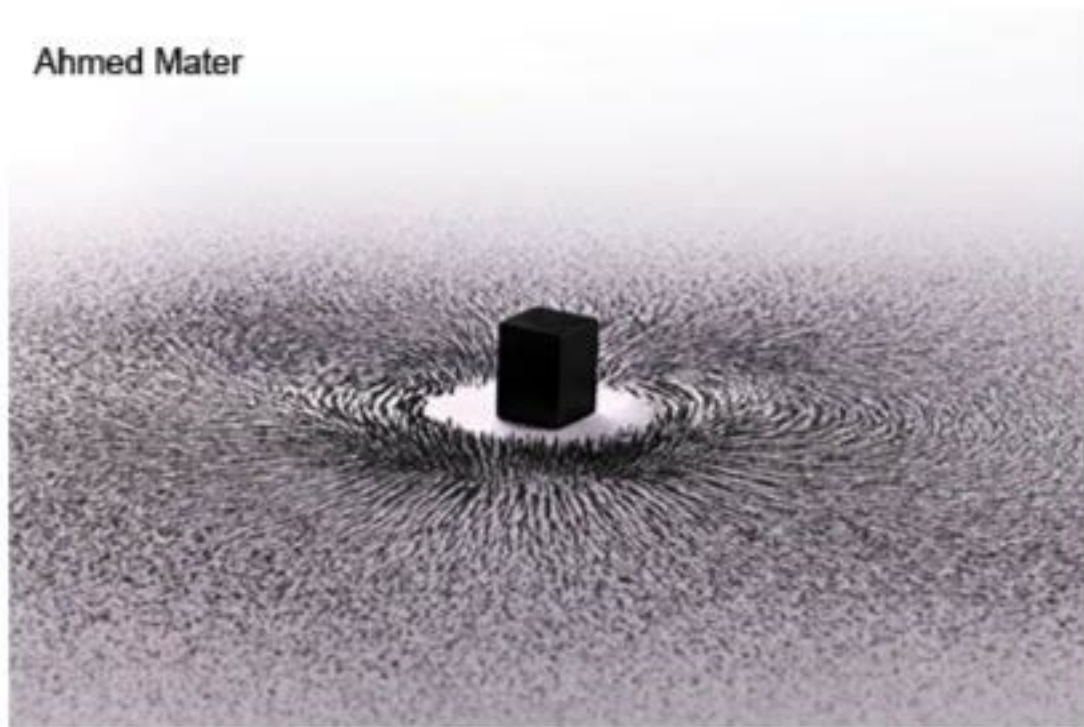


# Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam

By Karen Dabrowska

**“As you circumambulate and move closer to the kaaba you feel like a small stream merging into a big river. You have been transformed into a particle that is gradually melting and disappearing. That is love at its absolute peak”**

Ahmed Mater



This description of the ecstasy of a Muslim pilgrim accompanying a two-minute black and white film greets visitors to the world's first exhibition on hajj - the annual

Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca at the British Museum. After years of negotiations with 13 countries, rare artefacts from Islam's holiest sites have been brought to London.

The artefacts, especially the coverings of the kaaba, are magnificent. Loans include significant material from Saudi Arabia including a seetanah which covers the door of the kaaba as well as other historic and contemporary artefacts from key museums in the Kingdom. Other objects have come from major public and private collections in the UK and around the world, among them the British Library and the Khalili Family Trust. Together these objects evoke and document the long and perilous journey associated with the pilgrimage, gifts offered to the sanctuary as acts of devotion and the souvenirs that are brought back from Hajj. They include archaeological material, manuscripts, textiles, historic photographs and contemporary art. Grave stones of pilgrims who remained in Mecca until they died bring stark realism to the almost surreal displays.

But the exhibition is more than a display of the wealth of objects from different collections: it conveys the deeply personal experience of hajj, the journey of a lifetime which touches the heart

and transforms the pilgrim.

In the words of the scholar Martin Lings :“It is not only a journey in space to the centre towards which one has always turned ones face in prayers but a journey far back in time beyond the mission of Muhammed, Jesus and Moses”.

The exhibition focuses on the different routes pilgrims took to Mecca: the Arabian route (Baghdad, Kufa, Mecca), the African route (Timbuktu, Cairo, Mecca), the Ottoman route (Istanbul, Damascus, Mecca) and the Asian route (Singapore, Bombay, Mecca). There is a map of the journey and numerous photos, quotes from the famous pilgrims including the historic Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta, boxer Mohammed Ali and convert Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens).

A beautiful drawing from the Ottoman era shows an elderly pilgrim on the route – a reminder of the agonies involved in making this journey before modern transport. When the Ottomans tried to build a railway for pilgrims, it became a military asset and was sabotaged by Arab forces aided by Lawrence of Arabia.

Non-Muslims also made the



journey to Mecca. A Victorian adventurer undertook the hajj disguised as an Afghan doctor. He, and the other interlopers who feature in this exhibition, went there in a spirit of genuine fascination with the religion and culture of Islam; Burton is best known for translating the Arabian Nights.

Once the journey has been documented Mecca is unveiled. First there is a factual inspiring film about the hajj. It is laid down in the Qur'an that it is a sacred duty for Muslims everywhere, if they are able, to make the journey to Mecca at least once in their lives. This pilgrimage takes place during the last month of the Islamic year, known as Dhu'l Hijja. At the heart of the sanctuary at Mecca lies the kaaba, the cube-shaped building that Muslims believe was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It was in Mecca that the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations in the early 7th century. Therefore the city has long been viewed as a spiritual centre and the heart of Islam. The rituals involved with Hajj have remained unchanged since its beginning, and it continues to be a powerful

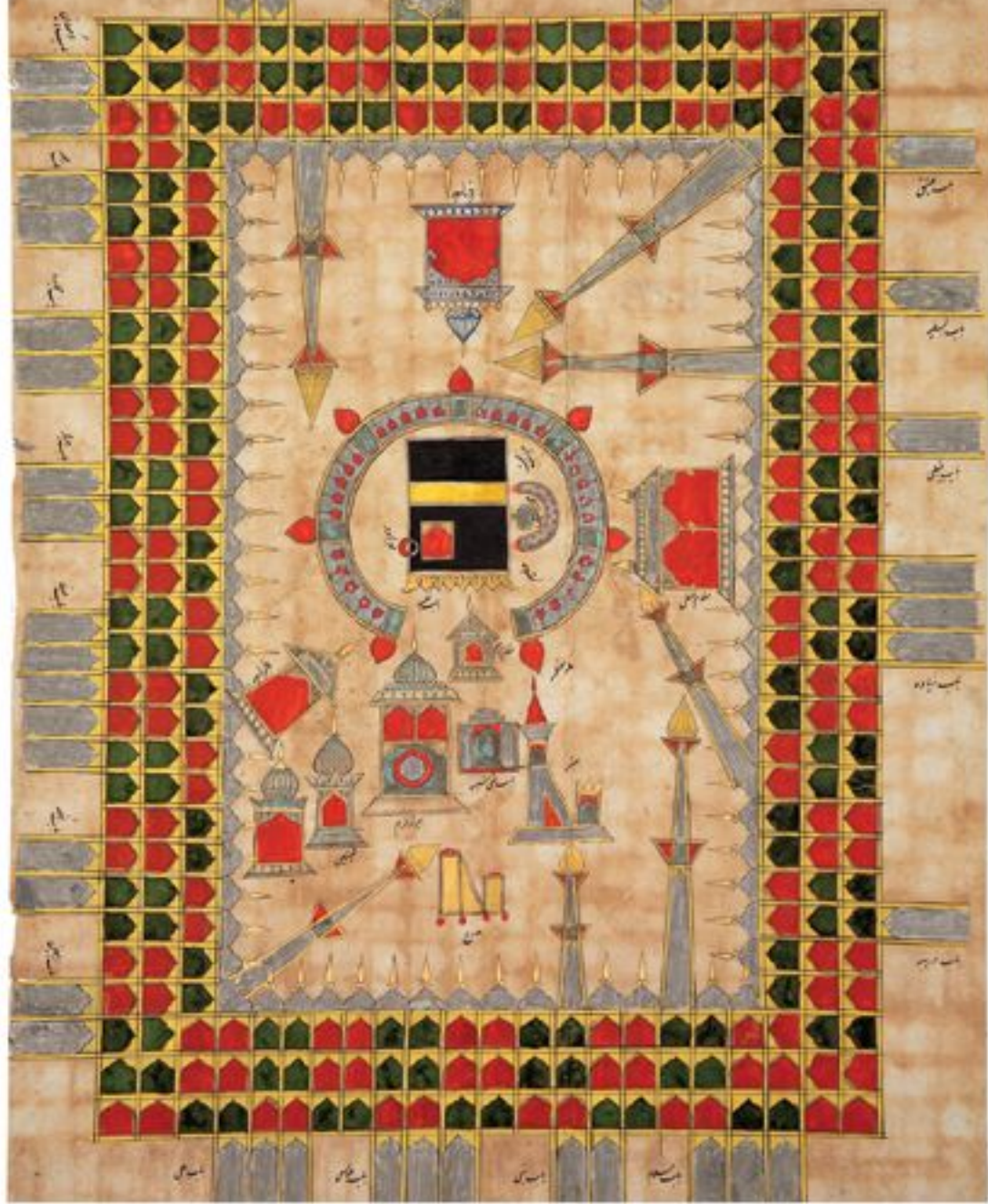
religious undertaking which draws Muslims together from all over the world, irrespective of nationality or sect.

Excellent use has been made of film, photographs and quotes from the Quran: "Proclaim the pilgrimage to all people. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of swift mount, emerging from the deep mountain passes".

Towards the end of the exhibition is a series of interviews with pilgrims. Their experiences are also shared with the world through the books they published and diaries they kept. The eloquent diary of 10-year-old Saleena Nurmohamed records her first sight of the ancient black stone cube at the centre of the rituals at Mecca. "Words cannot describe the emotions that are created when one looks for the first time at the kaaba," she writes.

The exhibition has been organised in partnership with the King Abdulaziz Public Library Riyadh, a philanthropic institution which was established in 1985. It is supported by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah and seeks to disseminate knowledge and

Detail of Khalili Hajj certificate



culture with emphasis being placed on Saudi Arabia's Islamic and Arabic heritage. HSBC Amanah has supported the exhibition's international reach outside Saudi Arabia.

The British Museum has been awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council award to support the research for the exhibition and accompanying publication *Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam*, edited by Venetia Porter which features contributions by leading scholars. An academic conference on Hajj will be held and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds will explore British Muslim communities' experiences of hajj.

The Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, commented that : "This exhibition will enable a global audience to deepen their understanding of the significance and history of the hajj. In particular, it will allow non-Muslims to explore the one aspect of Islamic practice and faith which they are not able to witness, but which plays such a major part in forming a worldwide Islamic consciousness".

When he opened the exhibition Prince Charles said : " I wanted to pay tribute, if I may, to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques who, in accordance with Islamic teaching, generously hosts hajjis making the pilgrimage to Makkah, providing remarkable practical and logistic facilities. This recalls the hospitality shown to earlier pilgrims by the families of the Prophet Mohammed, itself following a noble tradition reaching back to Abraham who built the original kaaba. I am sure you will see that, by gathering together a remarkable collection of treasures from across the world, this exhibition brings to life the very human stories of the countless generations who have completed the Hajj through the ages - from Singapore to Istanbul, from Nanjing to Mombasa. Through the vivid images and artefacts on display, the exhibition reveals the truly universal character of the hajj".

Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam  
British Museum

26th January – 15th April

هر کجده کعبه نصیب از لسه خدا رحمت ایدر  
هر کشتی سوز و کشتی خانه سینه دعوت ایدر

محمد رسول الله  
لا اله الا الله

