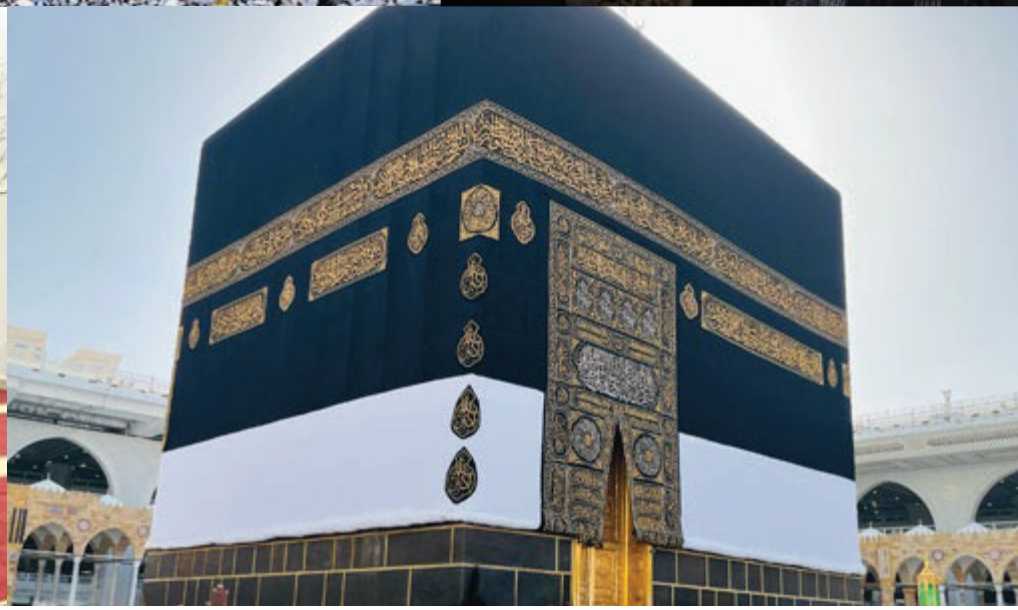
I travelled to Saudi Arabia with nine fellow Australian Muslims who had also been selected. On arrival, we mingled with the many other guests from countries across the world. We all stayed and dined together: strangers bound by threads of common purpose and friendship. Some did not speak English, yet we found a way to communicate and engage. Each day we interacted – men and women from different backgrounds, social situations and experiences: different threads woven together in the garment of humanity.

The performance of the Hajj was both challenging and transformative – challenging, because there would be more than two-million people from all parts of the world congregating in one location. The logistical and organisational requirements were feats difficult to comprehend. At times,



The author with a fellow guest of the program from South Africa

The author with a fellow guest of the program from China



it tested the bounds of one's patience – waiting, walking, searching. One had to keep one's wits.

The very factors that made it challenging also made it enriching. I have two enduring reflections. The first is an appreciation – for the first time, in my case – of the underlying symbolism in the various rituals. It has been described as a 'symbolic drama of the creation of the human being … the language of the play is movement and the principal characters are Adam, Abraham, Hagar and Satan'.[1] Some of these rituals include:

1. the circumambulation of the Kaaba: the Kaaba is understood to have been built by Abraham and his son, Ismail, when they arrived in the valley of Makkah. Like Abraham, pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times.
2. walking between two hill points, Safa and Marwa, along the path Hagar traversed while searching for water. Pilgrims repeat this walk to become like Hagar – searching.
3. throwing stones at the pillars: these pillars are manifestations of Satan tempting Abraham not to perform the divine order of God.
4. finally, the sacrifice: a sheep is sacrificed, symbolising the moment when Abraham was directed to sacrifice a sheep. This is the essence of the celebration of Eid ul-Adha.

My second reflection is on the experience of a global community, dressed in the same garb to remove outward signs of social status or difference. Everyone stands side by side as equals before God. Everyone wears an ihram, or white sheet. Everyone walks towards the same centre with the same purpose, uttering the same supplications. Suddenly, cultural and ethnic variations diminish. Worldly distinctions and ranks fade away. I met people from different corners of the world. We overcame language barriers by conversing at times with smiles and gestures. To this day, I keep contact with a number of them – people from places like Argentina, Switzerland, Ghana and China, to name but a few. So much of the Hajj was about this shared connection and a reminder of the importance of service to people and society.

Ten days later, the trip ended and I arrived back home. More than a year on, the trip is a distant memory but the experiences endure, and I am pleased to have completed the Hajj.

Closer to home, it was also a privilege to be asked to participate as a representative of the Bar at the ecumenical church service marking the bicentenary of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, held at St James Church on 16 May 2024. It was the first time I had participated in a multi-faith service. We spoke to the same ideals and aspirations. It served as a further reminder of the interconnected nature of all of us; when the veils of race, culture, language and religion are stripped away, we are all humans with similar aspirations and ideals, intent on a journey to a centre – just like the experience of the Hajj. BN

ENDNOTES

1 Ali Shariati, *Hajj: Reflections on its Rituals*, tr Laleh Bakhtiar (Kazi Publications, 1989).