

## Digital *hajj*

### The pilgrimage to Mecca in Muslim cyberspace and the issue of religious online authority

#### Introduction

Each year, at a strictly appointed time, the city of Mecca – still the undisputed epicentre of the Muslim universe – becomes the site of one of the largest annual pilgrimages and, as is oftentimes pointed out, probably the greatest mass gathering worldwide (Bianchi 2004: 3). Between the eighth and the thirteenth days of the (twelfth and) final month of the Islamic lunar calendar, called *dhu l-hijja*, almost three million Muslim men and women from virtually every country congregate there in order communally to perform a prescribed series of ritual actions wearing a special garment, which consists of two white seamless cloths (*ihram*); constantly chanting the so-called *talbiya*, a prayer that begins with the word *labbaika*; circumambulating the cuboidal building of the Ka'ba in an anti-clockwise direction on arrival and before departing; running seven times between two hillocks named Safa and Marwa; standing for half a day in the desert on the plain of Arafat; throwing pebbles at stone columns representing the devil, and sacrificing animals at Mina (Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1923: 168–91, 205–321; von Grunebaum 1976: 26–35; Martins 1987: 339–45; Haleem 2012: 27–58). Enshrined in the Qur'an – at sura 3, verse 97 – the *hajj* constitutes, as is known, the fifth of the five pillars which are essential to Muslim belief. It is a, so to speak, sacred duty towards God enjoined upon every adult Muslim of either sex, insofar as he has sufficient financial resources at his disposal and is physically capable, to undertake the spiritual journey to the sacred precinct of Mecca and its environs at least once in his lifetime. According to Islamic understanding, the faithful reenact in detail the sequence of ritual acts performed by the prophet Muhammad himself in that the given ritual assemblages which constitute the annual pilgrimage to Mecca are usually considered as having remained unchanged since its beginning during the lifetime of Islam's founding figure. The *hajj* itself is supposed to create a sense of cohesion and to demonstrate the unifying force of Islam, bringing together believers from all parts of the globe in today's Saudi Arabia.

Given the afore-alluded importance of the pilgrimage to Mecca in Islam, it is hardly surprising that users surfing on the net for the term *hajj* are faced with dozens of more or less relevant web pages. Furthermore, a quick trawl of the internet shows that the annual Muslim pilgrimage is represented online in a plethora of forms: online-bookable *hajj* packages, suiting all budgets and tastes can be found alongside step-by-step instructions for future Mecca pilgrims and downloadable audio examples of *hajj* recitations and prayers, as well as accounts of individual pilgrimages and, last but not least, cyber or virtual *hajj* in *Second Life*, directed not only at the 'armchair pilgrim' but also the non-Muslim, who is, as is commonly known, not just not allowed to observe or participate in the pilgrimage to Mecca, but who is as a matter of principle denied entry to the cities both of Mecca and Medina, even outside the annual season of the *hajj*.

The present paper attempts to give an overview of the different representations of the pilgrimage to Mecca found in the 'liminal space' of the internet. For that purpose, it examines a handful of emblematic examples of how the *hajj* is being presented and discussed in cyberspace. Thereby, special attention shall be paid to the question of how far issues of religious authority are manifest on these websites, whether the content providers of web pages appoint themselves as authorities by scrutinizing established views of the fifth pillar of Islam, or if they upload already printed texts onto their sites in order to reiterate normative notions of the pilgrimage to Mecca, or if they make use of search engine optimisation techniques, thus heightening the very visibility of their online presence and increasing the possibility of becoming authoritative in shaping internet surfers' perceptions of the *hajj*.

The relationship that exists between the now not-so-new media formed on the internet on the one hand with Islam or Muslim groups and on the other with individuals so far amounts to a set of relatively young and thus by and large still underdeveloped areas of scholarly investigation. However, one of the issues that has been hotly debated so far is the question of to what extent computer-mediated forms of communication offer the potential not only of affirming existing, conventional forms of authority structures and knowledge production and dissemination in the Islamic context, but also to put forward new approaches to Islamic ideas and viewpoints, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the learned scholars of Islam in the non-virtual world. Some scholars have viewed the popular emergence of the world wide web as one that, far from democratising religious knowledge, would rather preserve traditional authorities as represented by the formally trained *ulama* and safeguard established perspectives on Islam instead of leading to a renegotiation of power and symbolic capital in the discursive arena.

However, more commonly, the advent of the popular internet – being a mass medium with potentially easy accessibility and on which a gate-keeping function, as is exercised by the more traditional mass media, is rarely being performed – has been seen as an opportunity to open up intra-Islamic discourses to wider audiences as well as a potential means whereby Muslim individuals and groups might take on leadership roles as spokespersons of Islam, thus threatening the role of the *ulama* as the undisputed interpreters of canonic knowledge. Roughly speaking, in this rather idealistic view of the internet as a decentralised and mass-participatory medium with the capacity to give each individual the opportunity to be heard in a transnational and potentially almost global public sphere, it appears to offer marginalised or voiceless individuals and groups, such as women, youth, converts or Muslim minority groups an inexpensive and quite fashionable platform which allows them to make their viewpoints known to large numbers of people and to represent themselves to the wider world as authentic voices of Islam (Harms 2007: 157–8; Inan 2009: 89–91; Linjakumpu 2007: 5–7).

In various seminal studies on the impact of the internet on issues of authority in Muslim contexts Jon W. Anderson, for instance, has discussed the world wide web as some sort of a new public space which has enabled a new class of interpreters of Islam who are inherently facilitated by the internet to reframe patterns of authority and to take Islam into their own hands (Anderson 2002: 303–4 and 2003: 45). Along the same lines, Gary Bunt has noted that in the pre-internet era Muslims sought advice and guidance from local, community-based religious scholars who had as a background a formal training in Islamic sciences at acknowledged teaching institutions such as al-Azhar or the Dar al-ulum in Deoband. In the digital age, though, auto-didactic ‘lay’ interpreters lacking such a classical, recognized training are empowered to easily bypass the *ulama* and put themselves forward as experts or authorities on Islamic issues by just having an online presence and, as a result, can easily play authoritative roles in the lives of fellow Muslims looking for direction (Bunt 2009: 32).

### **Websites centred on providing information**

Not surprisingly, a very common pattern among websites related to the *hajj* are pages which are largely oriented towards the provision of solicited information about various issues associated with the annual Muslim pilgrimage. A noteworthy example of this type of website is hajinformation.com, a site that is ranks in the top ten results of a simple Google query for the search term ‘hajj’.



Figure 1. Hajinformation.com.

This website is a particularly clear instance of what could be termed the organisational, or quasi-official face of the pilgrimage to Mecca, in that it constitutes the official online presence of the 1962-created Saudi Ministry of Hajj, based in Riyadh. Offering its content both in English and French, the website of the Ministry of Hajj is apparently specifically designed to provide a comprehensive online information service on various aspects of the Meccan pilgrimage.

This includes a canonised history of the *hajj* which states that the sequence of the rites associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca were laid down by God himself in order to mark historic events in the life of Abraham. Accordingly, the website reiterates the very story of how Abraham, together with his son Ismael, erected the Ka'ba as a house of monotheistic worship, to imply that conducting the *hajj* pilgrimage is indeed not only retracing the steps of Muhammad, but those of Abraham as well. Part and parcel of the official website of the Saudi Ministry of Hajj are also sections on stages of the pilgrimage to Mecca and its various rituals, on the prayers commonly used during the *hajj*, on the state one must enter before performing the pilgrimage and the efforts of the Saudi government to facilitate the *hajj*, such as the construction of pedestrian tunnels leading into Mecca. Furthermore, the website incorporates a section of frequently-asked questions about the *hajj*, in which queries such

as how to travel to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where to get a visa for the entry into it, what the weather is like in the cities of Mecca and Medina, and so on, are answered. In addition, it features a list of approved *hajj* travel agencies in the whole world and provides not just more or less photogenic pictures of Mecca and its environs, but also flash animation clips of the Ka'ba. Further, amongst other things, site visitors can view two so-called 'safety films' which give them specific advice on how to undertake the annual pilgrimage safely. One important feature of hajinformation.com is that it does provide an email address for the purpose of directly contacting the ministry, but nevertheless, on the whole, the site remains in a '1.0' web mode in that it is a non-interactive, one-way broadcasting service, thereby preventing site visitors from potentially subverting the authority of the ministry, or even promoting alternative readings of the *hajj*.

Among the probably most prominent websites aimed at featuring multi-layered information on the pilgrimage to Mecca and making use of the *lingua franca* of the internet is IslamiCity.com. It scores highly within common search engines such as Google – especially conditioned by the fact that its operators have taken advantage of the discourse-reducing effects of search engines by purchasing three domain names, namely islam.org, islamicity.org and islamicity.com, with the effect that IslamiCity.com possesses at least two memorable Islamic URL names. The IslamiCity site was actually established and is maintained by HADI, an acronym which stands for Human Assistance and Development International, a Saudi overseas holding company based in Culver City in California (Bunt 2000: 25–6 and 2004: 128–9; Brückner 2001: 17; Lawrence 2002: 242–3), which characterises itself as a non-profit organisation working for the socio-economic and educational development of people worldwide (IslamiCity.com 2012a). This website, which is considered to be one of the main Wahhabi players on the world wide web, constitutes a quite comprehensive portal to the Muslim religion and the Qur'an whose primary aim is, according to its producers, sharing with the world an understanding of Islam and Muslims as well as the promotion of peace, justice and harmony for all (IslamiCity.com 2012c). Going online in 1995, the IslamiCity site, which boasts of having serviced almost 1.2 billion requests since January 2001, was at the end of October 2012, ranked number 36,041 in a list of the most popular of all websites by the Alexa search engine, which in turn notes more than 3,309 sites linking to it.

Rather than listing the various *hajj*-related items of content which can be found on the IslamiCity site, which contains what it calls a Hajj Information Center (IslamiCity.com 2012b), at least one point may be stressed here.



Figure 2. The Hajj Information Center of IslamiCity.com.

A notable characteristic of this section of IslamiCity.com is that some of its representations of the *hajj* are to a certain degree merely reiterating and replicating already existing offline sources, far from creating much that is really original, or even innovative. Muslim (and non-Muslim) cybernauts find, for instance, some brochures stored in a pdf-format bearing titles such as a ‘Practical Guide for Hajj’ which have been gleaned from other sources and simply recycled. Apart from that, the HADI-sponsored site links to items of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington and the Saudi Ministry of Hajj concerning visa (Saudiembassy.net 2012) and health requirements (Hajinformation.com 2012b). In contrast to this, however, it is somewhat perplexing that IslamiCity.com, with its Saudi background, does not refrain from connecting to a rather prominent Shi’i website. Visitors to IslamiCity’s Hajj Information Center are offered a link that takes them to al-islam.org, established in 1998 by the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project and registered to an address in Minnesota, where they find an English translation of one of the most prominent publications on the fifth pillar of Islam written in the twentieth century (al-Islam.org 2012): Ali Shariati’s *Hajj*, in which the pre-revolutionary Iranian thinker (1933–77) readily attributed to the pilgrimage to Mecca a symbolic significance with social and political implications (Benson 1991: 18–26; Bianchi 2004: 28–32). Just to pick out one





Figure 4. The courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in Second Life's *hajj* simulation.

game (MMORPG), which has especially become known to a wider public through the media hype it received in early 2007, although apparently it has now passed the height of its popularity. This 'Metaverse' constitutes a user-generated virtual world in which the users – called 'residents' – interact, communicate, play and trade through customisable, graphic representations of themselves, named as avatars (Johnson 2010). Meanwhile, Second Life has more than 31 million registered users worldwide, of whom as many as 33,000 are simultaneously logged into the system around the clock (Gridsurvey.com 2012).

The current online recreation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca (*al-masjid al-haram*) along with the major *hajj* locations (Second Life 2012), which had at least one precursor (Derrickson 2008; Sisler 2009: 253–5), was released in November 2009 by the Mada Media Development Association.

This Cairo-based organisation, whose self-description declares that it is a non-profit, civil society institution with the essential objective of serving Muslims and introducing Islam in its true form to non-Muslims around the world (OnIslam.net 2012b), is actually the owner company of OnIslam.net, a website constituting an offshoot of IslamOnline.net, one of the most prominent Islam-related Arabic/English web portals. Blurring the boundaries be-



tween education and entertainment, the designers of OnIslam's immersive *hajj* simulation pursue a dual purpose: they seek not only to enhance their coreligionists' understanding of the fifth pillar of Islam and minimise their mistakes when they engage in the 'real', that is to say, terrestrial, *hajj*, but also to make interested non-Muslims acquainted with the major rituals of the *hajj* and its meanings, thereby actually debunking possible misperceptions about one of the world's largest annual pilgrimages (Solayman 2010). Its builders also put great stress on the claim that a legally valid *hajj* cannot, under any circumstances, be accomplished online and that therefore the engagement in Second Life's *hajj* simulation cannot be a substitute for the 'real' journey to the cradle of Islam. It is not surprising then that OnIslam.net posted an online *fatwa*, delivered in response to the question as to which particular stance Muslims should take toward the Second Life recreation of the Meccan pilgrimage. This *fatwa*, which was issued in May 2009 by the Kerala-born Canadian scholar Ahmad Kutty (b. 1946), currently a senior lecturer at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, essentially maintains that a Muslim may not exchange the, as it were, 'in-world' journey to Mecca with its counterpart in virtual space (OnIslam.net 2012a).

### Websites with commercial interests

Given the status of the *hajj* as a canonical duty which canalises Muslims from every corner of the globe into travelling and inevitably becoming pilgrim-tourists, it is not really surprising that the internet, because of its commercial nature, is nowadays also very much a medium by means of which the prospective Mecca pilgrim is offered a variety of products and services fitting his needs: a vast array of mass-tour operators and travel agencies as well as companies specialising in 'Islamic goods' utilise the world wide web as a tool to both purvey and sell accommodation bookings, organised pilgrimage tours, or items and goods specifically related to the annual Muslim pilgrimage, such as *ihram* garments, *hajj* board games and pocket-sized step-by-step guides. Apart from a site actually operated by travel firms offering *hajj* tours and through which items for the pilgrimage to Mecca are sold online, there are a considerable number of websites involved in *hajj* business, which, interestingly, seek in a way a vital coexistence of information and commerce.

Thus, for instance, the already mentioned IslamiCity site is actually oriented towards overt economic ends as well, although it describes itself primarily as an informational page which provides or enhances knowledge about the

fifth pillar of Islam. It is a promotional site in that it does subtly try to prompt Muslims into becoming faith tourists and undertaking the *hajj* by presenting appealing screensavers, short videos and images of the Meccan pilgrimage, while at the same time unilaterally providing useful information to assist prospective pilgrims in planning to embark on the *hajj*. In addition, the site actively promotes a wide range of *hajj* packages that one can choose, ranging from a so-called 'Walking Hajj Program', for which nearly \$5,000 is charged, to a 'Short Executive Program' which includes accommodation in five star hotels at a cost of about \$10,800. IslamiCity.org also features an 'IslamiCityBazar', online store where site users are offered opportunities to purchase *hajj*-specific products, ranging from *hajj* guidebooks to *ihram* clothing.

### Websites designed to issue a critique

An examination of what appears in Muslim cyberspace relating to the Meccan pilgrimage suggests that there are countless examples of web pages promoting nothing other than a mainstream interpretation of the *hajj*, bolstering the authority of what might be called traditional perceptions, whereas online attacks of the same thing, combined with the dissemination of an alternative understanding of the last of the five pillars of Islam are, thus far, seldom to be found. However, a striking example of a fairly prominent attempt by a Muslim minority group to set up and run a website in order to, among other things, offer a critique of established perceptions of the *hajj* and for whom the web, because of its alleged 'open democracy' provides a suitable platform to get across in the public domain what they identify as the proper understanding and right way of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, is the Submission site. Being more the exception than the rule, this comparatively simply designed site explicitly raises the question whether the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca is undertaken in a valid form nowadays. Thus, the operators of Submission.org – United Submitters International (also known under the self-designation 'the Submitters') – are affirming a particular form of self-appointed authority in the field, irrespective of how far such self-appointment might materialise into an external or collective acceptance of authority. United Submitters International is a Tucson-based group that goes back to the teachings of the Egyptian-American biochemist Rashad Khalifa (1935–90), who did not only assert that the Qur'an evinces a peculiar mathematical structure based on the number 19, but also claimed to be, alongside Muhammad and Abraham, one of the messengers of Islam (Haddad and Smith 1993: 137–68; Gardell 1996:



Figure 5. A web page on the *hajj*, from the Submission website.

176–81; Lohlker 2000). He represented a much-noticed, yet marginalised tendency in what has been called Islamic modernism, which in turn has been labelled with the disputable term 'Islamic Protestantism' on the grounds that it decidedly dismisses the *sunna*, that is to say, the exemplary behaviour and words of Islam's founding figure, as a post-Muhammad distortion (Gardell 1996: 177).

In the eyes of the authors of Submission.org, who claim to follow the Qur'anic text alone as the only valid and divine source of religious law and guidance (Submission.org 2012a), the *hajj* pilgrimage was corrupted by traditions and innovations such as showing veneration for the Black Stone which is embedded in the Ka'ba, or regarding the water of the Zamzam Well as being blessed.

In particular, they argue that the very conviction that undertaking the annual pilgrimage to Mecca is only allowed in the last month of the Islamic calendar constitutes a mistake. Espousing an alternative view that will certainly not achieve broad acceptance within Muslim communities, they present the *hajj* to the web user as a sacred duty which can be fulfilled not only in the month of *dhu l-hijja*, but in three other months as well (Submission.org 2012b).

## Concluding remarks

In sum, as has been already argued, repeated searches involving typing a variety of terms related to the Meccan pilgrimage into search engines suggest that web pages which contest mainstream interpretations of the *hajj*, or even question it as a valid form of Muslim faith seem, thus far, to be more the exception than the rule. Yet, there is admittedly some evidence that the very investigation of the realms of respective individual weblogs and podcasts might change this impression in one way or another.

Apart from that, another point should be stressed. In order to draw more accurate conclusions about the manifestations of religious online authority on the websites analysed here a content analysis is not really sufficient. Rather, it is necessary to amalgamate it with a survey of both the reception of its content and the material's consumer audience. This calls for answers to questions such as; how do the bodies who are behind the websites intend the content available on it to be used and in which way do the page recipients *de facto* use the site materials (Cowan 2011: 463–464)? In turn, this implies that a basic content analysis should be essentially combined with empirical fieldwork based on questionnaires and qualitative interviews with runners and designers of web pages, as well as with individual internet consumers (Krüger 2005: 19).

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