

# 3

## Pilgrimage and Power

Debates over the politics of pilgrimage revolve around three key questions. Do pilgrimages tend to fall under the control of entrenched authorities—secular and religious—or do they remain independent social movements inherently hostile to hierarchy and hegemony? Do pilgrimages encourage universal and egalitarian identities, or do they harden parochial loyalties already dividing nations, sects, and social groups? And are modernization and globalization destroying pilgrimages or making them more vigorous than ever—reducing them to quasi-secular tourism or turning them into truly worldwide expressions of spiritual revivals?

To a remarkable degree, these debates amount to an ongoing conversation with the legacy of a single man—Victor Turner, the British anthropologist who was the world's leading authority on ritual and the pioneer of comparative pilgrimage studies. Turner argued that pilgrimage carries greater political significance than any other ritual. He never investigated the hajj firsthand, but he believed its far-reaching political implications make it the most important pilgrimage of all.

Turner is best known as the theorist and proponent of *communitas*—an idealistic belief that all human beings are bound together by a fundamental sameness transcending whatever particular cultures teach about differences in our nature and interests. *Communitas* was the polar opposite of *structure*—the system of rank and status underlying the division of labor in society. The two poles were by no means equal; structure was dominant; and it kept the upper hand by carving out safe times and places where *communitas* could express

itself harmlessly in the language of myth and symbol. Rituals created special conditions so *communitas* could bolster structure instead of threatening it. Precisely because rituals occur in supernatural circumstances—in a “time out of time”—they can challenge the status quo with coded and stage-managed attacks that dominant elites would otherwise find intolerable.

Turner thought pilgrimage inspired the most intense clashes between *communitas* and structure. Catholic clergy opposed mass pilgrimages in medieval Europe precisely because they were spontaneous movements of ordinary believers that threatened church authority. Only after the church realized that the power and popularity of pilgrimages were permanent did it embrace them and give them official guidance. Many pilgrimages produced elaborate organizations that paralleled and intersected the church.

Turner was intrigued by the interplay of social interests—religious and secular, mass and elite, national and international—that competed to control pilgrimages across Europe and the New World. He spent years trying to explain how they could spawn so much *communitas* and so much structure at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Having characterized *communitas* as antistructure, Turner faced a seeming contradiction: Many pilgrimages retained great autonomy and mass appeal long after creating well-organized institutions of their own.

To resolve the paradox, he abandoned the notion of *communitas* as antistructure and called it counterstructure. In this view, *communitas* allows humanist and universal values to challenge dominant institutions without being absorbed by them. Turner even decided that *communitas* and structure are complementary—basic instincts constantly needing to be balanced and harmonized. To express the ideal synthesis of *communitas* and structure, he coined yet another neologism—*societas*. Structure represents the human need to conserve, and *communitas* is the perennial need to grow. *Societas* combines the two, reconciling our inherently dualistic nature. No matter how much Turner softened his portrayal of the clash between *communitas* and structure, he never expected the conflict to end. Indeed, he hoped it would intensify as *communitas* found new channels of expression and ensure a permanent source of creative tension in societies in danger of becoming too rigid and complacent.

Turner was remarkably confident that pilgrimage remains forever irrepressible. “There is something inveterately populist, anarchical, even anticlerical, about pilgrimages in their very essence.”<sup>2</sup> He insisted that pilgrimage serves society best by criticizing it instead of reproducing it. Pilgrimage nurtures a special *communitas*—a constant striving toward transcendent ideals that fill our hearts and souls.

Turner was particularly fascinated by the hajj, which he believed to be the best example of “structured *communitas*.” How is it that the same pilgrimage that is so intertwined with nation-states and entrenched elites is also the pilgrimage confronting them most radically with a contrary vision—that we are

all bound together as equal members of a universal human community? How is it that dominant powers ceaselessly impose structure on the hajj, only to find that they are unwittingly inventing new ways for hajjis to experience *comunitas* on their own?

## The Great International Pilgrimage Systems

Although many religions have international pilgrimages with ancient roots and mass followings, the hajj has always been in a class by itself. Compared with the fluid and multilayered pilgrimages of Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism, the hajj is a model of simplicity. Most pilgrimages are voluntary, but the hajj is a basic obligation the Qur'an explicitly demands of all Muslims who are physically and financially capable.

The hajj must be performed in a single location, at a specific time, and in a prescribed manner. Other faiths grant pilgrims wide latitude in choosing the sacred places they wish to visit, arranging travel around daily responsibilities, and completing ritual duties at their own pace. Hajjis enjoy none of this freedom and flexibility. Many avoid any variation and innovation, determined to follow the example Muhammad established with his own pilgrimages.

Muhammad radically reformed the hajj, breaking its ties to paganism and modeling it on the heroic story of Ibrahim (Abraham), the founder of monotheism, whose unflinching obedience to God is the overarching inspiration for the hajj and for Islam in general. Muhammad used his last pilgrimage as the setting for the famous "Farewell Sermon" atop the Mount of Mercy on the plain of 'Arafat, where he revealed the final portion of the Qur'an, declaring to hajjis assembled below that he had "perfected" their religion.

Just as Muhammad regarded the restoration of the "authentic" hajj as the capstone of his prophecy, Muslims view the hajj as the most important of Islam's "five pillars" and as the crowning spiritual achievement of their lives. When Muslims undertake the hajj, they are reenacting decisive acts of monotheism's two greatest prophets—the very first and the very last. The drama reminds pilgrims of their bonds with Muslims around the world and with the millions of pilgrims who preceded them over fourteen centuries.

On a deeper level, the rituals transport hajjis as far into the past and future as the mind can conceive. When hajjis circle the *Ka'ba*, they walk in Muhammad's footsteps. They also imitate forms of worship laid down by Ibrahim before the birth of Islam, by Adam before history's dawn, and by adoring angels who circled God's throne in heaven before he created the universe.

Looking to the other pole of eternity, the visit to God's house is a dress rehearsal for Judgment Day. The pilgrim's simple white garb, the *ihram*, is the shroud all souls will wear when they rise from the grave and stand before their Creator at the end of time. In anticipation, many hajjis carefully preserve the

towel-like wrappings they wear in Mecca, instructing their families to make them their real burial shrouds so they can appear at the final Judgment just as they did during their most hallowed days on earth.

The hajj is an obligation that can be fulfilled only in Mecca. Unlike Banaras and Jerusalem, Mecca does not stand at the top of a staircase of sacred sites, where multiple pilgrimages confer ascending degrees of grace. The hajj so clearly overshadows all other pious journeys that for Muslims it *is* their pilgrimage system, pure and simple.

Journeys to other sacred places are mere “visits” (*ziyaras*) that can never substitute for a hajj no matter how many times they are repeated. No combination of *ziyaras* can equal a hajj, even if their destinations include the prophet’s mosque in Medina, the tombs of the most venerated imams in Iraq and Iran, or the final resting places of the thousands of saints and martyrs all across Asia and Africa.

Not even a visit to Mecca itself can replace the hajj if it falls outside the designated pilgrimage season—the last month of the Islamic calendar, Dhu al-Hijjah. Muslims can make the *‘umra*—an abbreviated version of the hajj—whenever they wish, but it will not take the place of a hajj.

Although the *‘umra* can be completed in a single day, it requires the same special dress as the hajj and includes the same rites within Mecca. But the *‘umra* omits all the key rituals on the city’s outskirts—culminating acts that “make the hajj the hajj”—especially the Day of Standing on the plain of ‘Arafat and the stoning of the “devil” and animal sacrifice at Mina.

Because the *‘umra* mimics famous scenes of the hajj, non-Muslims often refer to it as “the lesser pilgrimage,” and even some Muslims harbor the superstition that seven *‘umras* are equivalent to a hajj. Nonetheless, an *‘umra* is just another *ziyara*—more meritorious than a morning trek to the tomb of a local saint but no substitute for obeying an explicit command of God.

The hajj’s exceptional importance in world politics flows directly from its exalted religious status. Firm roots in scripture, combined with an unswerving focus on a single sacred city, promote a global pilgrimage distinguished by unparalleled cosmopolitanism and continuity. Hinduism and Christianity have pilgrimage systems with comparable breadth and vitality and even longer histories of politicization. Yet, because they are so numerous and malleable, Hindu and Christian pilgrimages never acquired anything approaching the hajj’s preeminence.

## From Sacred Truce to Global Parliament

Although the hajj is the youngest of the great pilgrimages, it has always been the most politicized. Its political dimensions predated Muhammad by centuries. The spread of Islam merely broadened the scope and deepened the mean-

ings of an annual religious gathering that was already a linchpin of Arabia's political and economic life.

Mecca was the wealthiest of the competing city-states straddling the busy trade routes that link the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Mecca's pre-eminence stemmed from its role as religious hub of a fractious society with no clear political center. Even in polytheistic times, shared veneration of the *Ka'ba* induced feud-prone tribes throughout Arabia to set aside differences long enough to assemble for their holiest rites.

The heart of the pre-Islamic hajj was Mecca's "sacred truce"—a customary pact declaring the city a safe haven where bloodshed was outlawed during Arabia's most celebrated festival. By preserving Mecca's status as a sanctuary (*haram*), the tribes shared a vital mechanism for resolving conflicts, sealing their pact each year during the pilgrimage. Creating a secure forum for negotiation and arbitration is a consistent theme of the hajj in ancient Arabia and the Islamic era.

A striking example of this continuity is a famous Muslim parable linking Muhammad to the *Ka'ba* and portraying him as a skilled mediator before he became a prophet. The people of Mecca had just completed a major renovation of the *Ka'ba*. The four most powerful tribal confederations of central Arabia were at odds, each claiming the honor to return the Black Stone to its proper location in a corner of the shrine. To avoid violence, the tribes accepted Muhammad's arbitration and vowed to abide by his decision. To their surprise, Muhammad awarded the honor to all the tribes without really giving it to any of them. Rather than engender lasting enmity by declaring a winner, Muhammad asked a chief of each confederation to grasp a corner of a four-sided robe. Then he placed the Black Stone in the center of the cloth and told the bearers to carry it together to the *Ka'ba*, where he alone fitted the stone in its new setting.<sup>3</sup>

The diplomatic role of the early hajj made it analogous to the Olympic games of ancient Greece. The Olympics also encouraged a broader identity—pan-Hellenism—among evenly matched city-states sharing a common culture yet locked in constant warfare.<sup>4</sup> The comparison is still fitting today. Like the International Olympic Committee, hajj managers are constantly accused of hypocrisy—of indulging the very commercialism, nationalism, and favoritism they are supposed to transcend.<sup>5</sup> Both the hajj and the Olympics must garner support from the same political and economic powers that would be destroyed if their loftiest principles became reality.

Debate over the politics of the hajj is as old as Islam itself. Because Muhammad founded a new state as well as a new religion, there has always been lively interest in how the hajj fits into his dual mission as prophet and political reformer. The debate boils down to competing understandings of Muhammad's intentions.

In making the hajj a pillar of Islam, was Muhammad looking to the past

or to the future? Was he pragmatically bending to customs of a deeply conservative society, hoping to win over Meccan oligarchs who nearly destroyed him? Or was he planting the seed of a new society, radically different from anything the world had experienced—a universal and egalitarian community that can grow into an irresistible force if the hajj nurtures its ideals in Muslim hearts around the world?

There is truth in both explanations, and they are by no means mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, Western narrators tend to favor the tale of compromise, whereas Muslims overwhelmingly endorse the revolutionary account, acknowledging that reality is everywhere far from the dream. Westerners see Islamization of the hajj as reinforcing entrenched power, whereas Muslims see it as an idealistic vision of a new order.<sup>6</sup>

### The Dutch Uncle of Modern Hajj Policy

The Westerner who most cogently advanced the conservative explanation of the hajj's origins is Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje—the renowned Dutch Orientalist and colonial officer whose views shaped modern pilgrimage policy, first in Dutch-ruled Indonesia and, long after his death, in independent states throughout Asia and Africa.<sup>7</sup> If Victor Turner saw the hajj as shining *communitas*, Snouck Hurgronje viewed it as a bulwark of the status quo. Turner thought the hajj embodied irrepressible demands for equality, but Snouck Hurgronje spent his life reassuring nervous elites that they could use it to subjugate Muslims everywhere.

Snouck Hurgronje's confidence about the malleability of the hajj stemmed from his unparalleled knowledge of Islamic history, contemporary Meccan society, and the cultures of Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> He regarded Muhammad's decision to preserve the hajj as a stroke of political genius that accomplished many goals simultaneously.

By centering his new state in Mecca (the city he was forced to flee and conquer) instead of Medina (the city that gave him refuge), Muhammad won over his former enemies and consolidated Islam in Arabia. He also marshaled resources to launch a united force against the greatest military powers of his day, the Byzantine and Persian empires. When Muhammad instructed Muslims to pray in the direction of Mecca rather than Jerusalem, his community could make a double claim: They could be monotheistic without being Jews or Christians, and they could be universalistic without ceasing to be Arab.

Snouck Hurgronje's Muhammad is the soul of realism—a prophet-statesman who preserved the "Meccan Festival" because it was a cherished Arabian heritage that helped mobilize a primitive people "whose conservatism penetrated to the marrow of their bones." His Muhammad—the most political of all prophets—viewed the hajj as "a means and not an end."<sup>9</sup> By wrapping

the hajj in Islamic garb, he “accentuated the Arabian character of his religion,” making it palatable to a pagan society that worshiped their customs more than their deities.<sup>10</sup> By this account, the hajj was not only inherently political but also inherently conservative.

Snouck Hurgronje spent about a year in Jeddah and Mecca and became the first Western ethnographer of Meccan society and one of the few to photograph intimate scenes of its family life.<sup>11</sup> His observations persuaded him that Europeans greatly exaggerated the city’s role as a breeding ground for anticolonial agitation in the Islamic world. He insisted native Meccans were preoccupied with fleecing their pilgrim prey, not with spreading radicalism. The true danger was the network of exiles and students who took refuge in Mecca’s many expatriate communities, exploiting the freedom of the hajj to propagandize visitors from their homelands.

Snouck Hurgronje was most critical of Mecca’s “Jawa colony”—the settlement of Malay-speaking Muslims who used their commercial and religious connections to undermine Dutch and British rule in Southeast Asia. The greatest threat was not the herd of gullible hajjis but this handful of conspirators who turned their piety into fanaticism and rebellion.

He opposed European calls to cut off the flow of pilgrims and urged colonialists to use their vital interest in the hajj to justify stepping up diplomacy and espionage in the holy city. At his instigation, the Netherlands became the first non-Muslim state to set up a full-service hajj bureau in Jeddah. The ostensible purpose was to protect Indonesian pilgrims from swindlers and predators, but the mission included surveillance of Mecca’s Malay community, particularly their political activities and communications with hajjis from Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Snouck Hurgronje’s most important legacy was the “Islamic strategy” he devised to pave the way for colonialism in the Dutch East Indies. For more than thirty years, he fended off the objections of Dutch merchants, missionaries, and generals to build an administration that would “civilize” Islam instead of suppressing it. The crux of his approach was to distinguish between religious and political dimensions of Islam, sponsoring the former and crushing the latter.<sup>13</sup> He called for constant vigilance against pan-Islam, Mahdism, and jihad. Yet he also insisted non-Muslim rulers could win gratitude and acquiescence by supporting cherished institutions, such as religious schools, courts blending Islamic and customary law, and, above all, a well-run pilgrimage to Mecca.

Unlike most Europeans of his day, Snouck Hurgronje believed that the political unity of Islam had ended forever and that there was no reason to fear communications between Muslims of different nationalities. He regarded talk of Islamic revival as Turkish and German propaganda—a “despicable game” that sought “to light the blaze of a Mohammedan religious war on a large scale, and thereby to cause endless confusion in international relations.”<sup>14</sup> He

scorned the French and British for backing rival candidates for a caliphate that had no real power and in Indonesia little popularity.

While other colonial powers banned the hajj or strangled it with red tape, the Dutch sponsored pilgrimages at record rates. In the 1880s, only 4,000 Indonesians made the pilgrimage each year. By World War I, the number was 30,000, and on the eve of the Great Depression it surpassed 50,000. The upsurge was a direct result of Snouck Hurgronje's efforts as advisor for native and Arabian affairs in Netherlands India from 1889 to 1906 and as tutor to a new generation of colonial officers at the University of Leiden until his death in 1936.<sup>15</sup>

Snouck Hurgronje always contended the specter of the "fanatical hajji" was a phantom that Dutch politicians used to bully colleagues who knew nothing about Indonesia into endorsing anti-Islamic policies. He responded that the vast majority of hajjis returned home exactly as they departed—not as rebels but as "sheep." Any effort to suppress pilgrimage was unnecessary and doomed to backfire.<sup>16</sup> Snouck Hurgronje counted on the presumed passivity of ordinary Muslims to give the Dutch time to implement a paternalistic policy of "association"—nurturing a loyal cadre of European-educated Indonesians who would push Islam to the margins of an increasingly secular society. He believed it was best to let the hajj die a natural death, a victim of its own excesses and the irresistible lure of Western culture.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Snouck Hurgronje grossly underestimated the power and political skills of Indonesia's Muslims, especially their ability to mobilize modern parties and mass movements. In the end, his immense knowledge of Islam and admiration for its civilization were no match for his sense of cultural superiority and historical inevitability. No matter how much he lauded parallels between Dutch liberalism and Islamic idealism—their dreams of racial equality, individual freedom, and universal peace—he never doubted that Europeans and not Muslims would shape the values and institutions of international society.<sup>18</sup>

### Empire and Nation: Managing the Common Heritage of Islam

Snouck Hurgronje's hajj policies gained wider acceptance in independent states that arose after his death than they ever enjoyed among his peers in Europe. Facing the resurgent Islam that Snouck Hurgronje had discounted, rulers in the new nations adopted his strategy of seizing pilgrimage before opponents could turn it against them. In one country after another, state sponsorship grew into regulation, control, and monopoly.

Compared with their former colonial masters, politicians who guided the nationalist movements of the Third World had greater respect for the hajj as a perpetual repository of universalistic ideals. Even if only nominal Muslims,



they realized Snouck Hurgronje missed the point when he saw the hajj as reflecting Muhammad's ambitions instead of God's commands. The great nationalist leaders of the post-World War II era—Nasser of Egypt, Sukarno of Indonesia, Adnan Menderes in Turkey, Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, and Ahmadu Bello in Nigeria—understood that in the popular imagination the hajj has always been the most powerful reminder that Islam is a single community of believers distinguished by their degree of piety and not by their origins.

Nationalist politicians also realized the hajj would never be fully compatible with their own determination to wield sovereignty in separate societies. No matter how much Islam adapted to disparate cultures, the hajj would always be a countervailing force, pulling Muslims toward a common identity transcending legal boundaries and political allegiances. Nothing makes Muslims more mindful of God's indifference to their differences than the sight of pilgrims from every race and class performing the same acts of worship at the same time and place. No other experience so openly invites them to question how well their existing institutions—international and domestic—live up to God's standards. And no other experience so readily inspires self-criticism and demands for social change.

Muslim nationalists share Snouck Hurgronje's fascination with the political uses of the hajj. But they are much closer to Victor Turner in interpreting pilgrimage as a humanistic vision with worldwide appeal—a vision that inevitably contradicts parochial identities, including nationalism. Snouck Hurgronje never outgrew his amazement that a set of incomprehensible rites, beginning as little more than a tribal picnic, could blossom into the world's most poignant expression of transnational community. Because Muslim politicians assume the hajj was created by God and the prophets rather than by the Bedouin, they see no anomaly in its blend of Arabian roots and universal reach.

Before and after the creation of independent nation-states, Muslim leaders competed to gain political advantage from the hajj. Yet even when it turns violent, rivalry is tempered by subtlety and calculated ambiguity, particularly in asserting claims of sovereignty over the pilgrimage and the cities of Mecca and Medina. The king of Saudi Arabia scrupulously limits his title to "Custodian of the Two Holy Cities," stressing the gravity of his responsibilities and not the supremacy of his command. In projecting authority through innuendo and symbolism more than law and might, the Saudis echo the many dynasties that collectively managed the hajj for more than a millennium. Constant maneuvering to control the pilgrimage was a politics of prestige more than a politics of power. Sultans and emirs enhanced their legitimacy by subsidizing and protecting the hajj, not simply by flexing military muscle.

Even under the Ottomans—the most modern and centralized of all Islamic empires—the Hejaz remained a land of insolence, too important to be ignored yet too remote to be subdued.<sup>19</sup> Like all Ottoman vassals, the sharif of Mecca

knew that the sultan's power shrank exponentially with distance from Istanbul. And no one was more cunning and venal in exploiting that weakness than Mecca's ruling families.

Pageantry and tribute were as important as the show of force. Great powers in the Islamic world tried to outdo one another in assembling the biggest hajj caravans and sending the most generous tokens of patronage. Their beneficence was ostentatious and widely distributed—endowments for Mecca and charities for its residents, stipends and bribes for its officials, and protection money to buy off Bedouin raiders who devastated even the best armed caravans crossing their domains.<sup>20</sup>

Two donations acquired unique importance as icons of imperial preeminence. The *mahmal* was a ceremonial litter filled with silks and jewels, carried atop a colorfully adorned camel. The centerpiece was a precious box, often containing nothing more than a Qur'an presented to the people of Mecca as testimony of a sultan's devoted protection. The *kiswa* is the large black cloth—covered with Qur'anic verses magnificently embroidered in golden thread—that is draped over the *Ka'ba*. Each year, a new *kiswa* is unfurled at the beginning of the hajj season, and the old one is cut into pieces that distinguished pilgrims receive as treasured souvenirs.<sup>21</sup>

Presenting the *mahmal* and *kiswa* was a royal prerogative, jealously guarded by regimes that outfitted their caravans as though mobilizing for war. Mamluk sultans of Egypt claimed the exclusive right to send the *mahmal*, but rival offerings also came from rulers of Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. When the Ottomans became the hegemonic power in the Hejaz, they often permitted *mahmals* from other regions, as long as they deferred to the stronger caravans from Istanbul and Damascus.<sup>22</sup>

With the rise of nation-states, Saudi Arabia gradually decided to end these prerogatives. After a skirmish between Saudi and Egyptian troops during the hajj of 1926, *mahmals* were banned. To underline their self-sufficiency, the Saudis began manufacturing *kiswas* on their own soil, ending six centuries of Egyptian privilege in “dressing” Islam's most sacred shrine.<sup>23</sup>

The system of nation-states still has not resolved disputes over who should administer the hajj. Now as before, all claims of sovereignty are contested and conditional at best. Premodern dynasties may have described the Holy Cities as another fiefdom or province, but they behaved as though entrusted with a commons that is the shared heritage of all Muslims. Today as well, Islamic states debate Saudi Arabia's claims over the hajj with the same vigor that the international community contests issues such as sharing the oceans, guarding the biosphere, and exploring outer space.<sup>24</sup>

More than ever, Muslim rulers understand that hajj management must be a truly international effort. Forced to restrain political rivalries within a common set of religious commitments, they increasingly turn to international law. Fashioning flexible rules and processes they can respect and periodically re-

negotiate, they have built the world's first international regime explicitly devoted to pilgrimage.

Their regime relies more on customary international law than on formal treaties and strict compliance. They are less concerned with transparency and uniformity than with consensus and fairness. Because the hajj is just one of many fields where they must cooperate, they are usually willing to compromise today and renegotiate tomorrow.

By using the Organization of the Islamic Conference as an arena for multilateral negotiations, they have created a hajj regime that adjusts the international balance of power in favor of non-Arab nations. Blending religion, law, and power, they draw simultaneously on Islamic tradition and the current thinking of international lawyers and social scientists. Their efforts will shape the future of the world's greatest pilgrimage.