the pilgrimage to Mecca from Southeast Asia

The Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is the central religious event in the lives of millions of Southeast Asian Muslims who are required to try to make this spiritual journey at least once in their lifetimes. Southeast Asians have been performing the Hajj since time immemorial, and the colonial-era records alone on this voyage could keep a scholar busy for an entire career, and perhaps many careers.

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But archival research is not the same as knowing the Hajj "from the inside" – and this is especially so in the case of the pilgrimage to Mecca, because the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina are forbidden to non-Muslims. For roughly the past six years, therefore, I have been episodically putting on a rucksack and spending weeks and sometimes months traveling all over Islamic Southeast Asia speaking to scores of Muslims about the nature of their pilgrimages to Mecca. I usually stay in small, cheap hotels all over the region, and I have performed these interviews in mosques, at bus stops, on docks, and in people's homes. The language of almost all of the interviews was Indonesian (or Malay), though English was spoken in the Southern Philippines and in a few other interviews (mostly in Singapore). Men and women were questioned, old people and young people, rich people and poor people, Muslims living in towns and cities of various sizes as well as in rural areas. These journeys have taken me to the Muslim provinces of Southern Thailand, all over Malaysia (to Penang, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kota Kinabalu), to the Sultanate of Brunei, to Mindanao and Manila in the Philippines, to the high-rise HDB flats of Singapore, and through several islands and river- or sea-ports in Indonesia (Palembang, South Sumatra; Banjarmasin, South Borneo; Makassar, Sulawesi; Mataram, Lombok; and to Jakarta). Several weeks spent at the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa, in Kuala Lumpur, allowed me to speak to many more Muslims who had been on the Hajj from various other parts of Southeast Asia that I was not able to visit myself. In all, I have been able to interview close to one hundred Hajjis and Hajjas, who have performed their pilgrimages to the Hejaz anytime from a week prior to our discussions to some half a century ago.

What do pilgrims remember about their Hajj? What aspects of this incredible journey, which used to take months in a passage by sea, but now takes hours in a voyage by air, are worth remembering, and what is forgotten? How do Southeast Asians organize their experiences in their memories, what is sifted as crucial to a Muslim life well-lived, and what is incidental? Are material circumstances remembered as vividly as spiritual obligations, and what do various pilgrims' memories have in common? Perhaps most importantly, how do Southeast Asian Muslims explain the Hajj to others and to themselves in the act of narrating experience? Is this process different from writ-

oral histories of devotion

Cambodian River Mosque

ing a memoir of the pilgrimage, which many Hajjis indeed have done as an act of devotion? In the pages that follow, I convey some of the memories of pilgrims as to the physical circumstances of their journeys, spanning travel, health, residence, and living in the Hejaz. Other parts of my work has dealt with the spiritual dimensions of these journeys, but for our purposes here I will focus only on the "material life" of the Hajj – and what these memories have meant to Muslims who have undertaken this longest of journeys.

As I traveled around Muslim Southeast Asia from 2003 to 2009 with my rucksack, staying for three days here, four days there, jumping from town to town, province to province, and country to country, I have heard many similar stories of the impact of the Hajj on local peoples' lives. This kind of multi-sited interviewing has allowed me to hear the opinions of quite a wide range of people, both geographically, ethnically, and nationally, as well as in terms of gender, class, and age. The pilgrimage is the central event of many Muslims' religious experience in the world: more capital, both financial and spiritual, is spent in performing the Hajj than in most other activities of one's religious life. The Hajj therefore becomes symbolic of one's connection with Islam, and how important the religion will be in carrying out one's journey on earth. Pilgrims spoke to me in interviews ranging from half an hour to whole afternoons or evenings, depending on the time they had available, the feeling of trust shared between us, and the intensity of the memories and conversation. Some interviews were difficult or uneasy, and sometimes even unsatisfying; most, however, were fascinating and substantive and held me spellbound for hours at a time. I came with a menu of questions I wanted to ask, and tried to conform to it to get a similar spectrum of opinions that I thought were important. But I also let the conversations go where they would on many occasions, if someone had something particularly interesting to say. In this way, I heard about issues that seemed crucial to me as a researcher, but I also ended up hearing about things that I had not thought were important to ask, or had never thought of in the first place, period.

One of the most important initial memories of the material world of the Hajj that I heard about involved the dynamics and mechanics of the long trip out to Mecca itself. Most flights from Southeast Asia to the Hejaz are now undertaken by a carefully managed system of national air carriers working together with the Saudi authorities. Flights are sometimes chartered, but they usually fly directly from various Southeast Asian cities directly to Jeddah, carrying a load of passengers on board who are partly or wholly composed of pilgrims. All of this is fairly recent, however. An elderly Malaysian Hajjah with whom I spoke remembered performing her first Hajj by steamer in the 1950s: her entire family, including herself as a ten year old girl, left via Penang's docks in 1951. Half way across the Indian Ocean two elderly passengers died, and the captain summoned all of the pilgrims on deck to pay their respects before the two bodies, covered in canvas, were lowered by ropes into the deep. Pilgrims who have made the journey in more recent years also told of new arrangements. A Thai Hajji with whom I spoke informed me that for over a century, Thai pilgrims have usually made their way down to Malaya or Malaysia in order to attach themselves to the much larger numbers of Muslims going on Hajj from that country. But recently, he said, Malay pilgrims were coming north across the border, some of them illegally, to go with the Thai contingent so that they would not have to wait on the Tabung Hajji's long lines. These flights now leave directly from Haatyai or even Phuket, in Thailand's southern provinces. A hereditary Filipina princess from Sulu in the Southern Philippines told of new gendered arrangements as well: because of her high status, she led a contingent of two thousand Filipino Muslims on Hajj several years ago, the only woman heading a delegation from anywhere in the world that year. It is extremely rare for a woman to be given this honor, she explained. All of these arrangements show how the actual journeying of the Hajj mutates and adapts over time, as circumstances change in the wider world.

When the pilgrims arrive in the Holy Cities, they are confronted by the spectacle of all of humanity's cultures and colors all thrown

together in one very crowded place. Many if not most Southeast Asian Hajjis have never come across people from so many different countries before, and are absolutely fascinated by what they see. A Filipina Hajjah spoke of coming into contact with a young Chinese man who had hiked from the arid provinces of Western China all the way to Pakistan; the journey took him three months, and from there he was able to join a Pakistani pilgrim group. When he arrived in Mecca, however, he was officially "illegal" and was not allowed to join the Chinese delegation, so the Filipino woman and her companions took him in and fed him, as he had not eaten for several days. A Hajji from Palembang, South Sumatra, told me that he almost got into serious trouble while performing his Hajj as a nineteen year old adolescent: the lure of seeing so many new and strange people almost landed him in jail. He had never seen Indians before, and some of the women who were en route to Mecca from Jeddah were not yet covered in their *ihram* garments, but rather had their midriffs exposed in their saris. A Saudi policeman noticed him ogling the women and yelled at him to back away, or that he would be hauled off to prison. And the same older Malay Hajjah mentioned previously, who had remembered the death of two elderly pilgrims on her Indian Ocean steamer crossing some half-century ago as a ten year-old girl, also remembered seeing Africans for the first time on that pilgrimage. She had never seen groove scars on people's cheeks before, and she was fascinated by these marks of West African beauty, as well as by the incredibly colorful clothes of the women from Niger. All of these descriptions of "first contact" are also part of the experience of the Hajj, and the memories are often recounted by pilgrims in a mix of joy and awe.

Kuala Lumpur "Friday Mosque"

I wondered if this incredible transfusion of humanity – white, black, brown, and many shades in between – ever gave way to racism or ethnocentrism, as the sheer numbers of pilgrims, it seemed to me, had to engender difficulties of many kinds. When I asked this question, I was almost always met with a similar response: the feeling of goodwill and fraternity in the Holy Cities during the Hajj season is such that there is no racism or troubles based on ethnicity at all. But when I pressed, and tried to ask pilgrims to remember their actual experiences while performing the seven proscribed circumambulations of the Ka'ba, for example, I did eventually end up hearing different stories. Several Southeast Asian women, urban, cosmopolitan, and living lives where they mingled with many different kinds of people all the time, told me that Southeast Asians were simply physically smaller than Hajjis from many other nations, and thus they often were trampled and shoved to the side in the eagerness of pilgrims to perform the required rituals in heavy pedestrian traffic. A few of them hastened to add that such *kasar* ('coarse') actions were only seen as such by Southeast Asians, and that perhaps this was normal to other, particular cultures. A female Javanese pilgrim was less understanding of such cultural differences, however, and expressed her disapproval of how some people treated women while upon Hajj. "We do better in Southeast Asia," she told me, "and no man should ever be allowed to treat his wives or sisters in that way – he should be shamed." Another pilgrim, a Muslim from Manila, told of meeting a young Afghan with a long beard while he was in Mecca: the man was smiling at him, and they embraced as brothers and spoke in halting English together about the seriousness of the war there. These kinds of cross-cultural conversations are a big part of undertaking the Hajj, and the disparate friendships made on pilgrimage can sometimes last entire lifetimes. This mirrors the accounts of colonial-era pilgrimages a century ago as well, as news, fraternity, and friendship are exchanged in the Holy Cities, traveling back to distant Muslim lands and affecting local societies.

Yet it was indeed the question of communication that seemed among the most important issues to understand in studying the Hajj: how do all of these people speak to one another, when they come from not only eleven different Southeast Asian societies, but scores of global nationalities as well? Is Arabic the most common *lingua franca*, or English, or Malay, or some combination of the three? Pilgrims had different answers for this question, depending on their own experiences. Thai Hajjis, for example, expressed some real difficulty being able to navigate Saudi society satisfactorily while they were there upon Hajj. Most Thai Muslims can speak some Malay, but their Malay is a regional dialect, and is not so close to standard Malay that it can automatically be understood. Most certainly do not speak English, or French, two other important languages (at least numerically) of the pilgrimage. But there are actually many Thai Muslims resident in Saudi Arabia, where they work as cooks, drivers, and go to religious schools as students, so that there is a built-in community of disaporic Thais who are in-county to help the Thai pilgrims with everyday needs. An Indonesian student pointed out that since Indonesia has the largest global delegation each year to Mecca, it is in the interest of shopkeepers and businesspeople in the Hejaz – regardless of their own ethnicity – to learn some Indonesian in order to be able to sell their goods. Even if they cannot speak eloquently, many Saudis and Muslims working in the kingdom can speak enough of this Southeast Asian *lingua franca* to help pilgrims get around. Yet it was the comment of a blind Malay Hajji, a Chinese man from Johor who had converted to Islam some years ago, whose answer made the most sense to me. Deprived of his eyes, he was absolutely dependent on his ears when he performed his Hajj as a young man, walking stick in hand. This man mentioned that he heard an array of languages constantly overlapping in the

Mosque in Ternate, Malulu, Eastern Indonesia

Holy Cities, pressed up against one another in subtle gradations of distance from his ears. Malay, Urdu, English, French, and Arabic, alongside many other languages, all co-exist in the Hejaz, therefore, though people often have to use sign-language to get their thoughts across when they meet each other in the street.

A final aspect of pilgrims' memories of the material world of the Hajj has to do with housing and health, the latter being partially related to the kinds of domiciles available to pilgrims. Hajjis from Southeast Asia stay in a broad range of housing in the Hejaz, from five-star hotels right outside the main mosques in Mecca and Medina to shabby rented apartment blocks, located miles from the center of each city. These options represent the differences in wealth that are characteristic of the Southeast Asian pilgrimage: Singaporean and Brunei Hajjis, for example, mostly stay in extremely comfortable surroundings, while the pilgrims from the region's poorer nations (usually Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, not to mention the small numbers who come from Cambodia or Vietnam) stay in considerably less august circumstances. These differences in abode then also translate, to some extent, into differences in health while in the Hejaz. A Cham Cambodian Hajji, for example, told me that there was a large amount of airborne disease in his group, because 45 of them were bunking together on the floor of an apartment bloc located at some distance from the main mosques. An Acehnese confirmed this, stating that flu went around the compounds regularly and that the Hajj rituals themselves are demanding and very tiring, so that extra miles to walk and extra people sleeping on one's floor only meant a greater chance that the pilgrim would find himself sick at some point of the journey. Yet Singaporean Hajjis described the rooms at the Hilton and the Swissotel in Mecca and Medina as exceedingly comfortable, and managed according to international standards by very accommodating staffs. The Singaporean and Brunei governments oversee these arrangements, and Hajjis from both of these countries are virtually assured of plenty of rest and more than adequate food and health measures when they are out on the road performing their religious obligations. These differences in experience suggest that the Hajj, though meant as an egalitarian experience for human beings no matter what their earthly power or station before God, may not always be so. Spiritually, this may indeed be the case. Yet there are discernable differences in the material circumstances of pilgrims that are readily available for all to see.

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These were the kinds of conversations that I had in a several thousand mile-long arc of regional Muslim lands over the past six years. In this short essay I have only alluded to the physical manifestations of the Hajj, and how these circumstances are related to others through the lived memories of scores of Southeast Asian pilgrims. The spiritual dimensions of these travels I have written about elsewhere. Yet through the material realities of the Hajj one gets a sense of the vast complexity of this journey, and how Southeast Asian pilgrims are both bound together and inevitably separated by the day to day manifestations of their travels in fascinating ways. From the journey out to the Middle East to the living arrangements of millions of pilgrims in the diverse quarters of Jeddah, this story is a varied one, and one reflective of many different kinds of lived experience. There is no one archetypal pilgrimage to Mecca from the monsoon countries of Southeast Asia, from the lands "beneath the winds". I still feel very fortunate to have been able to hear of the contours of these voyages, the sum of which comprise – now, as many centuries previously – the single largest annual movement of human beings anywhere on the planet.