CHAPTER 8

HOLY PLACES, CONTESTED SPACES: BRITISH PAKISTANI ACCOUNTS OF PILGRIMAGE TO MAKKAH AND MADINAH

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Introduction

Taking a cue from Eade and Sallnow’s (1991) key work in the anthropology of Christian pilgrimage, the present chapter is a study of the normative and contested accounts of sacred journeys to the holy places of Makkah and Madinah reported by Pakistani heritage Muslims in the UK diaspora. Following the likes of Durkheim (1912) and Turner (1974a, 1974b) respectively, Eade and Sallnow accept that pilgrimage both promotes social integration and the more temporary, liminal and anti-structural feelings associated with communitas. However, they also maintain that the reinforcement of social difference during sacred journeys is of equal significance. Specifically, then, this account documents: 1) British Pakistanis’ symbolic constructions and ritual embodiments of sacred time and place, community and identity, during the various rites of hajj and other forms of pilgrimage; and 2) the cross-cutting and competing narratives of class and race, religious devotionalism and puritanism, that persist during pilgrimage.

Over two years, between 1999 and 2001, eighteen in-depth, semi-structured, interviews were conducted with respondents settled in Lancashire mill towns such as Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale and Nelson. Most interviewees traced their roots to Mirpur district in Pakistani-administered Kashmir (see Saifullah Khan 1977; Ballard 1983; Kalra 2000), while the ages of respondents ranged in more or less equal numbers across the following groups: those in their teens and twenties; thirties and forties; fifties to seventies. Their occupations were as follows: sales and business (four); further or higher education (three); retired (two); teaching/teaching assistant (two); housewife (two); community leader (one); computer programmer (one); chemist (one); housing support worker (one); and spinner (one). Around a quarter were women. Most importantly, all had either been on hajj (half) or
‘umra (the minor pilgrimage) (a quarter) – and some (a quarter) on both – at least once since the 1970s.

As many as 25,000 British Muslims travel to Makkah and Madinah for Hajj every year (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2006). Indeed, so long as they are physically fit and can afford to make the journey, it is incumbent upon the followers of Islam to undertake the pilgrimage at least once in their lives from the eighth to the thirteenth day of the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar, Dhu‘l hijja. In contrast, ‘umra is a voluntary rite, which involves the performance of abbreviated rituals outside Hajj season. During Hajj and ‘umra many Muslims will also seek to do ziyara (visitation) of the tombs of sacred personalities such as the Prophet Muhammad, his family and companions. This is certainly true of the majority of South Asian heritage Muslims and especially the British Pakistanis interviewed here. Insofar as they have been influenced by any particular tradition of Islam, whether through socialisation at home and the mosque or more active religiosity, the respondents tended to be associated with the devotional Islam of various transnational Sufi cults and/or the reforming Sunni ‘ulama (religious scholars) movement founded in British India, the Ahl-i Sunnat or ‘Barelwis’ (see Lewis 1994; Sanyal 1996; Geaves 2000; Welbner 2003)

My initial motivation for undertaking this research was very much driven by an interest in imaginings of a global umma (Islamic community) in Muslim diasporas, this at a time when the study of transnationalism was rising to the top of social-scientific agendas. While the impact of contemporary international crises in this regard can not be ignored (see Welbner 2002, on ‘9/11’ and the Gulf War, and McLoughlin 1996, on Bosnia), the pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah is perhaps the most emblematic expression of a universal Muslim community, for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. As one of the five pillars (arkan) of Islam, it is the Hajj that brings believers together at the site of their faith’s genesis. The rites of this sacred journey are said not only to purify the individual believer of his or her sins, but also attest to, and reaffirm, the diachronic and synchronic continuity of the umma. So while pilgrims follow symbolically in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad – who is believed to have established the rituals prescribed by the Qur’an (2: 124ff) before his death – with more than 2.5 million pilgrims annually, the Hajj is now ‘the largest and most culturally diverse assembly of humanity to gather in one place at one time’ ( Bianchi 1995: 88).

In the pre-modern period, the time, effort and even danger involved in travelling to Makkah and Madinah generally meant that numbers attending for pilgrimage were relatively small (Pearson 1994). However, in an age of globalised modernity, when the orthodox discursive tradition, or what Gellner (1992) calls ‘High’ Islam, has become more decisively and uniformly universalised at the expense of ‘Folk’ Islam, pilgrimage has become accessible and affordable to ordinary believers worldwide (Antoun 1989).

A tendency towards ideological
coherence (Asad 1986) has undoubtedly been effected in modern Islam through state education and mass literacy, as well as the media, Islamic da’wa (propagation) organisations and international migration. Indeed, in her study of Sylhet in Bangladesh, Gardner (1995) argues that, among successful economic migrants, the performance of Hajj is part of a modern, more rationalised and textualised, ‘Protestant’ Islamic consciousness that is the product of working in Britain and especially in Saudi Arabia (1995: 243–5).

My argument here, however, is that the argument that Muslim identities are increasingly standardised and homogenised in the global postmodern requires significant qualification. As Lehman (2001) and Beckford (2003) suggest, and my ethnography of British Pakistanis shows, time-space compression sees religious actors make and remake boundaries of the sacred and profane, creating multiple, criss-crossing webs of friction and conflict, ambiguity and resistance, within and across competing communities and traditions. Indeed, for all the movement of so-called ‘fundamentalism’ from the margins of classical Islam towards the centre of modern Muslim discourse (Calder 1993), Islam remains ‘polycentric . . . lacking any central global power’ (Lehman 2001: 308). Moreover, as Eickelman and Piscatori insist in their study of mobility and the Islamicate imagination, ‘a causal relationship between the act of travel and a heightened sense of being Muslim’ cannot necessarily be assumed (1990: 16). Hajj is increasingly nationalised, with national delegations often limiting cosmopolitan interactions (1990: xvi) and travellers exhibiting a ‘consciousness of locality and difference’ (1990: xv). As Fischer and Abedi (1990) maintain elsewhere, even while the pilgrimage is performed within the boundaries of the authoritarian nation-state of Saudi Arabia, contested social, economic, cultural and political inferences from various local-global contexts are always in evidence. At the same time, and paradoxically, the very processes which enable powerful attempts to regulate universalised Muslim identities also integrate the Muslim masses (and especially the new middle classes) into new public spheres and cultures of everyday consumerism, organic hybridisation and reflexive self-identities (Turner 1994: 202; Appadurai 1996; Featherstone 2002).

The sacred and profane: normative and improvised authenticities of ‘being there’

The ritual mechanisms of British Pakistani pilgrims’ symbolic separation from dunya (this worldliness) and liminal transition to the sacred are performed when, having made their ablutions and stated their intention to complete the pilgrimage, they don the ihram. Depending on their route to Saudi Arabia, whether they come via a port of entry at Jeddah or Madinah, British Pakistanis may change into their ritual attire in the UK, where they make stopovers (for example, in Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates), on the aeroplane itself or at one of the miqats (boundary stations) outside Makkah. Two female
respondents spoke of ihram in terms of both physical separation from the familiar and a greater consciousness of Allah, what Fischer and Abedi describe evocatively as ‘reawakening from the oblivion of ordinary life’ (1990: 150):

[Y]ou forget everything, your children, your families. I thought England was everything for me, my lifestyle was everything, but once I got there all I thought about was me as a Muslim. (Maryam, 26, teaching assistant)

It prepares you as you’re approaching the House of God that you’re becoming more God-conscious, reciting the talbiya [invocation]: ‘O God, I am here, what is your command?’ at every part of the journey. (Shazia, 56, housewife)

Highlighting the sacred journey of pilgrims from sin and death to purity and rebirth as they repent and ask for God’s forgiveness and mercy (Werbner, 1998: 97), Habib (45, spinner) explained that the ihram also anticipates how all humankind will appear before God on the Day of Judgement:

When you’re in the divine presence that’s how you will be. A Muslim dies with only two sheets of cloth [their shroud]. Likewise, performing Hajj. No matter if he is a king or beggar, there is no difference between them in the sight of God.

However, another pilgrim cautioned that spiritual introversion and self-consciousness is not at all an automatic outcome of ritual separation: ‘you need to be in touch with yourself or you can feel anything’ (‘Ali, 30, housing support worker). Certainly for Zafar (74, retired spinner) the prospect of coming so close to the House of Allah, the centre of the Islamic universe, made him feel excited but also humble and nervous because of his sins and a perceived need to keep to the elevated (and idealised) adab (good manners) he associated with the holy places. However, this was not true of everyone. He complained: ‘In the past every moment of the journey was sacred and cherished but I see people with their mobile phones even when they are putting on their ihram – their mind is still on dunya, their business and football.’

Many pilgrims’ incorporation into sacred time and space is confirmed when they are confronted with Masjid al-Haram, the Great Mosque of Makkah. Here they perform the first set of rituals which re-enact, in reverse order, the faith-testing ordeals of the founder of monotheism, Prophet Ibrahim, his son, Isma’il, and the latter’s mother and former’s concubine, Hajar (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 150; Werbner 1998: 97–100). When Ibrahim is forced by his wife Sarah to abandon Isma’il and Hajar in the desert, the latter searches frantically for water to save her baby son from death, only for God to create a miraculous spring from the ground. Pilgrims commemorate these events by drinking water from the Well of Zamzam, this after the sa’y (hurrying seven times) between two small hillocks, al-Safa and al-Marwa, adjacent to the precincts of the Great
Mosque. Of course, it is the *ka’ba*, the large, cube-shaped stone structure, covered by a black silk *kiswa* or curtain embroidered with golden calligraphy, that recalls the most iconic and totemic images of the pilgrimage. This is the House of God (re)built later in life by Ibrahim and Isma’il to mark their covenant with God when He tested a father by asking him to sacrifice his son.⁷ Here pilgrims must complete the *tawaf* (seven circumambulations).⁸

In underlining the importance of ‘being there’ pilgrims reinforced the idea of the holy places as a spiritual homeland and ‘one of the primal scenes of Islam’ (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 150). As Tariq (53, retired factory shop steward) reflected: ‘I had seen the large photographs in people’s houses, but nothing prepares you for the splendour and immense size of the mosque’. In a similar vein, Amjad (55, chemist) discussed the contrast between assuming that one is facing the ka’ba when praying towards Makkah and then actually ‘looking at it’.⁹ He, like many pilgrims, was overwhelmed with awe and emotion:

> When I just walked into the Great Mosque, *al-hamdu-li-llah* [praise be to God] and I saw the ka’ba there, the only thing I could do was to cry. You just grab the wall and cry for forgiveness, all the sins and misdemeanours you’ve done . . . It is as though you have come back home. That the ka’ba is the very source of our beginning – this is the feeling I had. And checking with ’ulama, some say the reason why it is there is because in the beginning of the world, the ka’ba is the place where Azra’il [the Angel of Death] took the piece of earth that Allah used to make Adam. I returned and the whole of humanity needs to return. It was a great blessing.

Such narratives of sacred place and belonging are also inflected with more individualised and particularistic feelings of closeness to family and kin, especially the dead. Maryam (26, teaching assistant) reported the impact on her mother, who was recently bereaved by the death of a son:

> I remember my mother saying to me, ‘My son’s gone to a place like this and we’re all going to go here’. As soon as she got there she was just consoled completely.

As they circumambulate the House of God most pilgrims salute the *hajar al-aswad* (black stone) lodged in one corner of the ka’ba and said by Muslim tradition to be a meteorite brought from Paradise by the Prophet Adam. However, others struggle through the crowds to kiss it (Bianchi 1995: 89). Ikram (25, teacher), a young man who went on Hajj primarily to accompany his elderly mother, told of how he improvised when he was unable to secure a clear path to the ka’ba: ‘I just thought in my heart, I’ve got the black stone in my hand and this is everything to me, my ka’ba. It just came to me, I thought I should kiss her hand and that was good enough for me.’

As well as such novel and deeply personalised interpretations, Sajid (37, computer programmer) described another experience that was characteristic
for many British Pakistanis. He underlined the continuing textual domination of an Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 1986; Messick 1993), one that has socialised generations of Muslims, directly or indirectly: ‘the whole history of Islam actually goes round in your head, what you’ve read . . . it’s like walking in the footsteps of the Prophet and the Companions’. However, in this regard, the influence of popular culture on the religious imagination is also apparent: ‘I have a video called The Message and in it, it shows what the ka’ba would probably have looked like. This was how I pictured it when I closed my eyes’ (Tariq, 53, retired factory shop steward). Such popular texts are invoked to simulate authenticity, in part because contemporary Makkah has cheated them of the unadulterated tradition of their imaginations. Many appreciate the air conditioning at the Great Mosque: ‘Asian England are nazak [soft/spoilt] so Allah has made the Hajj much easier for our sake’ (Munira, 69, widow). However, Suleyman (16, student) was not impressed with some of the many modern ‘improvements’ made by the oil-rich Saudi Arabian government since the 1950s and 1960s especially: ‘I could not but help feel that I was not experiencing the true sa’y which generations in the past have done running on marble rather than rock’.

Moreover, in a context where Makkah receives more visitors than any other city in the world for one month in the year, and in so doing provides Saudi Arabia with an income second only in importance to that from oil (Park 1994: 263), ‘Ali (30, housing support worker) underlined the constant presence of the secular and profane worlds, cheek by jowl, with the sacred:

You’ve got a big Arndale centre sitting in front of Haram Sharif and in front of Masjid al-Nabi [the Prophet’s mosque in Madinah] you see shops that have Nike trainers and even white wedding dresses. It makes you think, ‘Who buys these? How much are they [the Saudis] influenced [by the West]?’

Some welcome the supermarkets, with branded goods, or enjoy looking for bargains, while others are disappointed by the Saudi and UK agents who promise the world and deliver the bare minimum. However, as a sage-like young pilgrim, Hamid (20, undergraduate) advised, underlining again that the sacred is constructed in the imagination and so very much concerned with consciousness and perception: ‘If you want to look for tradition you will find tradition. If you don’t look you will not find tradition. So it’s a matter of where you look rather than being traditional or not.’

The height of the Hajj is the procession several miles east – via an overnight camp in the Mina Valley – to the plain of ‘Arafat, where Adam is said to have met again with Eve after the Fall (Wolfe, 1997: xxiii). Here they repented of their sin and were taught to pray on the Mount of Mercy, where later Muhammad, in his time, gave his farewell sermon. Some pilgrims shelter from the heat of the day in tents while others participate more directly in the
solemn congregational standing (\textit{wuquf}) in supplication from noon until sunset:

Us ladies just stayed in the tents, we made \textit{du'a} [supplication] and prayed for everything we could think of. I was especially praying for my son, so that he becomes good and doesn't get into trouble, all these kinds of things . . . making \textit{du'a}, asking forgiveness and doing \textit{tasbih} [using prayer beads] and \textit{zikr} [virtual remembrance of god]. (Shazia, 56, housewife)

Many hold that it is at this time and place that God is closest to the world, ‘making it easier for human prayers to attract his attention’ (Bianchi, 1995: 89), and pilgrims try to spend at least a short period on the Mount of Mercy making \textit{du'a}. However, it was the sheer size, scale and openness of ‘a vast plain of people all dressed in the same clothes as far as you can see on the horizon’ (Majid, 23, petrol station manager) that made most impact on pilgrims. At ‘Arafat they described an oceanic feeling of oneness and collective effervescence which again evoked the end as well as the beginning of time:

You see the whole of humanity all around you and say ‘al-hamdu-li-llah, I am actually part and parcel of this sea that is before me, the sea of humanity’, the oneness that it represents, our one Lord, Allah . . . The system, it just goes into a state of shock really, just looking at the size of the situation. (Amjad, 55, chemist)

If pilgrimage involves separation from dunya and the seeking of forgiveness, it also involves sacrifice ‘without losing faith in God’ (Werbner 1998: 98). Once the pilgrims have left the hotels and shops of Makkah behind and moved out into the desert, the stoning of three tall pillars (\textit{jamrat}) back at Mina and then the sacrifice that follows commemorate the binding of Isma’il and the repudiation of the Devil’s temptations. Amjad (55, chemist), one of the theologically more literate pilgrims, once again explained his understanding of the symbolic significance of the rituals:

You’re getting people here [in Britain, Europe and the West] nowadays that say that the Devil is just a figment of the imagination but, with respect . . . a Muslim has to always be prepared for what a powerful adversary the Devil is. He’s as real as anything and always tries to make sure you are never saved.

Trying to follow the example of exemplary persons such as Ibrahim and Isma’il, who resisted the temptations of Satan and showed commitment and perseverance or \textit{sabr} in their faith (Fischer and Abedi, 1990: 165), some pilgrims emphasised that: ‘You have to be patient here, then in the rest of your life you’re patient, it’s good for you’ (Farzana, 20, student). While there was only implicit criticism here, others were more explicit in their criticisms of fellow
pilgrims, arguing that, given the vast expansion of numbers in the modern age, many had lost respect and required instruction on proper adab. This was all grist to the mill of older pilgrims like Zafar (74, retired spinner): ‘Unless you suffer, hunger, thirst and feel discomfort, you have really not done Hajj . . . Have they been on Hajj or some holiday?’.

Nevertheless, some do find that the reality of completing this part of the Hajj really does test them to their limits, despite the buses and other modern conveniences. While many are extremely well prepared and organised, the heat combined with the sheer numbers can take its toll on others in terms of getting lost, dehydration, sunburn, exhaustion, injury and even the threat of death. It also impacts on the ability (and desire) of some pilgrims – and not just the elderly or infirm, who are excused – to complete their rites in the prescribed manner, again with some unusual improvisations. Most problems arise at thestoning of the pillars after the tiredness of a night meditating and collecting the requisite pebbles at Muzdalfia. The crush of people at the jamrat makes the act extremely hazardous, with some experiencing the stampedes that regularly make international news:

A stampede broke loose with people just crushed with each other, women without their scarves, screaming. A helicopter was monitoring on top of us and doing nothing. There wasn’t even room for an ambulance to get through. I think on that day fifty to sixty people died. (Sajid, 37, computer programmer)

He said, ‘Oh, I’ve had enough, I put all six people’s pebbles in one cloth and threw the big “football” at the Devil’. They were shouting at him, ‘Stupid, you’re supposed to throw them one by one’. He said, ‘Oh, please don’t say anything to me, I’ve just about made it back myself. (Majid, 23, petrol station manager)

The pilgrim relating this last story, while completing his ‘return’ tawaf (Wolfe 1997: xxiii) having arrived back in Makkah from Mina, actually collapsed and had to be taken to the hospital inside the Great Mosque’s precincts:

That day was the longest and most painful of all the Hajj, the day when you really get purified . . . I realised that if someone had told me the pilgrimage was going to be so difficult I probably wouldn’t have come but al-hamd u-li-llah I didn’t know that.

Multiple locations, competing imaginaries: class and race, puritanism and devotionalism

The sacrifice of ‘id al-‘adha, sometimes known as ‘id al-kabir (the ‘big’ festival), is the normative culmination of the Hajj. According to Werbner, the commemoration of Ibrahim’s covenant with God is ‘a moment of ordeal and release’ (1998: 99). Celebrated by Muslims worldwide, it is also a symbolic reminder
to pilgrims to share their blessings as the sacrificial meat is given to the poor. However, given the modern, depersonalised mechanisation and bureaucratisation of the Hajj, British Pakistanis now buy vouchers for the animal sacrifice before leaving the UK.\footnote{16} Neither do they participate in the 'id celebrations, because of the demanding schedule of rituals. Nevertheless, reflecting back on the rites of pilgrimage, there are many accounts of the sacred unity and emotional bonding of Muslims as a community, with reference to the suspension of racial, class and national hierarchies described by Turner (1969). There is a strong sense of egalitarianism, anti-structure and communitas, that ‘humanity is one single community . . . not different and separate nations’ (Amjad, 55, chemist):

Even all the barbers [who cut or shave pilgrims’ hair as a sign of release from ihram] shook my hand. It really was a humbling experience. I really felt Islamic brotherhood and I’m just used to being with Pakistanis. (Abid, 30, sales assistant)

Everyone tries to communicate with one another, even smiles or letting one person pass before you, letting them go in front or apologising, even sharing dates that you’ve got, or fruit, with the next person. I couldn’t speak their language, they couldn’t speak mine, but the smiles on each other’s faces made you feel really, really happy. (Ikram, 25, teacher)

The integrative function of ritual does not of course impose simple uniformity of meaning upon pilgrims. Rather, the pilgrimage is perhaps better seen as providing a common symbolic form which enables the aggregation of a sacred community, while at the same time allowing for the expression of multi-vocal interpretations and individual experiences (Turner 1974a; Turner 1974b; Cohen 1985). Moreover, while it is still possible to be treated as da`yuyf al-rabman (Guests of the Merciful), perhaps especially in Madinah, which is described as more relaxed than Makkah, British Pakistanis complained about the harshness and harassment of those marshalling pilgrims at the key sites in Saudi Arabia and the fact that, although most shops are run by Pakistani immigrants, the latter cannot own property in their own right (Hamid, 20, undergraduate). They did not escape racism as easily as did Malcolm X (1968) during his somewhat privileged Hajj.

Nevertheless, while in the holy places, many British Pakistanis were also confronted with experiences that prompted a deep realisation of the economic privileges and political freedoms that they benefit from by living in the West. Some members of the umma are undoubtedly more exposed than others to the stark inequalities and injustices that remain within a divided world. As members of a diasporic community, British Pakistanis were caught between a sense of connection and disconnection with pilgrims from South Asia, especially:
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It’s far too easy for us. Although we’re going to Hajj, we still pick and choose. We’ll travel on the coaches and things like that but those people, they’ll sleep rough, they’ll eat little and they’ll walk from one place to another. Yeah, so I value those people’s Hajj more than ours and I think it is more valuable to Allah. (‘Ali, 30, housing support worker)

At the same time, British Pakistanis also revealed stereotypes and prejudices of their own in terms of race, culture and class: ‘pilgrims from Africa [were] . . . seen as the cause of stampedes’ (Zafar, 74, retired spinner) and Shi’as were criticised because they ‘dress all in black, are always chanting something, behaving in odd ways and determined not to fit in’ (Ikram, 25, teacher). Given her own affluence, Shazia (56, housewife) felt threatened by rumours about the alleged criminality of the poor:

I had a lot of jewellery on and the women started telling me these horror stories saying, ‘If you go down there on your own, there are these black women who’ll cut your hand off and slit your throat or they’ll cut your stomach open and they’ll take away your gold’.

As Suleyman (16, student) suggested, ‘Some people give a bad name to their culture and because of this the rest of their people are looked down upon even on pilgrimage.’

Having completed the Meccan rites, many pilgrims travel north to Madinah to pay their respects to Muhammad, whose tomb is to be found at the Prophet’s Mosque with its green dome, tall minarets and ornate calligraphic carvings. South Asian-heritage Muslims are among the most devoted to the Prophet, with those influenced by Sufi and Barelwi movements emphasising the concept of the ‘light of Muhammad’ (nur-i Muhammadi). This is said to have existed from creation and is derived from God’s own light (nur-i khuda). According to Barelwi scholars, Muhammad is no mere mortal. Alive, not dead, he possesses ‘ilm al-ghayb (knowledge of the unknown) and is the primary focus for Muslims’ tawassul (intercession) with God (Sanyal 1996: 255–259):

Our belief is that our nabi [prophet], like all the anbiya’ [prophets] is living and if we are sincere our nabi is going to sort all our problems. Our ulama say there is a saying of our nabi that whoever comes and visits me in my mosque, insba’Allah [God willing], come the Day of Judgement, I will not let that person down. (Amjad, 55, chemist)

Other pilgrims described queuing in single file and then having a few seconds to give their salams (greetings) to the Prophet’s tomb and make du’as, with some believing that ‘the carpets are meant to be part of janna [“the Garden”, Paradise]’ (Farzana, 20, student). For some British Pakistanis, time in Madinah
was seen as the most profound and emotional of all their pilgrimage experiences, despite not being a part of the formal rituals:

I felt a strong emotion thinking that just the other side of that gate, which was only a matter of a few feet away, lay the most beautiful person who has ever lived and I started to cry. It was totally involuntary and I cried until I left the mosque. (Tariq, 53, retired factory shop steward)

Even a young respondent who was sceptical about ‘spiritual powers’ still ‘felt very strongly “There is something here”’ (Maryam, 26, teaching assistant).

The British Pakistanis interviewed found that their visit to Madinah underlined their theological differences from other Muslims, differences already familiar from Pakistan and the UK. They described meeting ‘different types of people who practise Islam according to their area of _fiqh_ [jurisprudence, schools of law]’, sometimes encountering annoying zealots who sought to ‘correct’ their practice on various matters: ‘You get young people coming up to you and telling you, “Uncle, you should know better. It is _bid’a_ [innovation] to make supplication in front of the Prophet”’ (Zafar, 74, retired spinner). Indeed, familiar sectarian debates occasionally broke out, something that a majority found unacceptable in the holy places:

When we were leaving ‘Arafat riding on top of a bus, there were these two guys who came from Britain arguing about the Barelwi-Deobandi debate. I was getting really cheesed off but remained quiet as they were quite old. I thought to myself, ‘What a place to bring these silly debates!’ (Habib, 45, spinner).

Despite such disapproval, one young British-Pakistani admitted that he had found it difficult to be quite so pragmatic, given the backing that the Saudi Arabian state gives to the puritanical and anti-Sufi Wahhabi sect of Islam. As a ‘lover’ of the Prophet, he decided that he must take drastic steps:

Because I knew the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, their ‘_aqida_ [creed] and our ‘aqida, one of my problems was reading _námaz_ [obligatory prayers] behind them [Wahhabi imams]. The first day I read behind them but I felt very uneasy. Some were telling me, ‘If you don’t know the imam, it’s ok’ but I brushed it aside because we think they are _gustakh-i rasul_ [blasphemers of the Prophet]. (‘Ali, 30, housing support worker)

‘Ali also complained that the Saudis ‘try to push their beliefs onto others’ through the publication of books and pamphlets given to all pilgrims, observing that: ‘there are some simple brothers and sisters who aren’t very educated and they get these leaflets and they think, “Oh, this must be wrong”’.

Boosted by its oil wealth, Saudi Arabia has pumped huge budgets into the global, multimedia export and propagation of Wahhabi ideas through pan-
Islamising international missionary projects and organisations such as the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-‘Alam al-Islami, founded 1962) (Nasr 1994; Zaman 2002). Other pilgrims also felt that their belief and practice of Islam was policed and disciplined while in Saudi Arabia in a way that was not true of Britain or Pakistan. They reported the ‘paranoid’ prohibition on carrying anything while paying respects to the Prophet and the ‘bad looks’ from security guards ensuring that no one touch the grilles of his tomb. There were stories, too, of guards challenging (sometimes in a threatening manner) public behaviour which was judged to constitute shirk (polytheism) or bid’a, from the kissing of a living saint’s hand to carrying prayer beads for zikr. Pilgrims also spoke of papers vetted at the airport, one having a page removed from a book of devotions (Habib, 45, spinner). In the same way that some pilgrims were critical of Saudi Arabian organisation of the pilgrimage – ‘and how organised people are back in Britain... if this was run by the British authorities how smoothly things would run’ (Shazia, 56, housewife) – so too another compared the Saudis unfavourably to Britain in terms of freedom of speech:

I think it was a year before I went to Hajj when the Iranians did a demonstration and were shot down [1987]... about three hundred people got massacred. In the West it doesn’t matter how bad the demonstration is they never open fire on their own people. I think this is a problem, not maybe just with the Saudis. The majority of Muslim countries are ‘trigger happy’. (Sajid, 37, computer programmer)

Pilgrims complained too that, in their drive to erase bid’a – and despite many ‘innovations’ of their own – the Saudi authorities have left unmarked, unsigned or even destroyed many places of ziyara. While not part of the formal Hajj or ‘umra rituals, sites of pilgrimage such as al-Baqi Cemetery are still sought out by many pious Muslims from across the world as places that offer great continuity with their salvation history and certain baraka (blessing) in the present:

There are so many thousand sahabis [Companions of the Prophet] in that graveyard, but you don’t know where their graves are. There are no names, no tombs or anything like that. So one just keeps walking and doing fatiha [reading the opening chapter of the Qur’an] at various places. (‘Ali, 30, housing support worker)

And yet there were always minor victories that subverted such attempts at the discipline and regulation of religious belief and practice. Shazia (56, housewife) reported the success of a friend who wanted to smuggle religious souvenirs back to Britain:

At each graveyard and other ziyara you go to they have these massive posters or signs saying, ‘It’s forbidden in Islam to touch the graves or to believe that there’s any
blessing or to take stones or dust’. But people have a long tradition of taking things from graves of holy people and this friend of mine was collecting stones from different graves and mosques. We had to hide them in such a way that they wouldn’t be detected at the airport and luckily those stones were brought back to England and now they adorn the front room, where people come and do ziyara.

**Conclusion**

The increasing mobility and prosperity associated with international migration has meant that pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah has become more affordable, convenient and democratised for Pakistanis in Britain than it was for their ancestors. In the subcontinent, fulfilling the duty of Hajj was once the privilege of small numbers of middle-aged Muslim males, whereas visits to the holy places from Britain are increasingly arranged by pilgrims of all ages at times of their need, desire and choosing. Nevertheless, despite the contemporary ease of actually travelling to the holy places, British Pakistanis still report experiencing a sense of liminal separation from the profanities of dunya when they arrive. Influenced by a sacred history increasingly transmitted via a consumer and an electronic Islamic culture, pilgrims also continue to articulate feelings of collective effervescence and communitas in terms of an intensified consciousness of Allah and the prioritisation of their Muslim identity. British Pakistanis describe pilgrimage not only as an emotional and testing personal journey from sinfulness to purification but also – in commemoration of the lives of the Prophets Adam, Ibrahim and Muhammad – as a collective return to the mythic homeland of the umma and, ultimately, all monotheistic humanity.

Against this background, however, the perceived ‘inauthenticity’ of Saudi modernisation, the lack of adab among touristic pilgrims and the prevalence of ‘McWorld’ (Barber 1995; Featherstone 2002) is disappointing for some. Indeed, in an age where time-space compression is especially intense, the fact of a Western-influenced dunya materialised in and around the holy places highlights the fragility of the boundary between the sacred and the profane suggested by Eade and Sallnow (1991). Rather than a once-and-for-all separation of one from the other, then, pilgrims would seem to imagine and re-imagine their liminality step by step and moment to moment. In the same way, pilgrims’ multi-vocal narratives about similarity and difference attest to the fragility of idealised and hyper-real imaginings of a sacred community where, cheek-by-jowl, cosmo-politanism and racism, theological utopias and dystopias, are routinely juxtaposed. Strong feelings of communal empathy can be cross-cut by the rhetorical tropes of negatively experienced encounters with Muslim ‘others’ from other parts of the world, as Eickelman and Piscatori (1990) maintain.

British Pakistanis therefore articulate not only a ‘double’ (Gilroy 1993) but more properly a ‘triadic’ (Sheffer 1986; Safran 1991) consciousness, reflecting multiple, genuinely rooted and highly contextualised locations and attachments.
in terms of: the homeland of Pakistan; the diaspora of Britain; and the wider Muslim world. The particular efficacy of travelling to the holy places for British Pakistani religious identities can be mapped along a continuum from a readily accessible source of strength to a sense of fading ambiguity. Despite some of the elderly grumbling about the banal over-availability and under-appreciation of sacred time and place in the global (post)modern, and while few pilgrims can now adhere to the traditional ideal and ‘cut off from dunya’ on their return, for many the possibility of travel to the holy places has become an important reference point for the imagination of their increasingly transnational and translated identities. Moreover, despite tendencies towards ideological coherence in the global postmodern, and for all the symbolic power of religious imaginaries, in the present moment, British Pakistanis’ highly differentiated and contextualised narratives about their collective and individual identities resist any simple incorporation by narrow and homogenised formulations of Islam.

Notes

1. It is not incumbent on children, the disabled, the enslaved, those with a mental illness or those women who do not have a mahram (a relative to whom marriage is forbidden). Exceptions are also made when conditions are dangerous for political or other reasons (von Grunebaum 1951: 15–16).

2. Followers reject the term ‘Barelwi’ in favour of Ahl-i Sunna (People of the Sunna), underlining their claim to be authentic representatives of traditional Sunni Islam. Ahmad Riza Khan (d. 1921) of Bareilly (hence Barelwi), founder of the movement, was first and foremost a Hanafi scholar and his scholarship was deployed to defend many of these more customary aspects of religious practice that were being criticised as un-Islamic innovations by reformist movements of the period. Unlike the Deobandis (see below), for example, he distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ innovations (bid’a). In the literature it is usual to see reference to Barelwism as drawing much of its support from the rural masses in South Asia for whom Sufi saints and shrines remained as important as ever in late nineteenth-century India. However, the leadership of the Ahl-i Sunna was drawn mainly from the prosperous and land-owning families of small agricultural towns and larger urban settlements. See Sanyal (1996).

3. As Fischer and Abedi (1990: 170) report, numbers participating have mushroomed in the modern period: 1850 (40,000); 1902 (200,000); 1964 (1,000,000); 1984 (2,500,000).

4. Moreover, at different points in Islamic history and in individual Muslim lifetimes, travel to Sufi shrines or the homelands of migrant workers has been as compelling as the Hajj (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990: xiv).

5. Before changing into ihram, body hair is removed, beards and nails trimmed, and full ablution made. Two white sheets must be worn by men, while women simply dress modestly (Roff 1985: 84). Sex and the taking of any life are forbidden.
Mukhtar (42, community leader) reports that before departing for pilgrimage British Pakistanis do gather with relatives, as is reported by Roff to be customary. The latter may bring a gift and old clothes to be distributed among the poor. However, these are brief affairs. To make a will before departing – another custom suggested by Roff – is rarer than in Islamic countries.

6. These mark a thirty-kilometre radius around Makkah, beyond which no non-Muslim should pass (Park 1994: 265).

7. Pilgrims can literally follow in the ‘footstep’ (maqam) of Ibrahim as a miraculous stone within Haram Sharif is said to contain its imprint (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 160). Ibrahim’s steadfastness is replayed in the life of Muhammad, who rid the House of God of the polytheistic idols on his triumphant return to Makkah from Madinah.

8. Pilgrims perform the rite at least three times; upon arrival in Makkah, at the end of the pilgrimage rituals and once more before leaving Makkah (Wolfe 1997: xxii). In Muslim traditions the ka’ba is often described as an earthly counterpart of Allah’s heavenly throne, while tawaf is said to imitate the angels’ circling of Him in adoration (Bianchi 1995: 89).

9. The Prophet Muhammad originally followed Jewish tradition and prayed towards Jerusalem, until he received a revelation instructing him to make the qibla (direction of prayer) of the Muslim world Makkah instead (von Grunebaum 1951).

10. The Message (1975) is an epic filmic representation of Muslim salvation history starring Anthony Quinn. Drawing on the Qur’an, but especially the sirah (Muhammad’s biography) and hadith literatures, it was given a seal of approval by the most important centre of traditional religious learning, al-Azhar, in Cairo.

11. By 1957 the Great Mosque was transformed (Peters 1994: 362), while there are now modern roads and air-conditioned transportation, watersprinklers, modern slaughterhouses, medical, fire-fighting and surveillance personnel, and a media centre (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 169).

12. The Arndale is a large shopping mall in Manchester, UK.

13. I have subsequently been informed by two Muslim academics at conferences that Ann Summers adult shops are also to be found close by the holy places.

14. British Pakistani pilgrims travel in groups from tens to hundreds of people, having purchased packages organised through officially recognised Saudi providers in consort with UK-based travel agents.

15. For example, ‘There was a stampede at the 2006 Hajj which resulted in the death of over 400 pilgrims, including three British Nationals . . . There has [also] been an increase in the number of reported cases of pick-pocketing and other forms of theft in Mecca, particularly in the region of the Grand Mosque and in Medina . . . during Hajj and Ramadan, contagious diseases spread quickly, and pilgrims should take basic medicines with them and consume adequate liquids and salts.’ See www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029390390&a=KCountryAdvice&aid=1013618387135.

16. Mukhtar (42, community leader) reports that some do go to the modern slaughter areas (or, alternatively, to local Bedouin), touch an animal and pay for it to be
slaughtered and butchered. The Saudi authorities then ship most of the meat overseas to the needy.

17. The message of the Deobandis, another ‘ulama-led movement originating in British India, is one of a disciplined adherence to the divinely ordained shari’a (Islamic law), cultivating a disciplined personal morality and restrained ritual practice. Optional rites and ‘innovations’, with disputed sanction in the hadith but defended by the Barelwis, were actively discouraged by the Deobandis. In British India controversies were played out very publicly during preaching tours, oral disputations and in an increasingly elaborate sectarian literature. Nevertheless, Barelwis and Deobandis both follow the Hanafi law school. See Metcalf (1982) for a history of the origins of the movement. These disputes have all been reproduced in diaspora and the new media.

18. The Saudis took control from the Hashimite Sharifs in 1925, ushering in a new order: ‘the pious accretions of shrine and rites that had grown up around the Hajj over many centuries were stripped away’ (Peters 1994: 362).

19. The League first emerged as part of Saudi Arabia’s attempt to counteract communism and especially the pan-Arab nationalism and socialism of revolutionaries such as Nasser of Egypt.

20. Mukhtar (42, community leader) also spoke of Hajj applications being sent back to UK-based agents by the Saudi authorities because common family names including words with divine associations like ‘Ullah’ or ‘Wahid’ were interpreted as constituting shirk.

21. It would be interesting to re-interview respondents in the wake of ‘9/11’ and ‘7/7’, to explore any impact on their constructions of Britain as much as of Islam.

22. For a discussion of changing Iranian Shi’ite interpretations and experiences of Hajj, including those of Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati and others, see Fischer and Abedi (1990).

References


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