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Preparing for the House of God: Nepali Muslim Narratives of the Hajj

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Preparing for the House of God: Nepali Muslim Narratives of the Hajj

Megan Adamson Sijapati

This essay focuses on first-person narratives from Nepali Muslims directly before and after their journeys from Kathmandu to Mecca, for the Hajj pilgrimage in 2005-2006, collected and translated by the author. To date, studies and public representations of Muslims in Nepal in the period of Nepal's long transition to secularism have focused predominantly on the population's mobilization of religious identity and its religio-political aspirations, productions, and experiences that help to constitute it as a collective. These representations have been key in affirming Muslims' rights as a minority in a newly secular federal republic of immense ethnic and religious diversity and a history of Hindu hegemony. Through the Hajj narratives of Nepali Muslims presented in this chapter, a contrasting portrait to these dominant representations is offered. This portrait gives a view into the interior religious worlds of

Muslims in Nepal during this period. In them we get a glimpse of the every-day ness of their religious endeavors and the interior dimensions of piety that pilgrimage can cultivate, including a notion of collectivity that is based in faith and practice.

Keywords: Muslims, Nepal, Islam, religion, pilgrimage, Hajj.

Introduction

This essay presents first-person narratives from Nepali Muslims directly before and after their journeys from Kathmandu to Mecca, for the Hajj pilgrimage, in 2005-2006. To date, studies and public representations of Muslims in Nepal (by Muslims and non-Muslims) in the period of Nepal's long transition to secularism have focused predominantly on the population's mobilization of religious identity and its religio-political aspirations, productions, and experiences that help to constitute it as a collective (Dastider 2000, 2013; Sijapati 2011a, 2012, 2017). These representations have been key in affirming Muslims' rights as a minority in a newly secular federal republic of immense ethnic and religious diversity and a history of Hindu hegemony. My aim in focusing on Nepali Muslim Hajj narratives from 2005-2006 in this essay is to present a contrasting portrait to these dominant representations. This intimate portrait offers a view into the interior religious worlds of Muslims in Nepal during this period. In them, we get a glimpse of the everyday-ness of Muslim religious endeavors and the interior dimensions of piety that pilgrimage can cultivate, including a notion of collectivity that is based in faith and practice.

The first-person perspectives of Nepali Muslims at the center of this current essay are best understood in the realm of ritual practice, or ritualization (Bell 1992), and in terms of lived religion (Orsi 1985) as a rich landscape of practice and faith and with multiple, shifting meanings embedded in the social field. Yet no matter how helpful theoretical framing may be, first-person narratives can be obscured by the scholar's theorization (Tweed 2006). Therefore, the approach in this perspectives essay is to foreground voices from the field, present them intact, and accompany them with minimal theorization as mediation. This is intended to encourage engagement with these voices on their own terms. Of course, the first-person narratives below are already mediated through language, which is further preceded by processes of internal, subjective cognitive-emotive mediation, for as constructivists remind us, "there is no way to tease apart the representation of a religious experience from the experience itself" (Sharf 1998: 113). Nonetheless, these first-person voices provide a powerful, if imperfect, rendering of both experiences and self-reflection that could be lost if, for example, they were situated only in the context of religio-politics. While piety is always political, and no religious act is ever entirely apolitical, neither the everyday-ness nor the interiority of Muslim religiosity in these narratives is to be understood if situated solely in the realm of overt identity politics.

In these Hajj narratives is the opportunity to listen carefully to Nepali Muslims in the effort to understand more about Muslim religiosity in Nepal at the politically charged time of 2005-2006, yet not to let them be over-determined by this context. To assist in this understanding, this 'listening,' this essay first provides context on some of the salient points pertaining to Nepal at the time of these interviews and then discusses the Hajj as a form of Muslim piety and the logistical challenges the Hajj presents for pilgrims in Nepal. From there, I present first-person narratives of Nepali Muslims in Kathmandu, before and after Hajj, which I collected through personal interviews. I present each individual's interview intact, as opposed to dividing interviews thematically into excerpts, in order to provide a fuller and more cohesive portrait of the individual in his or her account.

The Nepal 2005-2006 Context

Nepal's identity politics of the last three decades, and religious identity politics in particular, have had transformative effects upon contemporary forms of religion and religious community (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Whelpton 1997; Gellner, Hausner, and Letizia 2016; Sijapati 2011a, 2017). The relationship between these changes and the status of minorities in Nepal has made internal questions of community and collectivity even more pressing for marginalized populations, including Muslims. The country's identity politics at the time the narratives of this essay were collected were at a fever pitch, and Muslims faced increased visibility and vulnerability in public. 2006 was the last year Nepal was a Hindu constitutional monarchy and it was the height of the country's civil war. The civil war started with a village-based Maoist insurgency that sought to dethrone the king and dismantle high-caste Hindu hegemony and pave the way for the greater rights and representation of Nepal's minorities in the state apparatus, and it culminated in the People's Revolution that overthrew the Hindu monarch. Nepal was in a period of crisis, and the overall situation for Muslims in the country was tense. As with other religious and ethnic minorities, the Muslim population's future was imbricated within the many the changes facing the country at large. This was also just one year after well-coordinated Hindutva attacks on Muslims and Muslim sacred spaces (Sijapati 2011a: 48-70) in the Kathmandu valley, including the very mosque the Hajj pilgrims were gathered in for their Hajj departure, where these interviews were conducted.

Muslims comprise 4.4% of Nepal's population and are an ethnically, linguistically, and doctrinally diverse population. The sense of community among the country's

Muslim population is historically not strong and, in the transition to secularism at the time of these interviews, it was nascent and contested. As I have shown elsewhere (Sijapati 2011a; 2011b), Muslims in Nepal occupy a unique position of both inclusion and exclusion, a kind of ambivalent alterity, and as such, like minorities in other contexts, may shift between primary loyalties of country or religion, or more often, be perceived to be doing so. Given this, one could argue that to be Muslim and to participate in any public religious act such as the Hajj was, in 2005–2006, to participate in the performance of religious difference and intra-religious solidarity in the multi-ethnic state that Nepal was recognizing itself to be, despite its historical identity as a ‘pure’ Hindu land, (one understood, no less, as untainted by Muslim invaders unlike the rest of South Asia).

The majority of Nepal’s approximately 970,000 Muslims reside in the Tarai (lowlands region bordering India), with the largest percentages in Sunsari, Rautahat, and Kapilvastu districts, while small communities also reside in regions outside the Tarai such as Gorkha, Kathmandu, and Pokhara. Muslims from across Nepal’s districts embark on the Hajj. Nepal’s Hajj Committee arranges their travel to and from Saudi Arabia and their accommodations in Mecca for a set fee. Their journey begins with travel to the country’s capital of Kathmandu, which can be long and taxing due to the poor road systems, weather conditions if it is monsoon season, and limited transportation options. Once in Kathmandu, pilgrims are given accommodations and are brought together to prepare for their group departure for Mecca. In 2005, they were housed at the Kashmiri Takiya Jame Masjid, where they spent a few nights acclimating after their journey to Kathmandu, meeting fellow pilgrims, waiting for their paperwork and travel documents to be finalized, and preparing themselves with prayer and ritual manuals so that they would know what to do once in Mecca. It was then that I met with them for these interviews.

To non-Muslims, it could seem that through the Hajj these pilgrims are embodying—and publicly claiming—a sort-of dual citizenship and polyvalent identity (as Nepali, as Muslim, as from a particular village, as of a particular caste, etc.). But, as these interviews illustrate, the pilgrims can live identities as Muslim and Nepali seamlessly and concerns over Nepali-ness vis-à-vis one’s Muslim-ness are not raised in the pilgrimage journeys. This absence of attention to negotiation between national and religious identities is notable given that the idea of a Nepali *ummah* (described by local organizations as a *millat* or *quam*, both Islamic terms for community but also nation), was being promoted by Muslim leaders at the time (Sijapati 2011a).

The Hajj, Practice, and Piety

Islam is a religion of orthopraxy, meaning that historically it has been a tradition in which practice has been understood to take precedence over, and even precede, belief or faith¹ (Madjid 1998). In the context of Islam, ritual practice directs and embodies submission to God, and its consistency across settings allows for Muslims to partake in ritual together (literally) even if there is no shared culture or language between them, and in an abstract sense, with an imagined community across time and space. For example, performance of the five daily ritual prayers (Arabic: *salat*, Urdu: *namaz*; translations henceforth abbreviated A. and U. respectively) may vary slightly by sect, but *namaz* is practiced more or less identically by Muslims across the world and has been since the earliest Muslim community. The Hajj, a five-day pilgrimage held annually on the eighth through the twelfth days of the Islamic lunar month of *Dhu-al Hijja*, is also a core ritual practice in Islam. Its completion is obligatory for those who have the financial means to undertake it without creating hardship for their family. On Hajj, Muslims from different cultures and societies participate together in the individual enactment of their faith through rituals which retrace the steps of the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets and include the recitation of prayers in Arabic and the donning of clothing symbolizing one’s state of purity during the pilgrimage.

While the Hajj is a deeply personal, individual religious undertaking, it is also highly communal and as such the Hajj has long had the potential to cultivate a sense of communal religious identity that highlights the global collectivity that is the *ummah*. The faithful across time and space may feel connected through their devotion to the Prophet or through the structures of ritual practice, repeated as they are from one generation to the next, and from place to place—from Mumbai, to Doha, from to New York City to Nepalgunj—but it is yet another thing to live within a community of Muslims and have a sense of it as a collective. Hajj is a key connector of local Muslim populations with the broader global *ummah* (Bianchi 2004), but in these Nepali narratives we see that the bonds with other Nepalis and South Asians (Indians and Pakistanis) are what are noted by returning pilgrims. To that end, we should remember that like nations, religious communities such as the global *ummah* are always, in a sense, imagined (Anderson 1991), and for Muslims in a diverse and dispersed Muslim minority population, the idea of the *ummah* may be both salient and inspiring but it may also prove to be a mirage. As politics and piety are deeply intertwined at multiple levels of any religious pilgrimage (Bianchi 2004; Metcalf 1990), Hajj can bring into full relief

the differences between one's own culture and community and other communities on Hajj as well as disparities in wealth and resources. The Nepali voices presented below do not say that disparities in wealth are to account for them remaining amongst themselves and with other South Asians on the Hajj, but it may be that the inability to speak English (or Arabic), which is a result of poor educational resources in Nepal and amongst Muslims in particular, accounts for this relative isolation.

The expenses required to travel and stay in Mecca were (and continue to be) significant for Nepalis given the currency exchange rate and the relatively low incomes even of higher income earners in Nepal. This also comes through in the voices presented here. Pilgrims often elect to also visit the city of Medina—religiously significant for the presence of the Prophet's mosque and its association with the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslim community—once they have completed the Hajj, and this can add significant expenses. In Medina, there are fewer regulations in place to safeguard against pilgrims being overcharged. According to Hajji Mujahi Haq, an advisor to the Hajj Committee the year of these interviews, the Committee can only ensure safety and good care on the Nepal side of the journey; once in Mecca, it has no oversight. One major concern, he reported, was Nepali pilgrims becoming separated from the group and getting lost. The year of these interviews, the Nepal Ambassador to Saudi Arabia assisted in securing the pilgrims' lodging in Mecca. He said that in the history of Nepal this was the first time that two hundred fifty-four Nepalis were embarking on Hajj (by 2015 it was reported to be over one thousand, a remarkable increase).

A long-standing complaint I have heard from Muslims in Nepal has been the fluctuations in the operating policies of the Hajj Committee. The desire for a permanent Hajj Committee, populated by people knowledgeable about Islam, was expressed by many people I spoke with in the years following the new secular state. It continues to be a source of frustration for Muslims, and though a permanent committee was eventually formed under the Ministry of Home Affairs, dissatisfaction remains. Saudi Arabia's Hajj authorities set limits for the number of pilgrims who are allowed to go on Hajj from each country in any given each year, and each country then has its own selection procedures for who can go, setting limits based on its own factors.

Regardless of where they are travelling from, Hajj pilgrims must familiarize themselves with Hajj orthopraxy in preparation for the journey. The rituals are specific to the Hajj only and pilgrims believe they must be performed

with both correct intention and exact precision to be accepted by God. Pilgrims may read pamphlets and books in advance to prepare, take these materials with them, and listen to those who have been on the Hajj before or who know the rituals through prior study. For some Nepali Muslims, the challenge to learn the rituals and proper prayers is acute since many have not received formal religious education of any sort, and because the prayers are in Arabic, which they neither speak nor read. Prior to beginning the rituals of Hajj in Mecca, pilgrims may perform extra supplicatory prayers to God for blessings to perform the Hajj properly and for God to accept their Hajj, which we see referenced in the personal narratives below.

Historically, the Hajj “was always looked upon as a kind of death,” (Murata and Chittick 1994: 21) for both the potential for physical harm or death that could occur on the long journey (particularly before the invention of air travel) and for the spiritual renewal it engenders within the pilgrim. Because the Hajj is a duty enjoined upon only those Muslims who can leave their families with ample financial resources to sustain them if they do not return, this typically means that once they have decided to undertake the Hajj they have already contemplated its perils. They have made a decision to embark on a journey that can, at the worst extreme, result in injury or death² and they have left their families and lives behind in acknowledgment of this possibility.

Nepali Muslim Voices

I conducted these interviews with Muslim pilgrims first in late December 2005, two days before they boarded flights to begin their journey out of the Hindu kingdom and to the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, and again in early January 2006 upon their return. Gathered at the Kashmiri Takiya Jame Masjid in Kathmandu, south of the Narayanhiti Palace,³ in anticipation of the upcoming departure for Mecca, the pilgrims I spoke with in December were resting from the journeys they had just made to Kathmandu from their hometowns and villages, preparing to embark upon their travel to Mecca, and waiting for their travel paperwork to be processed by Nepal's Hajj Committee. I met them there again upon their return in January. The pilgrims interviewed on the two occasions are different from one another and were selected from sixteen interview transcripts, in which each pilgrim was asked the same set of questions. The narrative selections here were chosen for the geographic breadth of the Hajjis/Hajjas interviewed. Interviews were conducted in Urdu, with the exception of one in Nepali and one in English.⁴

* * *

Where have you travelled from and are you going on the Hajj alone?

I am from the Sunsari district and I am going on the Hajj alone. But thirty people are going from Sunsari.

How did the desire to go on Hajj come about in you?

The desire first came to me at Nadwatulama,⁵ during my student life. I read [about it] in the Holy Quran. I studied the Quran, I studied the Hadis, and Islamic books, and in my heart, I then felt that I have to go to the house of God. I read such praise about Mecca and Medina, that's how I started thinking about it. It all made me think about travelling to the house of God. I had read about how beautiful the house of God [Ka'ba] is. For many years I had kept it in my mind. It's a very rare thing to be able to go. Allah called me to his house in 1989, when I was in a six-month teacher training course at Malik Saud University, then I did the visitation (A. *umrah*)⁶ twice. When I saw a picture in 1989 of what the Hajj is, [and saw] the importance of Hajj, that it is a requirement, then the passion came in me: I should do this work (U. *yeh kaam kar lena chahiye*), the visit (A., U. *ziyarat*)⁷ of Mecca.

My father, who trained me, was very poor. He was a peon at a school and he gave me training without any money and with a lot of struggle. I have always had in my mind that I would take him on Hajj. I have already done a government assisted Hajj. This time I am going for my father. I am doing *Hajj-e Badal*.⁸ After I came back from Saudi [from Hajj], I thought I would take my father to the Hajj also, that I must do this. Because he worked so hard to give me training, yet with all his worries and hardships he endured. But my father died two years ago. I am still going to keep that promise.

What will you ask for, pray for, during Hajj?

When I am on Hajj, the first thing I will ask when I am there is for God to make my journey successful for my father, to let it count for him.⁹ The second will be that when I go inside, and people ask what they want, instead of asking for one thing I will ask God to please give me whatever I ask for, so that whatever I ask for later it will be granted. I will ask for the ability to overcome any difficulty that comes.

The anticipation I feel for this journey, the waiting in Kathmandu, is very difficult for me. Even just one day, this one-day [today] has felt like one year. Waiting here has been as difficult as death. I want to have wings to fly to reach Mecca. One day here is like one year. My heart is disturbed with this desire to see the house of God (U. *us ghar ke liye mera dil betaab hei*). I am feeling very bored here, so eager to see the house of God. That's why I want to be

there. I dream about the house of God and my whole focus is on that. Neither food nor drink taste good to me. I don't feel like having it.

Is there a special reason you're going on the Hajj at this time? And, what is the relationship between Nepal and Hajj?

The Hajj is the special reason. There is no special relation between the house of Nepal and the house of Islam. The relation of the Hajj is with the entire world. To whomever has been given the resources in life, then for them it is required. So, if the person is living in Nepal and is healthy and can afford all the charges of the Hajj, then he should be a representative of Nepal. It is necessary.

How will you deal with the obstacles or difficulties you may face?

All the difficulties that may arise on the Hajj are to be understood as a blessing. However, many people travel for Hajj, so that many people Allah will give blessings to. There is an understanding that while on the Hajj, if I get hurt, then at least my brother shouldn't get hurt. If I am struck, then at least my brother should not get struck. If someone is lost...that is the meaning of Hajj also. All these difficulties are blessings. The relation of the Hajj is with our body: if the body becomes tired this is a blessing from God. This is the body's work.

Those who will get lost and who will get [go] crazy while on the Hajj, they are the ones who will find the true pleasure of the Hajj, [because] all of these challenges and struggles are blessings. [You] experience challenges, get lost and you get bewildered, but that is the fundamental delight (U., Nepali: *majaa*; translations henceforth abbreviated N.) of the Hajj. That's what the Hajj is about.

As for the journey here within Nepal, to prepare and come to Kathmandu, there is no problem, there are no difficulties. But at the Hajj, it's really difficult.

How has the Hajj Committee helped you?

They provide lodging and food, tickets, foreign currency, and taking Hajjis to the airport. But maybe in Nepal they should provide a Hajj house [i.e. lodging] and a special course for Hajjis. There is no special facility for Hajjis. In Mecca also, there isn't any special help for Nepali Hajjis; for Nepali Hajjis there are many difficulties both in Kathmandu and Mecca.

* * *

Where are you from in Nepal, where have you travelled from?

I am from Gorkha. I am very happy (N. *ekdam khushi*) to be doing this journey. Three people are going with me who have done the Hajj before. I am doing new prayers (A., U. *du'a*) and setting the right intentions (A., U. *niyyat*). I am

doing some familiar prayers and I'm getting a few books [of new prayers to learn] to take in my pocket. I will memorize some *du'a* from this book; it is in my pocket. With this book I'll know, upon putting on *ihram*, what I have to do. I know when I enter the Ka'ba; I know what I have to do and what I have to pray. I know what I have to do in Arafat... in Musdalifa, and I know I have to use stones in Mina. I know when I will go to Mina which *du'a* I have to do. In the *masjid* of Aisha. I have to go and so *salaam*, I know this. I know a little bit. In Safa and Marwah, I know what I have to do. Allah called me there, so I want to stay there. That is Allah's mosque. God willing, God's wish (*U. marzi*) is that I do the Hajj. And, I too, will be very happy to be there. But it is God's calling, God's wish. And, in Medina there is the highest-level *ziyarat* and I will be getting blessings from that.

What is this year's Hajj Committee doing for you?

Eating, sleeping, tickets, very good things. They are trying to help all the Hajjis.

How will you deal with the obstacles or difficulties you may face?

I don't think there will be problems or any difficulties. Whatever challenges come, I will deal with them.

* * *

Where are you from in Nepal?

Gorkha. Two of us are going. My husband is going, too. And, there is one other person.

How did the desire to go on Hajj come about in you, why do you want to go?

For faith (*N. iman ko laagi*) I want to go. I have gone on Hajj before. Now we are going on our second time.

Why are you going again?

I want to go again, and Allah called me to his home, and so, my interest is to go. Every person will want to continue to go on Hajj, but can't unless Allah has called him/her.

I love Allah and the house of Allah, the Ka'ba, and I want to give *salaam* to the Prophet, peace be upon him. So, I am going on the Hajj. With Allah's love I will have success, both in this world and the next...I will ask forgiveness at Allah's house where he accepts all things from people.

Is there any special relation between Nepal and the Hajj?

The relation of the Hajj is worldwide! This Hajj is related to all the Muslims of the world. Mecca is like heaven. Medina is also blessed land (*U. mubarak zamin*). There I will do *salaam* to the Prophet, peace be upon him.

* * *

Where are you from in Nepal?

I am from Palpa district. [From my village] my elder brother has gone, my daughters have gone, my brother's daughters have gone, and others have also gone.

How did the desire to go on Hajj come about in you?

In my heart. It came from my heart. About one month ago, the idea came to my mind. Yes, I know [it is compulsory to perform once in a lifetime], but one has to be able to afford it. If we do not have the ability, [i.e. meet the requirements] then how are we to go? I did not until now have the ability to go. Those who have, they go. My sons started talking about sending me for Hajj. And so, I said if they are sending [me], then I will go. My sons and daughter in law are sending me. I became so happy that I am going. They sent money for the journey.

What will you ask for, pray for, during Hajj?

I will ask for blessings from Allah. What should be done in order to live? I will ask [to understand] that. [I will ask from Allah that] he let our country be in right order and let there be a good brotherhood in Nepal. And, I also ask to fulfill our *du'a* (supplicatory prayers). Allah knows what he will do.

How are you feeling now? What are your expectations?

I am not sure whether I will be able to talk about Hajj or not. I do not know what to say during Hajj. We have not been taught about this in our school, so I am just learning like a child. We do not know the *du'a*, so I am learning.

* * *

From where have you travelled?

I am from the Saptari district. Twenty-eight people are doing the Hajj from my area of Rajbiraj.

How did the desire to go on Hajj come about in you?

The desire to go on Hajj was a chance given by Allah. He called us, and we tried our best, so we are going. If someone has enough wealth or property that is sufficient to meet returning expenses and home expenditures, it is an obligation for him to perform Hajj. Because I have fulfilled the conditions for performing Hajj, it is therefore compulsory for me.

Is there any special reason your Hajj is this year?

Hajj itself is the special reason.

What is the relation between Nepal and Hajj?

The Nepali people are very poor and have no sufficient money to perform Hajj. So, in comparison to other countries very few people go for Hajj.

What will you ask for, pray for, during Hajj?

I will pray for prevailing peace around the whole world, and especially for those Muslims whom the media are trying to demonize and conspire against. And, to let each and everyone know the real meaning of Islam. I will pray for Allah to let the non-Muslims who have misconceptions about Islam understand it more clearly. For all of these reasons, I will offer special prayers. And, the bad things which are being said about Islam—like all Muslims are terrorists, or other things—to show the world that it is nothing like that, and this has destroyed the view of Islamic history too. [In Nepal], the media is not playing a good role in this problem. Many incidents that took place recently, like the Iraq incident,¹⁰ in these the media is also not playing a helpful role.

How are you feeling about going on Hajj?

We are feeling very happy. We are so happy that we got the chance. And He, on whom we have faith, selected us for this.

What is the difference between Hajj and other forms of prayer?

Among the basic forms of prayer, Hajj occupies a special place. [It is] like the [ritual] prayer, which is an obligation for every Muslim whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female. And if he is not in a condition to pray by standing, he can do it by lying in bed or even by just gesture. Like this, the Hajj is compulsory for those people who have wealth.

What is the difference between Hajj and other ziyarat?

The Hajj is performed in Mecca, but as the people go there after spending a lot of money, so people also visit [the city of] Medina. The Prophet's mosque there has a special place [in our religion], so Hajjis go there, too, after the Hajj. In terms of the difference between Hajj and other ziyarat, actually, we do not have any ziyarat. Hajj is a ziyarat itself. Ziyarat does not have any place. But as we go to Medina, we visit the prophet's grave.

How will you face the difficulties on the way to Hajj?

Around twenty-five lakh¹¹ or more people go, so there are problems. There will be difficulties. The space is limited, so there is [a tight] gathering. But, we don't take it as a problem. If we start feeling that from our actions others should not get hurt, and if such a kind of feeling develops in us, no one will face any problem on the way.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about the Hajj?

The people of Nepal and India tend to go on the Hajj when they have become too old. There is a common belief that we should first finish the other works in life, and then only we should go on Hajj. It is not like that. If at any age the Hajj becomes compulsory, he must perform it at that moment because he is not aware of what is going to happen next year. He may fall sick and may die, the money which he has now may get spent. So, a person can lose their chance. He should perform Hajj immediately when Allah makes it compulsory for him. There are many advantages of this. The first advantage is that when he is young, he can more easily face the obstacles and difficulties which come in his way, but the people who are old they will face problems inevitably. Other than that, I can't give any new information about Hajj. What shall I say new about this? None can. It is such a thing that new things cannot be added to it.

* * *

Where are you from in Nepal?

I am from Sunsari district. I am traveling with my wife. I am going on Saturday's flight.

Are you going at this time for a special reason?

In our religion, it says that we have to go if we are *Sahib-e Nisab*.¹² The desire in me was from a long time ago. I have to go, as Allah has given me the opportunity. I am leaving everything, and now I am going on the Hajj. Now, I have to do it at this time, because I am weak. It is my wish to go to see the Ka'ba. In our lifetime, we live in this world in the boundary of Islam, and in the boundary of the Hajj. My hope is that only one time in my life, I want to see the Ka'ba. It is my desire. I want to see the house of God. I think about Hajj, that is compulsory for Muslims...so, I am going to Ka'ba for rehearsal, for practicality, for the practice. I know the theory; now, I will practice it.

I am going because I have met the requirements, and so, it is compulsory (U. *sahib-e nisab ke bare mei*). There is no guarantee in life. Now, I have gotten the chance, so I have to go. For one or two years now, my wish has been to go. Now, it is time to go. I pray that Allah will accept [my Hajj].

You, please, also pray for me and please pray for all Nepali Hajjis. That will be good for you and me. We must serve the true religion, be a soldier in the service of Islam (U. *sahi din ke sipaahee dine*).

What will you ask for, pray for, during Hajj?

I have done some things wrong—small and big—so I will pray to Allah. I will pray for Islam, Muslims, Islamic

institutions, *khankahs* (spiritual retreats), all things related to Islam. I will pray for them and for friends also. For the country, I will pray for peace (N. *shanti*, U. *amman*) for Nepal.

Now, I think that and now I am going. If [there is] anything I want to do, then that I will pray for Allah. We will pray that Allah will accept our Hajj; our responsibility is only to pray, and we can hope this will be accepted by Allah.

What is the relationship between Nepal and the Hajj?

There isn't any special relation with Hajj and Nepal. The relation is a worldwide relation. The government gives permission...people go from every country.

What kinds of trouble do you think you may experience?

I don't have any problems. If anybody has beaten me, taken my money, today I will excuse it all.

What is the difference between Hajj and ziyarat?

Hajj is a different thing. Hajj is a pillar of Islam, and *ziyarat* is not. We have to pray with Allah in a Sufi saint's shrine (*mazaar*) and in *ziyarat*.

The place is [a] place for everyone—for my children, the country, the brotherhood, for oneself, for relatives and friends—to ask for forgiveness of sins. And, fulfilling these demands is dependent of Allah. That, after returning from there, lets him give us [the] opportunity to work for Islam, lets us not do bad things, work for Islam, and inform the people about Islam, prevents us from committing sins.

* * *

Welcome back after Hajj and congratulations for becoming a Hajji. How was your journey?

We had very favorable journey, very good experience. Mecca and Medina are really very good places. And, we fulfilled all the requirements of Hajj. We did not face any sort of problems regarding the rules of performing Hajj.

How did you feel when you reached Mecca?

We were very happy because we reached such a religious place and we reached there for that intention and so were very happy. Our ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Mr. Abul Lais, was present there [at the Jeddah airport] and he welcomed us. They helped us in everything.

How were the arrangements made for food and lodging?

Arrangements were good. The food has to be managed individually. The lodging arrangements were made there before our arrival in Mecca. We paid per person \$100 for 30

days. And when we arrived [at] Medina, there we paid 100 Riyal for 10 days.

How did you feel when you reached the Ka'ba?

It was very fantastic and tears came out of my eyes when I saw the Ka'ba. I was feeling afraid, regarding where had I arrived. It was such a place which is regarded as a very pure and holy place from religious point of view. In fact, it was my luck that it took me there.

Did you meet any other Hajjis from other countries?

Yes, I met other Hajjis. I met with Indian Hajjis. They were very good people. They also had good arrangements of hotel, food, lodging, etc. We faced some problems in Medina because there we had to manage lodging ourselves. It is the rule of Medina that one has to submit his passport there before entering. So, our passports were in bulk and were submitted by Hajj Committee. And, they said that until and unless the lodge owners themselves say that these people have booked our lodge, then only we would let them go. Hence, we had to wait there for six to seven hours. And, after that we contacted one lodge owner and booked it, and then they came there gave the proof to the government that we had booked their lodge, and then only we came out. And, then we stayed there in the lodge.

Now that you have completed your Hajj, what is your plan for your future?

I have decided that let Allah and His Messenger give me this opportunity of performing Hajj again and again. And, I want to spend my remaining life in the light of our religion. Everyone going there prays to Allah to forgive his sins, and as such sins are forgiven so it is the want of every person that he won't commit any sins in his life. And, live life in the best way. This is my planning, too.

* * *

Welcome back after Hajj and congratulations for becoming a Hajji. How was your journey?

It was very nice. That was all because of your well wishes and Allah's blessings. We went to Medina and had *ziyarat* of the grave of Muhammad, peace be upon him, prayed there in mosque, and we did Jannatul Baqiyah.

How did you feel when you reached Mecca?

I felt I will pray to Allah to give me place in heaven. I also prayed for my family members and for all the Muslims for Allah to provide a place in heaven and to keep us free from obstacles. I asked whatever came into my mind. I did what I knew.

How did you feel when you reach at Ka'ba? Were you afraid?

I felt very nice. No, I was not afraid. I felt that that life was better than this one.

Did you face any difficulties on the way?

No, there were not any problems on the way. Everything was fine.

Did you meet any Hajjis from other countries of the world?

I met only the Nepali there. I could not meet any of the foreigners because I could not understand their language.

Many people died in Mina in a stampede.

Yes, people died in Mina.

Did you know how to perform Hajj accordingly?

Yes, I knew because I contacted those Hajjis who have previously gone there. Two things have been changed there, so we could not see those things. After circumambulation of the Ka'ba (*tawaf*) then we went to Hazrat Ibrahim's¹³ grave and prayed two *rakat* (a single unit of prayer) of prayer there.

We went to so many places, like Mount Uhud, Khandaq, a place where Sahibah (Companions of the Prophet) were killed, and other places. Some other places [we] were prohibited to enter. We were with a Hajji from Pakistan who had gone there five times before, so he guided us in each and every step.

* * *

Welcome back after Hajj and congratulations for becoming a Hajji. How was your journey?

Thanks be to God (*alhamdulillah*) it was very nice, very pleasant. Allah made everything nice for me. Everything was managed properly and there were no difficulties on the way.

How was your experience as a whole?

They had managed things very beautifully. They had a very developed system. There were some problems there. Actually, the people of SAARC¹⁴ countries are not very careful, and that's why such an accident [the stampede in Mina] took place. Because, people were not behaving according to the system they had managed. There was too much of a rush, and there was one-way traffic. First of all, they went by carrying their luggage, and as you know there was rush. The people walked very slowly for two to three hours. I did not see it directly. I was upstairs and the accident took place downstairs. I felt very sad when I came downstairs and there was such a rush.

How did you feel when you reached Mecca?

I was feeling very happy. That feeling cannot be expressed. The happiness that I got cannot be expressed. Allah accepted me and called me there. Actually, I was not capable of going to such places, but Allah accepted me and called me so I went there. And, I pray to Allah to accept my Hajj. I also pray to Him to accept Hajj of my family members and of all the people who went there.

Did you face any problem while staying in Jeddah?

There are many problems that can be said here. The main thing is that we have to be careful while going there. There are no complaints against the people of Mecca. Their system is so advanced that, if we move according to their system, then we will never face any obstacles.

There was [a] welcome program and our Nepal ambassador did it. Our ambassador managed our lodging [as] well. But, the Hajj Committee here in Nepal had so many problems. Its presidents and other members could not manage things properly. I cannot explain their shortcomings. There was a considerable communication gap between these people and the people there in Mecca.

What did you buy there?

Well, about the shopping, I have bought [a] prayer rug (*jae namaz*), rosary (*tasbih*), and date palms (*khujur*), the scent of which was very loved by Allah's Prophet. There are so many things that are not available here [in Nepal].

Did you meet any other Hajjis of different countries?

Yes, I met several of them; they had very good character. I will place Indonesian people at the upper most level. The way they talk was really very nice and they were very cooperative.

As many people do not know anything about Nepal, how did you introduce your country?

People do not know anything about Nepal. I told them Nepal is the only Hindu Kingdom of the world and it is very near to India. On three sides it is surrounded by India and on one side by China.

Did you know how to do things there on Hajj?

Yes, I was prepared fully and at the last moment I took help from friends. And, I am thankful to Allah that I performed things accordingly.

Is there any training from the Hajj Committee regarding these things?

Yes, there are all sorts of training programs, but the Hajj Committee does not conduct them. They are conducted by

Muslim organizations like the Islami Sangh, which even showed us videos of Hajj. There are no such attempts by the Hajj Committee.

Conclusion

As raised at the outset of the essay, the first-person perspectives of Nepali Muslims above can be understood in the realm of ritual practice, as ritualization (Bell 1992), and as forms of lived religion as rich landscapes. The context of Nepal is important to understand as these pilgrims' reflections, as is the importance of Hajj as a ritual obligation for Muslims about to undertake it.

The above transcripts of Nepali voices illustrate how the experience of undertaking the Hajj is transformative from its beginning to end, yet in ways that do not seem to be over-determined by the politics on the ground in Nepal surrounding religious minorities identities, rights, or representations, which were so pertinent to Muslims at the time. These pilgrims instead reframe our understandings of the Muslim collective, allowing us to see it as based on faith and practice, even if it is nascent. Pilgrimage is understood by those who study it to bring people into new collectivities and usher them into liminal states—states from which they will emerge and re-position themselves back into normal life 'on the other side'—and we certainly see this in the voices above. The personal narratives documented above also provide a portrait of Nepali Muslim backgrounds and states of mind immediately prior to a religious rite that, for many, becomes the most religiously significant event in their lives. These narratives illustrate both the mundane and spiritual aspirations of these Hajj pilgrims, particularly as they are Muslims living in a non-Muslim majority culture and society and whose exposure to formal Islamic learning or large communities of religious compatriots has been minimal. In this sense, in the Muslim voices documented here, themes of opportunity and learning stand out, as well as the hardship of becoming a pilgrim and the joy and satisfaction that come from completing a major ritual in their religion. All of these things combine to raise questions about Muslim religiosity and potential alternative collectivities: what kind of collective is the Muslim community in Nepal if not a religio-political one? How is the everyday-ness of Muslim religiosity seen most fully in the extraordinary (and not everyday) ritual of the Hajj? These first-person narratives reveal the Hajj to be a unique religious space for the practice, or enactment, of both piety and collectivity, envisioned and experienced in multiple ways.

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Endnotes

1. However, the two are always intertwined and much thought has been given by Muslim thinkers to the relationship between practice and faith, with some arguing that faith precedes practice.
2. Consider the travel hazards of overland and maritime journeys of the past, or the tragic hotel collapses or stampedes of recent years—a risk in any massive gathering, not just the Hajj.
3. The residence of Nepal's Hindu monarchs until 2006.
4. All interviews but one were translated by the author.
5. An Islamic seminary in Lucknow, India, that is a major center of Islamic learning in South Asia.
6. 'Umrah, (A. visitation),' refers to the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca, which involves all the same rituals as Hajj but can be performed any time of year.
7. The term 'ziyarat (visit)' refers to pilgrimages, usually to Sufi shrines.
8. *Haji Badal*, or *Haji-e Badal*, are the terms used by South Asian Muslims to refer to the practice of performing the Hajj on behalf of someone else.
9. One of the rituals on the Hajj is recitation of a prayer asking that God accept the pilgrimage. For an overview of rituals on the Hajj, including the prayer referred to here, see Toorawa 2016.
10. This reference is to the public killing of twelve Nepali workers in Iraq, after which coordinated anti-Muslim riots took place in the capital valley of Kathmandu targeting Muslims, mosques, madrasas, and Muslim-owned

businesses. For detailed treatment of the incident and its impact on Muslims, see Sijapati 2011a: 48-70.

11. One-hundred thousand.

12. *Nisab* in Arabic means 'portion.' In this context the phrase refers to the threshold after which a person is obliged to pay 'zakah (A. tithe)' and thereby possessing wealth enough for the Hajj to be a religious obligation.

13. Abraham.

14. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan.

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