

The Role of Saudi Women in "Delalah" at Al Medinah

Hadeer El Nagah

Associate Professor of English - Prince Sultan University

Abstract:

The challenges confronting *Hajj*¹ management and organization may vary from cultural, religious, health and many other types of difficulties. Apart from the massive governmental efforts to organize *Hajj* and deal with its multiple and complicated challenges, parallel vigor is equally active in the social and private domain. Women both at Mecca and Medina have always been active facilitators of the remarkable experience of *Hajj*. Along with their male family members and peers, the women of Mecca and Al Medinah contributed in the civil hospitality services of "*Twafa*" and "*Delalah*". *Twafa* is the organized civil service at Mecca, while *Delalah* is at Al Medinah. While women's role in *Hajj* services is undeniable and historically unquestionable, very few researches and studies were conducted in that particular area. Due to the nature of privacy of women and their domestic domain very little attention was given to their activities as *Hajj* facilitators and cultural communicators to visitors of Al Medinah. Based on historic, cross cultural readings and interviews, the aim of this study is to 1- Discover the dimension of the service and cultural role played by women as *Hajj* facilitators at the area of Al Medinah. 2- Document the efforts exerted by women in this domain and its effects in the public and domestic spheres, 3- Suggest a preparation of a larger project that documents the efforts of women in *Hajj* at both Mecca and Al Medinah.

Study Problem:

Since the beginning of Islam in the Arab peninsula, women have always been active members of their societies. Due to their unique location at the prophetic city of Al Medinah, women of Al Medinah have always been an inseparable part of the city's preparation and hospitality to welcome and receive the

¹ Note on Transliteration :Due to the religious nature of the subject matter of this study some of the Arabic words are used, they are to be used in transliteration these are some of the examples: *Haj*, *Hajjis*, *Jihad*, *Mecca*, *Medinah*, *Mahram*, *Twafa*, *Delalah*,

prophet's visitors, however very few references document the role played by women in this domain. More specifically despite the spread of societal organizations active in the field of *Hajj* tourism and hospitality during modern times, very limited attention is given to documenting the Saudi women role and their participation.

Importance of the Study:

This study is particularly important for the documentation of the women's effort in *Hajj* services. Moreover, there is a specific significance of conducting this study and to write it in English to make it available to the English readers and researchers in this area. This study is to be considered as a seed to a more elaborative and comprehensive research project of encyclopedic nature to document the role played by Saudi women in social domains in general and in national projects like *Hajj* in particular.

Methodology:

The study is based on a qualitative approach using historic overview of the role played by women in *Hajj* in general and in Al Medinah in particular.

Objectives of the Study:

The aim of this study is to:

Discover the dimension of the service and cultural role played by women as *Hajj* facilitators at the area of Al Medinah.

Document the efforts exerted by women in *Hajj* services and hospitality and its effects in the public and domestic spheres.

Suggest a preparation of a larger project that documents the efforts of women in *Hajj* at both Mecca and Al Medinah.

Previous Studies and the Limitation of the Study:

One of the main limitations confronting this study is to find reliable sources documenting the role played by women in *Hajj* hospitality at Al Medinah. Besides very few books and references documenting such role, most of the material collected was from interviews, newspapers articles, autobiographies and travels of *Hajj* and recorded documentaries. Except of Faten Hussein's study on women in *Twafa* 2005, no other studies are known in this particular area and this current research is considered the first to focus on the role of women in the area of Al Medinah.

Introduction:

The Importance of *Hajj*:

Hajj is one of the most unique human experiences as it involves deep human interaction with people from different cultures, nations and languages. Due to the increasing numbers of Muslims attracted to perform *Hajj* every year, tremendous efforts are exerted both on the governmental and the societal levels to host,

serve and support the *Hajjis*. The Quran emphasizes the importance of *Hajj* in many locations and encourages human beings to interact and mingle during *Hajj* and many other occasions:

"And proclaim to mankind the Hajj (pilgrimage). They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel; they will come from every deep and distant (wide) mountain highway (to perform Hajj)." (Qur'an: 22:27)¹

"O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Tawe Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Qur'an:49:13).

Hajj is also stressed as one of the pillars of Islam in *Hadith* in numerous examples.² Besides its religious and intercultural significance, *Hajj* was also an opportunity for charity work to the people of Mecca and Al Medinah since the beginning of Islam. Even before Islam hospitality and service of visitors of Mecca was considered an honor³.

The Particularity of Women *Hajj* and their Role in *Hajj* Services:

Hajj is equally obligated to both men and women, it is considered equal to *Jihad* in reward as expressed in *Hadith* narrated By 'Aisha :(The mother of the faithful believers) I said, "O Allah's Apostle! We consider Jihad as the best deed." The Prophet said, "The best Jihad (for women) is Hajj Mabru" (Sahih Bukhârî Hadith Book 026, Hadith Number 595).

In addition to its uniqueness as a human and cultural experience, *Hajj* promotes the sense of unity and develops the person's sense of togetherness and tolerance towards people from different backgrounds and ethnicities. In their introduction to "Estimating the Impact of the *Hajj*: Religion and Tolerance in Islam's Global Gathering", Clininingsmith, Khawaja and Keremer stated that *Hajj* leads to a feeling of unity with fellow Muslims. More importantly, they emphasized that "It (*Hajj*) increased belief in equality and harmony among ethnic groups and Islamic sects and leads to more favorable attitudes toward women, including greater acceptance of female education and employment" (1). Such positive impact of *Hajj* is not limited to those who are performing the rituals but to all those who are working in the field as well, as they come in close contact to different nationalities and ethnicities which will accordingly develop their sense of openness to the world and acceptance of others (ibid).

Nevertheless, *Hajj* is a complex and challenging experience, besides the difficulties of performing the religious rituals themselves, the huge numbers, difficulty of communication, movements in masses to same places are amongst the challenges that face any organization of *Hajj*. The complexity of the experience itself and the interchanging factors and disciplines involved makes it an interesting case of interdisciplinary research and an area that really in need and demand of thorough examination and

1 Also see for more about Hajj in the Quran 2/128, 158,196,198, 3/97, 5/95, 96 and many other examples.

2 See (Hadith No. 112 (16), Book of Faith, Sahih Muslim, Vol. 1

3 See Abd Al Aziz 2009.

development. Women across Islamic history played an important role in *Hajj* hospitality and service, since the beginning of Islam: (Hadith) and it was historically proven that women were allowed to work in different venues and one of their main services to their societies was serving in the area of *Hajj* hospitality¹.

Historic Role of Women in Mecca & Al Medinah

Saudi Women & the *Hajj* Experience

Saudi women have always participated actively in providing services for the *Hajjis*. Even before the institutionalization of the *Hajj* guidance services, many of the domestic services were entitled to women. Though very limited studies were found in this area, historic and religious references and sources frequently refer to the domestic and health tasks shouldered by women especially at Mecca, Jeddah and Al Median where the *Hajjis* usually needed to stay².

In her introduction to the fifth volume *Alam Al Twafa* which is devoted solely to the female *Hajj* guides, Faten Hussein stated that many women across history practiced *Al Twafa*³; they were officially appointed by the Saudi government and were equally entitled to inherit the profession like male siblings (20)⁴. Especially at the two Holy cities, Mecca (including Mena and Arafat areas) and Al Medinah⁵ the role of women was mainly domestic as most of the *Hajjis* were hosted in private homes till recently. One of the interesting points that worth mentioning here is the specializations among the families that work in both *Twafa* and *Delalah* as it is recorded that families will specialize in providing services to *Hajjis* from certain countries and geographic areas, women from these families in turn became experts in these specific cultures in terms of language, social traditions and cooking and other housing practices, it is also likely that marital relations happens between hosting families and *Hajjis* as both remain in contact for long periods of times even after *Hajj* itself. Such social and marital relations reinforce the specialization and promote language learning and support. Such cultural cross fertilization may in turn explain the cultural multiplicity of cities like Mecca and Al Medinah and richness of the social tapestry. In his memories of *Hajj*

1 See Hussein for more details 2005.

2 See Al Ansari 20, 169 and others.

3 See Alam Al Twafa : Twafa is defined in Hussein's study as : the profession of a person who receives the Hajjis, serves them and provides guidance to them (25).

4 As stated by Hussein in the above mentioned reference, no previous studies were devoted solely for the role played by women in facilitating Hajj and Twafa as a profession.

5 While guiding the Hajjis in Mecca is traditionally known as Twafa, it is known in Medina as Delalah, like Twafa, it is a family running profession till it was institutionalized by the Saudi government and it is currently mostly run by the Association of Adilaa (Hajj Guides) at Al Medina <http://www.adilla.com.sa/portal/>

and the services and hospitality of *Hajjis*, Mohamed Kamel Al Khja lists the specialization of each family working in Delalah according to the nationalities they host¹.

Lady Evelyn Cobbold's travelogue *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, first published 1934 is considered a unique documentation to the private spheres of social life at Mecca and Medina during the thirties of the twentieth century. The book derives its importance and value not only from being the first to be written by a Muslim women convert but also from its detailed description of the daily lives of women and children at the two holy cities, an advantage that distinguishes it from any other travelogue written by a male traveler. Being a Muslim herself, gave Lady Cobbold's writings an empathetic outlook that other mere journalistic accounts lack. This is one of the very rare documentation of the role played by Saudi women with regards to service during *Hajj* and *Umrah*. Lady Cobbold explained in details her stay in Al Medinah and the hospitality with which she was received and she gave a detailed account of the role played by women in the private spheres. The account also includes her description of the cleanliness of the houses, the interior decorations by women and their help and support in religious matters and visits to *Rawdah*. Deep cultural communication which is among *Hajj* rational and benefits can be sited at its best within the private spheres among women, as explained by Lady Cobbold (111-149).

Role of Saudi Women in *Hajj* during Modern Times

Despite their unquestionable presence in the historic literature of *Hajj* and *Umrah*, women in general lack sufficient representation in the modern history of the Kingdom. Moreover, women's efforts in the area of *Hajj* and *Umrah* hospitality and services continued to within the family and was rarely mentioned nor documented as part of the public service till very recently. However it is worth mentioning here that the lack of documentation of the women's role was mostly not deliberate as it is part of the cultural segregation and seclusion to women to the private sphere rather than the open and public domain of work. It is also noteworthy to highlight here that community and charitable work in general was not documented and institutionalized in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia till very recently. Surprisingly the first four charitable organizations to be institutionalized are women organization which demonstrates the social role and responsibility entrusted to Saudi women despite the lack of documentation (Sadhan, 2011).

Nevertheless, Faten Hussein is one of the active members of *Twafa* community of Mecca her documentation of the role played by women in *Hajj* and *Umrah* is considered to be a single outstanding work in the field (2005). She surveyed a sample of female *Hajj* guides and reached a statistics that mainly

¹see <http://forum.makkawi.com/archive/index.php/t-89272.html>

favors to increase the participation of women in *Hajj* services especially in the areas of reception, public relations, supervising of food preparation and catering services and paper work (48). The highest percentage of the sample surveyed were in favor of increasing the participation of women in first; reception and hospitality, second in providing religious guidance and teaching especially in female related issues with the percentage 94,83% and 82,76% respectively (67). Other services were also offered by women such as; medical care, helping in shopping, child care, keeping of valuable possessions and many other services that should not be underestimated (72). In addition to other numerous difficulties, inadequacy of trained female service providers and limitation of language communication topped Hussein's list of the obstacles facing women and limiting their involvement in the area of *Hajj* services. In her more recent account on the matter of women's role in *Twafa*, Hussein's 2013 *My Experience in Twafa*, in addition to being a personal portfolio to her work in the field, it highlights the establishment of the first institutionalized non-profit organization to work in the field of *Twafa* in Mecca. She also documents the women's chapter in the organization and the support of such role by the civil society and Um Al Qura University. (Hussein 2013 p. 45) it is worth mentioning here that a parallel non-profit organization is also established in Al Medinah *the Private Organization for Guides* 1405 H. A committee of *Hajj* and Umrah was also established at Taibah University at Al Medinah which also has a women branch that is currently presenting services to women *Hajjis* and visitors of Al Medinah.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and a unique trip that each Muslim wishes to perform at least once in lifetime. The number of women performing Hajj increases annually and due to the particularity of women issues during Hajj, more guidance and hospitality services are needed to be implemented every year. Saudi women have always been an integral part of the society. More evidently in *Mecca*, *Jeddah* and *Al Medinah* as they are the cities that are honored with receiving those who come to perform *Hajj* and *Umrah*, the women's role in hospitality and Hajj services is undeniable, the works of women in *Twafa* in *Mecca* and in *Delalah* at *Al Medinah* have its roots in the societies for centuries, however very limited historic and social researches were conducted to document such role. It is the main purpose of this study to document such role that has been on-going since the beginning of Islam. Women of *Al Medinah* have been active in the field of *Delalah* with their male family counterparts for centuries and continued to carry on these services in modern time through social and public organizations like – and the committee of Hajj at Taibah University and many others. The study recommends the following:

- A more comprehensive work and an encyclopedic publication needs to be conducted to document the role played by women in *Delalah* services.

- More training and institutional professional preparation needed for women and especially university students and those in closer contact with *Hajj* and *Umrah* services to equip young women with the professional skills needed for the field.
- The establishment of a *Hajj* and *Umrah* Institute for women which advances a field of hospitality academic studies and profession.
- Produce a documentary for the historic services provided by women as a tribute to such role and religious services.

Selected Bibliography:

I-Arabic sources

- Abd Al Kader, Abd Al Aziz, *The Islamic Relief Work: A contemporary Authenticating Study*, The International Competition of Naief Abd AlAziz Al Saud, 2009.
- Al Ansari, Naji bin Mohammad Hassan. *Al Mesqaya: from the Social Life of Al Al Medinah Al Munawarah*, Al Al Medinah Al Munawarah Literary Club, Al Medinah 2007.
- Hussein, Faten Ibrahim, Musaad Muhammad Al Deeb, *Alam Al Twafa* (Part Five Female *Hajj* Guides), Muttawiffy Hujjaj South Asia Est. Mecca 1426/2005.
- ----- *My Experience with Twafa*, King Fahd National Library, Mecca, 2013
- Hewala, Yusuf Ahmed. *The Documentary Book of the First Training Program for Hajj Guides*, the Organization of Guides, First Forum, Al Medinah 1410.
- -----*The Documentary Book of the Second Training Program for Hajj Guides*, the Organization of Guides, First Forum, Al Medinah 1421.
- Sadhan, Abdallah bin Naser. "The Establishment of Saudi Women Organizations in Saudi Arabia and their Role in Women Development", in *Medad*, Rajab 1432.

II- English Sources

- Alleviating the Difficulties of the *Hajj*: accessed 4\12\2014
<http://www.islamicbulletin.org/services/Hajj.htm>, <http://quran.com/search?q=Hajj>
- Clingingsmith, David, Asim Ijaz Khawaja and Michael Kremer, "Estimating the Impact of *Hajj*: Religion and Tolerance in Islam's Global Gathering"; Center for International Development, Harvard University, no. 159, April 2008.
- Cobbold, Lady Evelyn; *Pilgrimage to Meccan*, King Abd Al Aziz Public Library, Riyadh 2008.
- Ministry of *Hajj*<http://www.hajjinformation.com/International Association for New Muslims:> \
- <http://www.islamicfinder.org/getitWorld.php?id=54222&lang=>
- <http://susris.com/2011/11/04/the-Hajj-and-its-impact-on-saudi-arabia-and-the-muslim-world-david-long-2/>