

Hajj

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The hajj is the greatest gathering of humanity on earth. All Muslims who are physically and financially capable are required at least once in their lives to make this pilgrimage to visit “God’s house” in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. For the three million Muslims from over one hundred countries who meet in and around Mecca every year, these three weeks of tumultuous rituals mark the peak of their spiritual lives and the renewal of Islam’s historic identity as a universal community of believers.

In form, the hajj remains firmly centered on the original rites and holy places that Muhammad consecrated fourteen centuries ago. But today’s hajj is vastly more important because its massive mobilization of people, money, and power is helping to transform social, economic, and political life throughout the Islamic world. Beyond its eternal role as Islam’s most profound religious experience, the hajj now reflects and energizes powerful forces of social revolution, global community, and poetic imagination.

Social revolution

The contemporary hajj is a result of the confluence of successive revolutions that have swept across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa since the end of World War II. The end of European colonialism and the rise of independent nations quickly ended a century of governmental restrictions on overseas travel. Colonial rulers from England, France, and the Netherlands were particularly eager to discourage Muslims from visiting Mecca because they feared pilgrims would be doubly contaminated by pan-Islamic sentiments sweeping the Ottoman empire and by infectious diseases carried from South Asia. Even when colonial administra-

tions decided to sponsor hajj contingents as a paternalistic gesture to mollify Muslim opposition, they were careful to limit the size of pilgrim contingents, to pack them with police and spies, and to impose onerous quarantines at the first rumor of threats to public health in the Arabian peninsula. Newly independent states in Muslim countries abolished most of these obstacles in the 1950s and 1960s while expanding the basic services that European administrations had provided for transport, medical care, and repatriating destitute pilgrims stranded in Mecca after the hajj.

The rapid spread of civil aviation opened the hajj as never before to Muslims from the most distant corners of Asia and Africa. The number of overseas pilgrims skyrocketed from about 80,000 in 1950 to 250,000 in 1964, 900,000 in 1974, and 1.5 million by 2005. In addition, the national and ethnic composition of the pilgrimages shifted dramatically. Before 1960, Arabs consistently dominated the hajj, comprising 50 to 60 percent of all pilgrims, year in and year out, even though they made up only 20 percent of the world’s Muslims. As more and more governments directed their national airlines to offer special hajj flights with low-cost fares, distance from Mecca virtually disappeared as a barrier to pilgrimage. By the 1970s, non-Arab pilgrims equaled Arabs and since the 1980s the majority has come from Turkey, Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The Arab world’s pilgrimage has experienced a similar shift in its center of gravity – from the wealthier Gulf and Fertile Crescent countries to the bigger and poorer societies of the Nile Valley and North Africa.

Economic development steadily emerged as the most important force propelling pilgrimage in all regions and cultures. As private savings spread beyond the big cities to provincial capitals and villages, thousands of newly prosperous middle-class and peasant families became the first in their communities

to realize hajj dreams that had been unattainable for previous generations. Wealthy oil-exporting countries had thriving pilgrimages, but their contingents were quickly joined and surpassed by countries with more diversified economies that benefited from green revolutions, manufacturing growth, and foreign worker remittances.

As the hajj encompassed more nations and classes, the personal characteristics of pilgrims changed dramatically. Women and young people were the greatest beneficiaries, particularly urban, middle-class Muslims who are more educated and connected to the information revolution. Worldwide, the number of female pilgrims nearly equaled males and in societies where female literacy and property ownership are widespread – such as Singapore, West Java, northern Pakistan, Lebanon, Palestine, western Turkey, and southeastern Nigeria – women regularly comprised the majority of hajjis. Easier transportation and better accommodation made family pilgrimages common and women were quick to take advantage of new opportunities for group travel where a few male escorts accompanied large numbers of ladies.

Young people with diplomas and careers rejected the old-fashioned notion that the hajj should be mainly for the elderly and infirm who wanted to prepare for the hereafter. They saw the pilgrimage as a badge of success and mobility carrying spiritual benefits they could enjoy for a lifetime. In just three or four decades, the average ages of hajjis fell from around 65 to 45 or less in one country after another.

The greater accessibility of the hajj was a powerful stimulus to the development of Islamic banking and finance. Muslims embraced long-term savings plans for financing future pilgrimages alongside the nest eggs they were creating for retirement and their children's educations. Malaysia pioneered the use of special hajj accounts as the engine for an aggressive Islamic investment fund that allowed Muslim politicians to challenge the long Chinese dominance of the economy. Their success resonated not only in Indonesia, but also in Pakistan, Turkey, the Arab World, Europe, and North America where state, private, and foreign

banks competed to expand the portfolio of Islamic financial products to include home mortgages, auto loans, mutual funds, and credit cards. Today, Islamic banking and hajj savings are so intimately interconnected that many people have forgotten which came first.

The spread of democracy and multiparty politics has placed the issue of hajj services near the top of the policy agenda in every country that enjoys even intermittent pluralism, including the democracies of Western Europe where Muslim diasporas are still disfavored minorities. Politicians of all ideological stripes try to outbid one another in providing government sponsored pilgrimages regardless of whether they describe themselves as “religious” or “secular,” “capitalist” or “socialist.” Using the hajj to buy votes does not always work and sometimes it backfires. Muslims often express gratitude to politicians who use state agencies to organize and subsidize the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, just as frequently they criticize those services as inadequate or take them for granted, viewing them as basic duties of any modern government. Indeed, one of the surest ways to alienate Muslim voters is to debase the hajj by implying that it is just another public good to be traded in the political marketplace.

Most importantly, the hajj's remarkable growth is an integral part of the recurrent religious awakenings and searches for cultural authenticity that have spread throughout Islamic lands during the colonial and postcolonial eras. For at least two centuries, the hajj has fueled the imaginations of every generation of reformers from Asia and Africa that returned home from Mecca determined to reshape their societies in successive campaigns of anti-imperialism, nationalism, modern education, economic development, and democracy. In each case, Muslim leaders and writers reinterpreted Islamic ideals to suit the particular blend of nationalist, religious, and Western initiatives they championed for their times and cultures. The common thread was the claim that pilgrimage brought them closer to Islam's origins and refreshed their understanding of its enduring principles now matter how they di-

verged in adapting those values to new circumstances. Thus, virtually all nationalist revolutions and mass movements in the Islamic world have revived and reworked religious traditions – including the multilayered symbolism of the hajj – to distinguish themselves from the supposedly secular and materialist excesses of the West.

Global community

The hajj has always reminded Muslims around the world that they belong to a single community (*umma*, in Arabic) with a common historical destiny and that this shared identity transcends differences of nationality, race, culture, class, and gender. Today's hajj has enhanced this sense of community by promoting new international institutions as well as a greater appreciation for pluralism and diversity.

The hajj's unprecedented cosmopolitanism vividly demonstrates the wide diffusion of wealth and power far beyond Islam's supposed Arabian heartland into thriving areas of Asia and Africa that once were regarded as the periphery and farther still into Europe and the Americas. Mecca remains the symbolic center of Islam, but it is outshone by dozens of newer centers of economic, political, and scientific achievement on every continent. Indeed, the contemporary Islamic world is so geographically universal and interconnected that it no longer has any discernible center or periphery.

The hajj's explosive growth occurred hand in hand with the rise of international organizations and international regimes among Islamic countries. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) arose under Saudi sponsorship in the 1970s but it gradually developed a life of its own, operating as an Islamic United Nations where Arab, Asian, and African blocks share power and cooperate as a diplomatic lobby in world politics. During the 1980s the OIC created the world's first international regime for pilgrimage management. It adopted controls on participation in the hajj by implementing a worldwide quota on the number of pilgrims that each nation could send to Mecca.

The national quotas were pegged to population size and designed to freeze overall participation at 1990 levels of about 1,000 hajjis for every 1 million Muslims. In order to enforce these rules, every country had to create an official pilgrimage agency responsible for selecting, preparing, and escorting its allotted hajj contingent. As these national agencies grew, they learned from one another and helped to shape pilgrimage policy in the OIC and the Saudi government. The result is a sophisticated global network of hajj management that is of enormous interest to social scientists and international relations scholars because of its unique approach to reconciling the conflicting interests of national sovereignty, freedom of access to universally revered holy places, and preservation of the common heritage of mankind for future generations.

The new hajj regime both reflects and encourages a profound shift in the balance of power between Islamic countries. It abolishes the historical underrepresentation of Asian and African Muslims in the pilgrimage and in Islamic diplomacy. Moreover, it stresses economic development and organizational capacity as the key determinants of influence and participation instead of relying on differences in culture and geography.

Nonetheless, many national hajj agencies are plagued by favoritism and corruption. The economic and political stakes of pilgrimage management are so tempting that hajj resources are commonly diverted to enrich cronies and to mobilize partisan allies. Ironically, these shortcomings at the national level not only threaten the fairness of the global hajj regime, they also contradict the egalitarian and universalistic principles of Islam itself.

Poetic imagination

The hajj's invigoration of Islamic imaginations is even more far reaching than its contributions to social and institutional development. Contemporary Muslim writers have been exceptionally bold and creative in reinterpreting the rich symbolism of the hajj in ways that encourage social criticism and political action. Nearly

every street stall and bookstore in the Islamic world sells modernist depictions of the hajj as a re-enactment of ancient struggles against evil and as a dress rehearsal for looming battles to correct political, economic, and religious injustice.

The evocative works of Muhammad Iqbal in India, Ali Shari'ati in Iran, and Muhammad Arkoun from Algeria have inspired an entire generation of writers to use the hajj as a metaphor for debating core Islamic principles and charting the future of the global Muslim community, including its relations with other world religions and civilizations. These writings have been translated into all of the major languages of the Islamic world and absorbed into a wide spectrum of religious and political outlooks. By elevating the hajj from individual conformity with formal rituals to collective criticism of national and global community, Islamic modernists have helped to democratize religious interpretation and to undercut the authority of traditional Islamic scholars who still treat pilgrimage as a simple act of obedience that prepares Muslims for entering the next world instead of remaking this one.

SEE ALSO: Ascetics, missionaries, and pilgrims, medieval era; Islam and migration; Pilgrimage; Religion and migration; Travel and migration

References and further reading

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