

Title—The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865-1956

Author—John Slight

Year—2015

Categories: Islam, Empire, Hajj, Politics, Movement

Place: British Empire

Time: 1865-1956

Argument Synopsis:

Slight's book provides an empire-wide overview of the operation and management of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in the British Empire from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. His central emphasis is on the commonalities and problems facing British Hajj administration as a whole, framed in relationship to the assertion that Britain ruled a 'Muslim empire' in this period. Slight notes that during the period of study, 1865 to 1956, the British ruled over more Muslims than any other empire in history. Slight uses the Hajj as a window for studying Anglo-Muslim interactions and for rethinking the nature of Britain's imperial existence. The British relied on the administration of the Hajj for legitimacy in the eyes of their Muslim subjects. Management of pilgrimage to Mecca gave both the colonial officers and the Muslim subjects an opportunity and a necessity to work out the content of the claims of the British Empire as the 'greatest Muslim power in the world.' Slight demonstrates the crucial ways in which the British Empire's engagement with Muslim pilgrimage shaped the modern Muslim religious and political experience, as well as geopolitical conflicts related to the First World War—i.e. the redrawing of the borders of the modern Middle East and decolonization of Asia and Africa.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section, containing three chapters, covers the period from 1865 to 1914; Slight frames this period as the golden age of modern pilgrimage and pan-Islamic imperial connectivity. The second section focuses on the period of the First World War until the Suez crisis of 1956. Slight argues that the British Empire became overwhelmed by the new challenges of the post-1945 period. Slight utilizes a comparative approach, discussing the operations of the Hajj administration across the British Empire. He focuses more on India, likely due to its size and stature within the empire, but also discusses Hajj experiences in Nigeria, the Sudan, Malaya, and Hyderabad. The majority of his primary source material comes from colonial archives, but Slight seeks to incorporate the surviving accounts of elite Muslim travelers in an attempt to reveal voices of the subaltern.

Slight considers the Hajj from a variety of different perspectives; he gives the least amount of attention to the place of the Hajj in public health and disease control—because this aspect of the Hajj has been written about extensively in the literature. He does note that the impetus for British administration over the Hajj was the cholera epidemic of 1865. Slight concludes that in this period British and Muslim power and interests had become inseparable, and the management of the Hajj was the most explicit and formal example of this development.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Hajj politics were intimately bound up with the geopolitics of Ottoman rule and Arab revolt during the first world war
- The British Empire's legitimacy in the eyes of its Muslim subjects became closely linked to its management of pilgrimage to Mecca from various imperial domains
- The issue of destitute pilgrims led British officials to cite Qu'ranic injunctions to discourage the impoverished from embarking on the pilgrimage

