

The British Empire and the hajj 1865-1939

Introduction

The hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam, is the largest annual gathering of people in the world for a religious purpose. But in the era of imperialism, pilgrims increasingly travelled under European regulations from homelands under non-Muslim rule in order to begin their pilgrimage. Britain, which ruled the largest number of Muslims in the world by the early twentieth century, was the most important non-Muslim power involved with the hajj. Colonial bureaucracy related to the pilgrimage began in the 1860s and evolved in complexity until decolonization in the 1950s. This paper seeks to answer **why Britain became interested in the hajj, and trace how and why British involvement in its various aspects changed over time.** These aspects include: **disease, security, pauper pilgrims, Muslims employed by the British, and interactions between Britain and the Hashemite and Saudi regimes who ruled the Hejaz after 1916.**

For an annual event of such size and importance, it is surprising the history of the hajj has not received more scholarly attention. The main works related to the colonial period are few in number, such as chapters in Sugata Bose's Hundred Horizons and Mark Harrison's Public Health in British India, and articles by William Roff, Michael Low and Michael Miller. While all are valuable, they tend to focus on disease and security issues and the hajj from India. This paper will go beyond these works by looking at as yet unexplored topics and adopting a more transnational approach, referring to other British territories such as Malaya, Egypt, Sudan and Nigeria.

This paper uses colonial records from archives in London, Durham, Delhi and Bombay. My doctoral research when completed will redress the bias in this paper towards British sources that reflect British perspectives, once translation work is complete on hajj accounts and Muslim government records in Arabic and Urdu, from Egypt and India.

First, a brief summary of the hajj itself, which has pre-Islamic origins. These rituals are: Each person walks counter-clockwise seven times around the Kaaba, the building in the centre of the Holy Mosque at Mecca; kisses the Black Stone in the corner of the Kaaba; runs back and forth between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah; drinks from the Zamzam Well; goes to the plains of Mount Arafat to stand in vigil; and throws stones in a ritual Stoning of the Devil. The pilgrims then shave their heads, perform a ritual of animal sacrifice, and celebrate the three day festival of Eid. If the spiritual experience of the hajj can be summarised, the end of Iqbal Ali Shah's 1928 pilgrimage account seems apt: "From life I need nothing more. I have been to Mecca, the cradle of my faith"¹

Hajj early nineteenth century

The pilgrimage in the early nineteenth century comprised hajj caravans patronised by Ottoman and Mughal rulers whose journeys were long with the danger of robbery; also the cost of going on hajj was prohibitive to many Muslims. Alexander

¹ p.222, Iqbal Ali Shah, *Westward to Mecca*, 1928

Ogilvie entered this milieu in 1838 as the first British consul and East India Company agent to Jeddah, a port on the Red Sea near to Mecca. Britain's concern was to promote trade between the Hejaz and India, and protect British maritime interests in the Red Sea that had increased after the occupation of Aden in 1837. The hajj was of only fleeting interest. For example, the presence of Indian destitute pilgrims in Jeddah in 1853 prompted the Consul to ask how to deal with people who were now British subjects. The response from India was unequivocal:

Government does not feel itself compelled by legal means to prevent the resort of pilgrims to the places indicated. The Governor-General's opinion is that the Government has no right to prevent any person who decide to do so from proceeding on pilgrimage²

Disease

Britain's policy of non-interference in the hajj ended because of the devastating cholera epidemic of 1865. This outbreak killed 15,000 out of 90,000 pilgrims during the course of the ritual. Through the movement of pilgrims from Asia to Arabia, the disease spread to Egypt and across to Europe.³ The deaths of nearly 200,000 people worldwide prompted the European powers to call an international sanitary conference in 1866. Delegates concluded that the disease originated in India and was spread to the Hijaz by pilgrims before it moved onto Europe. They recommended that quarantine stations should be established at Tor and Kameron Island on the northern and southern points of the Red Sea, and checks made on all pilgrim ships before they alighted in the Hijaz, to prevent a recurrence of the disease spreading to Europe. Quarantine procedures, supervised by the European powers and the Ottoman Empire, now became part of the sea-going pilgrim's experience. Fear drove European and British sanitary monitoring of the hajj, an unprecedented international public health protection measure. The transport revolution in the form of steamships had also contributed to the spread of epidemics. Ships owned by European companies could carry far greater number of pilgrims to Arabia from South and South East Asia than ever before, which increased the risk of disease. The low cost of these passages now brought the hajj within reach of many more Muslims. The pilgrim's reaction to the sanitary and quarantine measures was mostly resigned acceptance. However, within the pages of Urdu and English newspapers in India, letters and comment pieces proliferated which attacked the quarantine regime as an unwarranted interference with religious practice. This argument was given life by Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 to India after the Mutiny of 1857, which guaranteed British non-interference in indigenous religious practices.

Muslim consultation

This new governing style of caution and cooperation towards Islam in India was an attitude which was reflected in other Muslim territories such as Nigeria and Sudan which the British conquered in 1898-1902. It meant every hajj related measure,

² 5th May 1854, Secretary, Foreign Department, Government of India, to H.L. Anderson, Secretary Government of Bombay, in Political, External Affairs – A, 5/5/54, National Archives of India, Delhi.

³ p.301, F.E. Peters, *Hajj: the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and the holy places* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

whether legislation regarding pilgrim ships, pilgrim passports or measures to prevent destitute pilgrims reaching the Hejaz, was run past Muslim notables first. The colonial record is filled with hundreds of statements from these men, mostly local worthies at the district level. Often their counsel that measures were “risky” meant they were shelved. The fundamental problem was that Britain lacked legitimacy over Muslim subjects on matters of religion as she was a non-Muslim power. Especially after the shock of 1857, and in the 1880s with the Mahdi’s revolt in Sudan, Britain felt constrained in implementing anything that would prevent pilgrims going on hajj, an attitude that only dissipated in the 1920s. The Government was anxious to seek out and assuage Muslim opinion, wary of any action that would provoke a “fanatical response”.

Security

This fear of “fanaticism” extended to the hajj. Because Mecca and Medina were closed to non-Muslims, officials were prone to paranoid speculation about anti-British plots being concocted there. This attitude was not entirely based on fantasy; many jihadist leaders who were involved in anti-European uprisings in Asia and Africa began their agitation after returning from hajj. But the imaginings of officials were often without foundation. Bartle Frere of the Indian Foreign Department wrote in 1873:

The Hedjaz is the natural asylum for fanatical Moslem exiles from India who may there pass their lives in a congenial atmosphere of fanaticism

And, from Jedda Consul J. Zohrab in 1879:

Representatives from every Mussulman community affords a means without creating suspicion to exchange opinions, discuss plans, criticize the actions of European governments and form combinations to resist the supremacies of the Christian powers

After Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s exposition of Pan-Islam in the last decades of the nineteenth century, official’s similar musings often had the appellation “Pan-Islamic intrigues”. The hajj was a centre where Muslims convened away from European control; but it appears from accounts by Muslims themselves and in the colonial record that the hajj was not the hive of anti-European conspiratorial activity that some thought.

Destitute pilgrims

As the imperial gaze focused on the hajj in the 1860s and 1870s as quarantine regulations were implemented, other issues aside from plotters came to concern officials. One concern largely neglected by scholars was British attempts to stop so called pauper pilgrims from British territories. Increased sanitary surveillance of the hajj and the inoculation of pilgrims before embarking led to a concern that destitute pilgrims would be the carriers of the next epidemic. Destitutes from British territories, such as India and Nigeria, also brought shame upon British “prestige”. An 1886 report on the hajj where there were over 3000 Indian destitutes lamented:

The hardships which these people suffer and the miserable state in which they live is quite heart rending to behold... their example affords a striking instance of how faith and religious zeal will allow them to bear every variety of privation and misery in the hope of a better future thereafter

British authorities felt they had a duty to help. Various measures proposed from the 1870s to 1912 to curb pauper pilgrims were not enacted for fear of a backlash from Muslims who would construe it as interference in their religion". The issue remained intractable, to the consternation of officials who despairingly compared the situation to pilgrims from other Muslim areas under European rule such as Dutch East Indies, and within the British Empire such as Malaya; both required all pilgrims to provide money for their return passage to prevent destitution.

Muslim employees

The people who tended to formulate and suggest measures like those related to pauper pilgrims were invariably Muslim employees within the colonial bureaucracy, who were of vital importance to Britain's ability to interact with various aspects of the hajj. This has been overlooked in existing works, but the role of "Native Agent" has been analysed by James Onley in his study of the Persian Gulf Residencies. The first agent in Jedda was the Indian Dr. Abdur Razzack, who wrote the first report on the hajj for the British authorities in 1882, in which he castigated the Ottoman sanitary authorities. During Razzack's tenure as Indian Vice Consul until 1895 he scrutinised every part of the hajj experience and came up with multiple recommendations to alleviate the sufferings of pilgrims. Several of his suggestions were made into legislation and government's policy. Razzack's achievements foreshadowed the roles other Muslims played in the colonial bureaucracy. Britain would have been unable to have any involvement with the hajj were it not for Muslims such as Razzack.

Arab Revolt, Hashemites and post war

Moving forward to the First World War, British interactions with the hajj changed to serve a more explicitly political purpose of bolstering her position in the Muslim world. Ottoman entry into the war in 1914 and the beginning of the Arab Revolt by Sherif Hussein of Mecca 1916 meant the pilgrimage attracted increased British attention. As Hussein's chief supporter and paymaster, Britain thought a successful hajj would maintain Britain's image and prestige as a protector and ruler of Muslims as well as garner support for Hussein, who was unpopular across the Muslim world for rebelling against the Sultan-Caliph. Sir Reginald Wingate, Governor-General of Sudan, wrote that the hajj should be encouraged to impress upon Muslims, at least in Sudan, that the Ottoman regime "if not actually over, was on its last legs".⁴ A Government of India communiqué stressed the difficulties of wartime pilgrimage but played up its "extreme anxiety to assist the Indian Moslem community in the performance of this religious duty" which meant they would make arrangements for the hajj in 1916. In reality, officials were keen to keep the hajj going to support Hussein and demonstrate Britain's concern to facilitate the religious obligation of Muslims, moves which would help neutralize any Muslim ill-will.

⁴ Wingate to Wilson, 19th June 1916, SAD Wingate 137/4/29-30, SAD.

Indian Muslim soldier pilgrims

Britain used the hajj for further political propaganda purposes in 1918 when it sponsored some Indian Muslim soldiers in Egypt to go on pilgrimage. This novel scheme, ignored in existing studies, shows Britain's wider political vision in using the hajj to shore up its image in the Muslim world. George V came up with the idea. Montagu, Secretary of State for India, thought the scheme "fascinating and might have excellent political effects" – an example of how officials were more interested in furthering the representation of Britain as sympathetic and supportive of Islam, than being concerned for the spiritual welfare of their Muslim soldiers.

The event was regarded as a success, and over 2000 soldiers participated. Critically, it was an important occasion to demonstrate Britain's commitment to its Muslim subjects. Captain Salamatulla Khan, leader of the Indian Muslim soldier-pilgrims said at his meeting with Hussein, "Our government takes great care and thought for our religion and religious customs. In spite of transport being so scarce nowadays it has afforded us a ship and given us the opportunity of doing pilgrimage".⁵ At the same time the British used an Indian captain, Ajub Khan, to gather intelligence on Mecca while on the hajj. Khan was another example of how without Muslim help Britain could not have been involved in such a wide capacity with the hajj. He was scathing of the Hashemite government's organization and stressed the necessity of further British involvement with the hajj in form of a hospital and agents in Mecca, in order to "relieve us of our duty to our Muslim subjects as well as greatly enhancing our popularity and influence in the Muslim world".⁶ Perhaps the need to appear more imperialist than the imperialists coloured his views when writing the report. This propaganda exercise like many others did not go according to plan, as the "mulcting and cheating of the poor Indian pilgrims was much resented by our men" who on several occasions "resorted to violence" to redress perceived wrongs⁷

As the war ended in 1918, authorities in London and across the Muslim areas of the empire were in consultation with a view to cement Britain's role in the pilgrimage in terms of imposing further regulation, a far cry from the cautious attitudes of the late nineteenth century. However, schemes for "improving" the hajj often had ambivalent practical application.

Destitutes

This ambivalent application was seen by Sir Reader Bullard, Consul at Jedda during the final years of Hussein's reign, as he touched on the issue of destitute pilgrims in a letter from September 1923:

We reckon there were 1,200 yesterday, pushing, quarrelling, yelling,

⁵ Report of Commander-in-chief, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, to War Office 31st January 1919, IOR/MIL/7/18619, OIOC.

⁶ Observations of Mecca, by Captain Ajub Khan, 2nd October 1919, attached to Report of General Officer Commanding Egyptian Expeditionary Force to War Office, 11th December 1919, IOR/MIL/7/18619, OIOC.

⁷ Report of General Officer Commanding Egyptian Expeditionary Force to War Office, 11th December 1919, IOR/MIL/7/18619, OIOC.

demanding tickets, trying to push in at the gate of the Consulate. Except to arrange for tickets for the sick we take no notice of the destitute until the very last minute

Bullard's portrait seems similar to Razzack's from the late 1880s. Yet by 1923 the Consulate in Jeddah was paying for return passages for thousands of destitute pilgrims at the end of every hajj. Why? Initial plans in the 1890s for Muslim communities in India to fund repatriation fell through, and the authorities decided preventing those who could not afford to perform the hajj would produce an adverse reaction. Coupled with the added pressure of numbers from Nigerian pilgrims who were often even poorer than Indians, the Consulate at Jeddah started from the early 1900s to repatriate pilgrims while privately fuming to their superiors that nothing was done to solve the issue.

Politics of hajj

British despair at pauper pilgrims was mirrored in their views towards the Hashemite organization of the hajj in the early 1920s. Yet Hussein's extortion of the hajjis was logical. They were the only source of income for his kingdom and the British had halted his wartime subsidy. Nevertheless, the British failed to link these factors together, and privately hoped Ibn Saud and his Wahhabi followers would take over Mecca, and with it the hajj, which they did in October 1924.

Wahhabi takeover

British officials and Muslims welcomed this event, as Ibn Saud proclaimed he would reform the administration of the hajj. There was less extortion and more security, but the Wahhabis created dismay amongst pilgrims, especially those from Egypt and India, in their attitude towards certain devotional practices. For example, Wahhabi guards zealously beat hajjis who attempted pray and kiss the railings of the Prophet's Tomb. It was in contravention of Wahhabi practice to worship anyone but Allah. But economics trumped Wahhabism by the 1930s. Hajjis on many occasions reported that if the low paid guards were bribed, praying and kissing the railings was tolerated. Wahhabi policy towards enforcement of religious orthodoxy fluctuated throughout the 1926-1939 period. The severe effect of the Great Depression on Saudi Arabia's finances which were dependent on the hajj led to laxer attitudes from the religious authorities towards hajjis, as their presence in the country was a vital source of income.

Destitutes

Britain did not publicly comment on Wahhabi practices. With its own pilgrims, British India's cautious bureaucracy had finally legislated in 1925 that those sailing to Arabia had to produce enough money for their return fare, a system that had been in force for decades before in Malaya, Dutch East Indies and Egypt. This temporarily halted the flow of destitute pilgrims but a few years later the problem had returned as pilgrims took to travelling overland from India or surreptitiously across the Persian Gulf. Sir Reader Bullard, also Consul in the later 1930s, wrote after passing the body of an Indian pilgrim in the desert near Riyadh:

Ibn Saud discouraged destitutes from attempting the pilgrimage, because they were a danger to themselves as well as a problem to the authorities, but nothing could prevent a penniless Indian Moslem from begging his way across northern India and Baluchistan, getting a lift in a dhow across the Gulf, and setting out to walk to Mecca

The issue of overland pauper pilgrims had taxed authorities in Nigeria and Sudan as well, where pilgrims would often take years to travel to the Hijaz, working along the way. Nigeria established a Pilgrim Relief Fund which relied on contributions from Emirs. The Saudis along with other governments tightened border controls in the 1930s, but for poor Muslims the spiritual reward of hajj being absolution from sin and paradise if they died on the way meant a route could always be found.

Muslim employees

Like Dr. Razzack, Munshi Ihsanullah was another key Muslim figure within the British imperial administration associated with the hajj that had to contend with destitute pilgrims. In the interwar period, when Consuls were often in post for only a few years, Ihsanullah was a powerful force in lobbying and working for the welfare of British pilgrims who came to Hijaz. His services were considered indispensable by Consuls, although during an Inquiry into the administration of the hajj from India in 1930, one official did voice concern that Ihsanullah's knowledge of the hajj meant he often out classed his superiors in related discussions and recommendations for improvements often came from him and not the Consul. During Ihsanullah's time, the non-British staff at the Jeddah Consulate expanded. Abdul Majid was the Malay Pilgrimage Officer from 1924 to 1940;⁸ there were Bengali and Punjabi clerks, and Nigerian and Sudanese messengers. The use of Muslims in hajj administration was also a feature in colonial bureaucracies from Nigeria to Malaya. Britain could not have been involved in the hajj in the ways outlined during this period if it were not for these Muslim employees, a reliance that only deepened as Britain expanded across the Muslim world in the early twentieth century and the issues deemed relevant by the British also expanded.

Conclusion

To conclude, by the late 1930s the experience of hajj had undergone a remarkable series of changes. Knowledge of the hajj and the pilgrimage experience was more widespread and deeper due to books and vernacular newspaper articles, even though a large proportions of Muslims remained illiterate. The Holy Places had passed from Ottoman to Hashemite then Wahhabi control, the last having the most impact on the way hajjis conducted themselves while in the Hijaz. Yet some aspects remained recognizable to those from the 1870s. The issue of 'pauper pilgrims' for the British, and for Ibn Saud, remained as seemingly intractable as ever, one that continued to occupy British officials in the Persian Gulf emirates into the late 1950s. Britain became involved in the hajj in the 1860s in an attempt to halt the spread of cholera, and began an interaction with this religious ritual that lasted for nearly a hundred years. Despite the deeper knowledge the British gained of the hajj, one persistent feature of this aspect of the relationship between imperialism and Islam was Britain's consistent and largely ineffective attempts to control the hajj.

⁸ pp.xi-xii, William Roff, (ed.), *The Wandering Thoughts of a Dying Man*, (Oxford, 1978).

Abstract

The 1861 cholera epidemic, which began in India and swept through Europe, carried by pilgrims on their way to Arabia to perform the hajj, was the catalyst for greater British involvement with the fifth pillar of Islam. British interaction with the hajj, which began with supervising the quarantine stations that were established at Arabia's maritime gateways, developed into a bureaucratic apparatus spread over Britain's Muslim territories, as well as the British Consulate in Jeddah. This bureaucracy attempted to regulate various aspects of the hajj experience. Preventing the spread of epidemic disease remained a primary concern, but other duties the British took upon themselves were assistance to so-called 'pauper pilgrims' from British territories stranded in Arabia and monitoring the traffic of slaves to Arabia who were passed off as pilgrims. As Britain became the ruler of the largest number of Muslims in the world in the early twentieth century, it became acutely conscious of its expanded role in facilitating the smooth operation of the hajj each year, as an advertisement to its Muslim subjects that Britain was sensitive and supportive towards Islam. British sensitivity towards this Islamic ritual was further shown in its sponsoring of Indian Muslim soldiers based in Egypt to perform the hajj during the First World War.