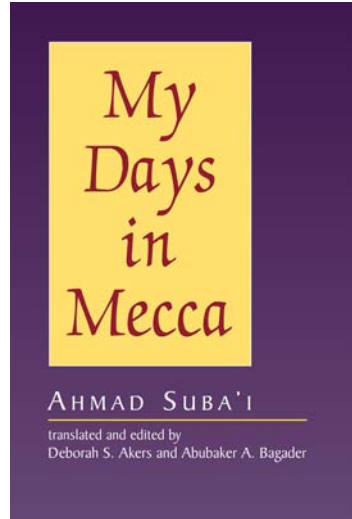


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My Days in Mecca

Ahmad Suba'i,
translated and edited by
Deborah S. Akers and Abubaker A. Bagader

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A Note on the Life and Works of Ahmad Suba'i (1905–1984)

Abubaker A. Bagader



MY DAYS IN MECCA (PUBLISHED IN ARABIC AS *MY DAYS*) is the autobiography of Ahmad Suba'i, a modern-day Saudi writer, journalist, educator, and social critic, and also one of the earliest modern Saudi historians. It offers Suba'i's story against the backdrop of the tapestry of Meccan life, rich in its descriptions of a variety of individuals and their interactions within the community, and centered around the events at the Grand Mosque. The double nature of the text as both the autobiography of a writer and the historiography of a place invites readers to approach the book at different levels.

The autobiographical material offers a glimpse into a personality deeply rooted in the soil of Mecca. Suba'i's use of the holy city as a backdrop for his life story shows his deep connection to the cultural currents of the time. During the first half of the twentieth century, Meccans saw a new beginning, as their city underwent a wave of modernization. Suba'i and the young men whom he describes in his book were among the first generation of young Saudis to receive a modern education. They were aware that, given their roles in breaking with the past and building a "new" society, and perhaps a new nation, they had a unique opportunity to constitute a force for change.

Suba'i also wrote *The History of Mecca* (1965), in which he offered a simplified modern historical narration. While many accounts of Mecca were written by local traditional historians, Suba'i's pioneering work reflected the city's distinguished character through a discussion of its political, economic, and social history. Suba'i also wrote *Mutawwifs and Hajjis* (1953) on the history of education and the affairs of *mutawwif*, the Hajj operators. In these historical narratives his real interest was contemporary life in Mecca. Through his advocacy for progress and development, he used history only to pave the way to the future of Mecca as he envisioned it as part of a modern Saudi state.

Suba'i was a pioneer in shaping public opinion. As a prominent journalist and writer, he was bold and sarcastic in his social criticism of a traditional life that he believed must give way. He was at times inflammatory in his attempts to change attitudes, opinions, and values. Writing about daily life in Saudi culture, he urged his readers to get involved in bringing about social change. Often, he knowingly offered himself as a social scapegoat. His intent was to guide young people without offending the older generation. As he mentions in *My Days in Mecca*, he served as chief editor of several Hijazi newspapers. Ultimately, he founded *Quraish*, a specialized weekly magazine in newspaper format, which provided a forum for public debate on issues of change. Suba'i established a theater, as well, which provided yet another outlet for spreading new ideas.

Suba'i was, undoubtedly, a man before his time. Given the inherent traditional conservative nature of the devout Meccan community, not all of his attempts to bring about change came to fruition. For example, despite his best efforts, he was unable to successfully promote theatrical activities within the city; the forces against him were too great.

Suba'i exemplified what it meant to be a good citizen—a person who tries to utilize all his time for the good of his soci-

ety. In his career as journalist, he was prolific on the subject of human rights. He also worked for animal rights. Disturbed by the treatment of donkeys in particular, as well as other pack animals used for transporting heavy goods, he established an organization for the humane treatment and protection of animals. Such interests made him a local personality and leader who was an integral part of the community in which he lived. I remember him stopping by my father's store in the market on his way to his office. Though he was always preoccupied with abstract intellectual ideas, he never tired of trying to reach out to the ordinary man on the street. He in fact did so with such good humor that he won over anyone who came in contact with him.

Suba'i was an educator par excellence. He carried the burden of a new vision that he felt had to be realized, a vision that was shaped by the real problems, needs, and aspirations of the youngest generation. His autobiography depicts a critical period for education in Meccan history. Prior to Suba'i's birth, the traditional *kuttab* system required students to memorize the Quran, which, when accomplished, implied an "educated" man. During Suba'i's youth, the governor, who was the sharif of Mecca, instituted the modern educational curriculum, requiring students to learn math and science, as well as the Quran. Suba'i was among the first generation of Saudi youth to go through this training. He and his classmates inevitably thought of themselves as renaissance men who would move their society forward. Upon graduation from high school, many were hired as teachers to educate the next generation.

It is important to consider the historical and cultural context in which *My Days in Mecca* was written. Suba'i describes the life of middle-class urban Meccans in the early half of the twentieth century. In the text, one can recognize the centrality of the Grand Mosque, the urban structure in the life of

Meccans, and the topography of the city. Meccans' multiethnic and sociocultural background is enhanced by the traditional folkloric fabric of the community, giving the city a vibrant and dynamic dimension. Suba'i made it clear that cultural Mecca is more important than economic and political Mecca—that is to say, that the cultural life and interests in Mecca have been the central focus of the life of Meccans.

Suba'i considered the traditional *kuttab* system backward and reactionary. When discussing education, he made it clear that he meant the word to encompass an understanding of life and politics in the city. The *kuttab* perpetuated illiteracy because it promoted rote memorization rather than reasoning and critical thinking. In Suba'i's opinion, this form of education only perpetuated despotism and unjust rule. The *kuttab* style of schooling, coupled with unchecked corporal punishment, also maintained the oppressive conditions of a traditional society and stifled any creative thought in young boys. In the autobiography, we witness the psychological damage that Suba'i himself underwent, and at the same time the making of the advocate for change that he would inevitably become. In his opinion, change required change in mentality and perspective. Therefore, rather than appropriating ready-made solutions that the Western model of education might offer, he sought change from within Saudi society, addressing the society's individualized needs. In fact, he adamantly rejected input from outside.

Within a few decades from the time that Suba'i wrote his criticism of traditional *kuttab* education in Saudi Arabia, there sprang the new, complex education system that exists today. All levels of education, from kindergarten through graduate school, are easily accessible, and are offered free to all citizens. The budgets allocated for education at all levels and types constitute the highest priority for the government. And echoes of

Suba'i's criticism and call for reform continue. The context of *My Days in Mecca* as a biography of a local pioneering elite forces us to see Mecca as the capital for change in modern Saudi Arabia, rather than, as it sometimes is portrayed, as a conservative antimodernist city. It goes hand in hand with other autobiographies written by Meccans, such as Hamzah Bogary's *The Sheltered Quarter*, which discusses the dialectics of traditional modernist discourse, and Mirdad's *My Life*, which contrasts the richness of urban and nomadic Mecca.

We hope that the reader will find Suba'i's words to be witty and full of life, as we do. We hope, too, that this book will create new familiarity with Mecca, the cradle of Islam, and that the city will become more human and real to the reader in the course of the pages that follow.