

The Making of Mohammad, Messenger of God



Star Anthony Quinn (left) with director Moustapha Akkad (right)
Star Irene Papas as Hind (at right).

"If they want to see the film, I'll show it to them. I think it will make them change their minds. If they, as true Moslems, find anything offensive, I'm willing to destroy the film.... I'll burn it."

That was the public offer made by Moustapha Akkad, director/producer of *Mohammad—Messenger of God* to the Hanafi Muslims holding hostages in Washington, D.C., in response to their demand that the film be withdrawn because it was insulting to their religion.

Akkad, himself a devout Moslem, is entirely responsible for the film, from the initial idea, through the raising of the \$17-18 million budget, to its successful completion despite innumerable difficulties and at least one major catastrophe. Now in his 40s, Akkad was born and educated in Damascus and came to California to study filmmaking and later to work—most of the time for CBS News, but on at least one major feature film under director Sam Peckinpah.

His main motivation for the undertaking was, he says, religious. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in November 1974 Akkad spoke of feeling that "people were misinformed about the essence of Islam.... This film is not intended to be the life of Mohammad, you realize. This is the ... life story of Islam as a social revolution. If people would only follow the teachings of this religion, there would never be any need for revolution.

"Islam is a very tolerant religion. It deals more with everyday life than any of the other major

religions.... Islam freed women. Why, women even led armies then! The veil came from a Babylonian tradition. It was not imposed by Islam. And social justice. Islam teaches that you have a right to call on a neighbor if you really need to. You are really responsible for your brother.

"Our point of view is very religious, very pious, very human and very ethical."

Partly because he intended the film to deal with the "nature" of Islam's prophet, but not with his life *per se*, and partly because there was a resistance in some orthodox Moslem circles to showing Mohammad on the screen (if not to making the film at all), Akkad and his screenwriter, H.A.L. Craig, decided to use the "first-person camera" (a device often used in films dealing with Christ)—the hope being that the absence of Mohammad as an active protagonist would not only quiet orthodox objections, but also emphasize the broader aspects of the conflict.

Craig, whose film credits include other "epics," soaked him-

self in Islamic history and religious literature and turned out a draft screenplay that was submitted to the prospective financial backers: the governments of Kuwait, Morocco and Libya, and a private consortium of Middle Eastern financiers. A committee of Islamic scholars from Al Azhar University (Cairo) was appointed to go over the script, page by page, working with Craig until all objections were met. It took months, but eventually a shooting script was approved, and the financing was assured.

King Hassan of Morocco, one of the film's backers, became the company's official host, and production headquarters were set up in Marrakesh in early 1974.

Akkad had by this time hired a production team consisting mainly of non-Arab heads of departments, working with and training Arab technicians in their specialized fields. For example, the recreation of 7th century Mecca, researched in detail by production designer Tambi Larsen, was accomplished by "re-

modeling" a small desert village near Marrakesh. The actual construction was done by a small crew of British carpenters, working with local artisans, who soon picked up the skills involved.

Two entire casts were assembled: one using English-speaking actors of many nationalities (American Anthony Quinn, Greek Irene Papas, Senegalese Johnny Sekka, and others) for the English-language version; and a cast of leading Arab actors for the version aimed at the world-wide Moslem audience. (There was an interesting language question here. Although the Arabic spoken today in different countries and even different regions of one country varies too greatly for easy understanding by outsiders, the classical language used in the film is understood by all Arab audiences.)

Principal photography began on April 15, 1974, and continued—despite Saharan temperatures and a broken air-conditioning system in the company's headquarters—into July. From the

start there were rumors that pressure was being exerted on King Hassan to rescind his invitation. Stories appeared in the Arab press to the effect that an infidel—in some reports, Peter O'Toole (who was not in any way involved), and in others, Anthony Quinn—was playing the role of the prophet. And there were complaints that the reconstructed Mecca in Ait Bouchent would draw pilgrims away from the real Mecca.

But there was no overt opposition. No violence of any kind. And no hostility from the villagers most closely in contact with the enterprise.

The company worked as fast as possible, under the gun of time, knowing that if filming in the giant outdoor setting, built at such cost, was not complete before King Hassan capitulated to whatever political pressure was being brought to bear, it would be almost impossible to complete the film.

On July 31, 1974, the blow fell. Two colonels from the Moroccan security force drove out to Ait Bouchent with the news that the company would have to pack up and leave Morocco.

Akkad had about one hour of edited film to show for his years of planning and months of intensive shooting—that and his faith that "it was the will of God that we continue." He showed the film to one of the other original backers—Colonel Khadafi of Libya—and in a short time the company was invited to Tripoli to complete the shooting of the film.

The two casts, the technical crews, cameras and sound equipment, props, wardrobe, vehicles and horses (specially trained for the battle sequences) had to be moved. The people could go by air, but most of the equipment had to go by land from Marrakesh to Tangiers, thence by sea through the Straits of Gibraltar. The horses were shipped by rail from Marrakesh to Algeria, through Tunisia and on to Libya—a distance of 2,200 miles.

There were, however, no facilities in Tripoli for making a major film. An abandoned tobacco warehouse was turned into a studio for filming interior scenes. But weather was not good enough for key battle scenes, so a second unit had to be dispatched to a desert community hundreds of miles to the south. Eventually the whole outfit was moved from Tripoli to the tiny town of Sebha by cargo planes from the Libyan Air Force. What amounted to a temporary city was set up for the accommodation of the company, and the Libyan army supplied nearly 5,000 soldiers for the battle scenes.

The film Akkad had first conceived in 1964 was ten years in the making. It took another three years to bring it to the screens of the U.S. It opened in Los Angeles and New York in early March and played to good houses, was closed down during the ordeal of the Hanafis' hostages, and reopened after their release. Despite press rumors of impending picket lines, there has been no boycott of the film, and it is doing well in cities with sizeable Muslim populations. A review appears on page 23 of this issue.

—Janet Stevenson

