

REVIEW ESSAY

## The Ottoman Empire and the Modern Hajj: Converging Histories from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean

Reviewed by Faiz Ahmed, History Department, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA  
([faiz\\_ahmed@brown.edu](mailto:faiz_ahmed@brown.edu))

*Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire.* Lâle Can (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). Pp. 272. \$25.00 paper. ISBN 9781503611160

*Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj.* Michael Christopher Low. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). Pp. 416. \$35.00 paper. ISBN 9780231190770

### Abstract

From a devastating pandemic to worldwide protests for racial justice, 2020 is likely to stand out to scholars of globalization and human interconnectivity for several reasons. Thanks to a pair of original and remarkably complementary monographs by historians Lâle Can and Michael Christopher Low published in 2020, we can add groundbreaking scholarship on the hajj pilgrimage to the list. Drawing from diverse but equally impressive stocks of Ottoman, colonial, and privately held archives from the long nineteenth century, Can and Low have unearthed a lost world of contacts and collisions on the high roads and seas to Mecca. Together—and each in its own way—*Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* offer fresh historical insights and compelling arguments on the making of the largest annual gathering of people in the world that is the modern Muslim hajj.

At the heart of Lâle Can's *Spiritual Subjects* and Michael Christopher Low's *Imperial Mecca* is a question more complex and wide-ranging than meets the eye: what did the hajj pilgrimage look like in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, roughly a hundred to one hundred and fifty years ago? Analogous to the myriad ports of departure and itineraries of hajj pilgrims who ultimately converge upon the hallowed precincts of the *Haramayn Sharifayn* in Hijaz, western Arabia, Can and Low reach some parallel conclusions while adopting unique approaches, arguments, and sources. Among the common themes in both monographs are highly mobile, border-crossing Muslims caught in the jurisdictional crosshairs of empires. Both works richly unravel the security anxieties, epidemiological risks, and bureaucratic headaches—but also imperial opportunities—turn-of-the-twentieth-century pilgrims generated for the Sublime Porte and European colonialism alike. When Muslim pilgrims originating from rival European empires set out to reach the Ottoman Hijaz, were they transient visitors, or permanent migrants? As spiritual votaries of the sultan-caliph in Istanbul, were colonized Muslims de facto Ottomans when they entered Ottoman territory, or forever foreigners? And given the perils of cholera, typhus, and other contagions (during an era before widespread vaccines)—but also the rich commerce, scholarly and pietistic networks, and anti-colonial solidarity—accompanying Muslim pilgrims, were they threats or assets? Over a century before the contemporary refugee crisis in Europe and Brexit, Can and Low show that such were the dilemmas produced by the steamship age's crisis of Muslim mobility from the standpoint of Ottoman and European colonial powers.

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Broadly conceived and eschewing a myopic focus on Mecca or the Hijaz, *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* unlock the hajj as a gateway to a wider panorama of explorations about the late Ottoman Empire, human mobility, and a shrinking globe during the age of steam and print. In addition to highlighting Ottoman and European struggles to promote their imperial sovereignty, prestige, and extraterritorial privileges vis-à-vis the hajj, other common investigative threads in both works include: What did it mean for non-Ottoman Muslims to travel to and within the Ottoman domains in the nineteenth century? And what did that mean for both Ottoman and European colonial empires monitoring their movements, encounters, and communications? Most of all, what were the extent and limits of Ottoman imperial power in administering the hajj, especially on the empire's frontiers and beyond its borders, where even larger Muslim populations of Eurasia and Africa presented both dangers and opportunities for the Sublime Porte and European colonial powers at the same time?

Dislodging long-standing tropes in the historiographical treatment of Pan-Islamism (as well as Pan-Turkism in Can), *Imperial Mecca* and *Spiritual Subjects* argue that the late Ottoman hajj was shaped by a more complex and wide-ranging array of historical forces than mere religious solidarity, the towering stature of Ottoman sultan-caliph Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), or some other form of Islamic exceptionalism. Furthermore, both authors conclude that the late Ottoman hajj was shaped by a vortex of competing tensions and anxieties, including late Ottoman immigration, nationality, and public health laws; the opportunities and dangers of faster, cheaper maritime and rail travel; the extraterritorial privileges of European empires and the latter's interventions on behalf of "their" Muslim pilgrims; and local administrative, mercantile, and shipping networks jealous to preserve their autonomy and share of the hajj's largesse. As for the undoubtedly pivotal nature of the Hamidian period, both Can and Low argue that the late Ottoman government of Abdülhamid II found itself caught between a transformative tension: brandishing its own forms of sovereignty, governmentality, and exclusion to shore up its territorial integrity and combat European encroachment on the one hand, versus upholding its global reputation as magnanimous custodian of Islam's holiest cities, the caliphate, and an open-door policy to the hajj on the other hand.

If *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* reach some parallel conclusions about the making of the modern hajj, it is their distinctive geographies, principal characters, and thematic concentrations that set them apart and make for an exceedingly enriching dual read. In Low's analysis, the key theater of the late Ottoman hajj comprises the eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Western Indian Ocean waterways leading to the Arabian peninsula's port cities of Jeddah, Aden, and Basra in particular. For Can, the primary hajj routes explored are Russian rail and steam lines carrying Central Asian pilgrims overland or across the Black Sea and Caspian Sea to Istanbul and the eastern Mediterranean more broadly. Whereas Low takes particular interest in Ottoman rivalries with the British and Dutch, Can examines the Sublime Porte's contestations with Imperial Russia (but also China and Britain), especially over Central and South Asian pilgrims. For Can, the primary agents of this story are Uzbeks, Afghans, and Uyghurs, among other imperial Russian, British, and Chinese Muslim subjects, in addition to the officials they engaged within various Ottoman offices responsible for pilgrims, migrants, and customs duties. For Low, it is a similar coterie of Ottoman officials spread out over numerous ministries, but also British and Hadramauti Arab mercantile networks shuttling Muslims of South and Southeastern Asia to the Hijaz.

Beyond these variations in geographic setting and cast of characters, there are topical and thematic divergences between the works. Although both Can and Low make original contributions to our understanding of Ottoman extraterritorial protection and imperial citizenship, the core chapters of *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* branch out in different directions. As reflected in Low's core chapters—"Microbial Mecca and the Global Crisis of Cholera" (chapter 3, 117–66), "Bedouins and Broken Pipes" (chapter 4, 167–201), "Passports and Tickets" (chapter 5, 205–48), and "The Camel and the Rail" (chapter 6, 249–87)—*Imperial Mecca* is relatively more interested in material questions of infrastructure,

epidemiology, and bureaucracy. Hence most attention is cast on the competing forces of late Ottoman frontier modernization schemes, the British Raj's extraterritorial influence and interventions on behalf of its Muslim subjects traveling to and residing in Ottoman territories (especially Indians), Arab mercantile networks anxious to protect their stake in the hajj market, but most of all, the "twin infections" of disease and sedition.

Historicizing the makings of the modern hajj as well as modern public health and technocratic regimes of the Arabian Peninsula from the late Ottoman to early Saudi eras, Low demonstrates how both Ottoman and British imperial administrations struggled to contain a Pandora's box of jurisdictional, epidemiological, and security hazards unleashed by the locomotive and steamship age. But Low is keen to avoid the pitfalls of Ottoman "sick man," victimization, or modernization theory narratives. In seeking to instrumentalize the hajj for various geopolitical, economic, or ideological advantages, Low argues, Istanbul, London, Amsterdam, and Riyadh all obtained a small measure of success, but primarily failure, for time and again the sacred annual pilgrimage has proven to be larger than its constituent parts, and utterly irreducible to crass financial, imperial, or sectarian gain. As for the Pan-Islamic question, Low is less interested in the per se religious components of Hamidian policy than its secular international legal discourse and the role of disease, drought, and related environmental and epidemiological factors in defining the limits of Ottoman and British imperial power. These valuable contributions enrich our understanding of not only the modern hajj, but the history of modern global processes underlining outbreaks of typhus and cholera, as well as anthropogenic climate change more broadly. Low's comparatively more materialist approach to the hajj should not be confused for marginalization or disrespect of the profoundly spiritual experience that of course also is the hajj. Low's reverence for, and indeed solidarity with, the often materially destitute Muslim pilgrims navigating myriad challenges while owning nothing but the *ihram* garment on their backs is palpable on every page of *Imperial Mecca*.

Can would agree with Low on the unsatisfactory nature of historiographical tropes offering "Pan-Islamism" or "Pan-Turkism" as all-inclusive reasons for late Ottoman diplomacy and foreign policy. Such Eurocentric and hollowed-out explanations obscure the more complex, wide-ranging, and dynamic qualities of late Ottoman statecraft, and how the Porte navigated the maelstroms of European colonial encroachment, ambitious regional governors and mercantile networks, and the fluid imperial status of Muslims beyond Ottoman suzerainty. With regard to the epidemiological, jurisdictional, and security threats facing both Ottoman and European empires monitoring global hajj traffic, Can also makes valuable discoveries and contributions, especially in "Extraterritoriality and the Question of Protection" (chapter 3, 94–124), "Petitioning the Sultan" (chapter 4, 125–48), and "From Pilgrims to Migrants and De Facto Ottomans" (chapter 5, 149–74). But Can is loath to skirt the Pan-Islamic question and argues that Islam as both a religion and constellation of socio-spiritual practices—especially Sufism—must be taken seriously. If Low's approach is distinctive for his biopolitical focus on disease, public health, and infrastructure, Can distinguishes her approach by a thorough exploration of the global economy of Muslim piety and Sufism, as reflected in "Rewriting the Road to Mecca" (chapter 1, 34–64) and "Sufi Lodges as Sites of Transimperial Connection" (chapter 2, 65–93) in particular. Whereas Low's most common units of analysis are microbes and hygiene, from Ottoman chemistry labs to Thomas Cook wire transfers, and medical, financial, and security risks more broadly, for Can it is often the more affective questions of belonging, spiritual subjects, ecumenical claims, and piety. Overall, Can's approach is distinctive for taking the quotidian spaces and practices of religion as equally critical and concrete subjects of analysis.

By way of example, many late Ottomanists are familiar with the historic Sultantepe Sufi lodge located in the Asian-shore Üsküdar district of Istanbul, around which chapter 2 (and the conclusion) revolve. Yet, before Can's discovery few seemed to know that this site lodged the rare cache of registers and private papers she examines in this illuminating chapter, illustrating the hilltop site as an epicenter for untold global connections. It is no

exaggeration to state that from the untapped source of this lodge's archives Can connects such disparate locales, persons, and themes as Chinese and Russian Turkistan in Central Asia to the Crimea and Balkans; pietistic networks in Arabia to late Ottoman customs office bureaucrats in Istanbul; and interpersonal rivalries within the cramped quarters of a travelers' lodge to interimperial competition and cooperation on a global scale. In this way, Can employs newly unearthed records in this off-the-beaten-path archive to open up new worlds of inter-Muslim, inter-Asian contact, collision, and exchange.

Stylistically, Can initially adopts a more personal approach in line with the significance of the hajj in her family history, which she explains in the preface to the book. Can's ability to weave first-person voice with historical analysis is effective, even moving, and she does so without detracting from the deep erudition and archival foundations of the work. Here *Spiritual Subjects* welds governmental questions of imperial citizenship, international law, and the Ottoman Empire's nationalization reforms, as well as grassroots questions of Sufi social and pietistic networks, in a seamless and riveting narrative. All the while Can elucidates important legacies and ramifications of the hajj, global Muslim networks, and connections between the Turkish Republic and other successor states to the Ottoman Empire to Central Asia, including Russian and Chinese Turkestan, for the twentieth century and even today.

Scholarship of such admirable ambition and transregional scope is bound to produce some notable silences or omissions—if anything, to inspire future generations of historians in a number of hitherto disparate fields. Early modern historians or medievalists are likely to ask about (or point out) earlier precedents and continuities for both works' central themes—including interimperial competition and cross-border communities, but also epidemiological concerns—that preceded European hegemony, or modernity for that matter. As a book focused on the mid-nineteenth to twentieth century, such questions are justifiably beyond the scope of both accounts, but also point to a possible longer historical arc for these questions.

Alongside the question of historical time is the question of space. When it comes to geographies of Muslim pilgrimage, the Saudi government's tendency to myopically focus on the Hijaz will not come as a surprise to observers familiar with Riyadh's emphasis on the holy sites under its control—that is, overshadowing the Jordanian-administered *Haram al-Sharif* complex in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem (comprising the al-Aqsa Mosque, Dome of the Rock, and Buraq Mosque), for example, or the constellation of Sufi mausoleums strewn across the former lands of the Ottoman Empire. On the one hand, for the two greatest cities of Muslim pilgrimage, both located in the Hijaz within a day's journey apart, the use of the classical Arabic dual term *al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn* (the Two Holy Precincts) for Mecca and Medina is of course standard and unobjectionable. And both Low and Can are careful to emphasize that their focus on the annual hajj season does not exclude a broader spectrum of year-round pilgrimage—such as the *Umra*, or minor pilgrimage to Mecca, and visitations to saintly tombs, or *ziyara*, both in and outside the Ottoman domains.

But perhaps it should be stressed that when it comes to the Ottomans—unlike the Saudis—for both geographic and ideological reasons the Hijaz was far from the only theater of pilgrimage. Rather, to both the Porte and pilgrims, the *Haramayn Sharifayn* of the Hijaz constituted only two nodes—albeit preeminent ones—within a much broader universe of Muslim devotional travel in and outside the empire. Hence one area to amplify, especially since both works serve to de-exceptionalize the Ottoman Empire and frame the modern hajj within a broader transimperial framework, is the empire's many other sites of pilgrimage. Such a treatment would not only highlight Jerusalem, of course, as the third holiest site in Islam—but also the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, home to the *Atabat 'Aliyat*, or holiest sites, of Shi'i *ziyara* after Mecca and Medina. To this we must add the plethora of saintly tombs, tekkes, and *zawiyas* across the former territories of the empire, from the Balkans to Baghdad and Konya to Cairo. For centuries, all of these cities and the sacred precincts therein were under Ottoman jurisdiction and custodianship, as they also were home to large communities of Indian, Iranian, Afghan, and Central Asian

Muslims. The latter introduced similar blurry lines of jurisdiction and citizenship, as well as potential security and epidemiological risks, to those in Can and Low's accounts. Indeed in many cases they were likely the very same people so richly canvassed in *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca*.

Nor must we limit such a discussion to Muslims. An important source of comparison, for example, might be the history of Christian and Jewish pilgrimage to Palestine under Ottoman rule. The many differences notwithstanding, these parallel cases of Ottoman-era pilgrimage—implicating relations between the Porte and Orthodox, Catholic, and Coptic churches, as well as Jewish ecclesiastical leaders—may help further the two authors' goal of reducing the one-dimensional, exceptional treatment of Islam, Muslims, and the hajj. It would also seem that Ottoman imperial administration or even patronage of Christian and Jewish pilgrimages not only furthered the Ottomans' foundational narrative of Osman's Dream as a multiethnic, multi-faith empire par excellence; it likely enhanced the versatility of the Sublime Porte's imperial tool kit when it came to securing its imperial legitimacy and prestige in the modern international theater. But more work is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, of all modern European empires canvassed in this illuminating pair of works, the French appear to receive slightly short shrift. It seems work needs to be done in English on how French Algeria, West Africa, and perhaps even Pondicherry, Indochina, and the Caribbean, for example, play into the questions so deftly explored in *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca*. Still, given the rich landscapes and seascapes canvassed in Can and Low's accounts, and Britain's more entrenched colonial presence in the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia in comparison to the French, this is hardly a fair criticism.

In sum, rare is the pair of academic monographs published in the same year that make so many contributions—across so many fields and disciplines—as the two at hand. Low and Can deserve to be congratulated on the depth and creativity of their respective research, incisive treatment of a vast secondary literature, and the elegance of their narrative prose. As reflected in their rich citations to the secondary literature and command of the relevant languages and literature, including their expert translations of Ottoman Turkish, Uzbek/Chagatai Turkish, Arabic, and Russian phrases and terminology, the authors prove themselves to be able and careful scholars who are meticulous in their research and analytical methods. The resulting prose—each in its own way—is judicious and scholarly, without being pedantic. Neither book is beset by excessive or alienating jargon and both should be highly readable across diverse fields and audiences.

For all these reasons, students and scholars in a wide array of specializations—including but not limited to the late Ottoman Empire and Middle East; South Asia and the Indian Ocean; international law and diplomacy; Islamic and religious studies; and science, technology, and environmental studies, as well as medicine and public health—would be well advised to read and assign the two works in tandem. Instructors seeking to enrich their syllabi beyond Eurocentric settings especially should take note. Read together, *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* brilliantly reveal what newly unearthed Ottoman documents can teach us about the making of modern migration management, epidemiology, and social control; imperial versus national and cultural identities; and diasporic networks and socio-legal questions of state sovereignty versus transnational religious affiliation. But it is their divergent actors, routes, and perspectives that make for a breathtaking, virtual three-dimensional experience on the making of the modern hajj. Although centered on the hallowed precincts of Ottoman-era Hijaz, *Spiritual Subjects* and *Imperial Mecca* remind us that no matter how lofty the destination, often it is the struggle and experience of the journey itself that matters most in the end.