

C. SNOUCK HURGRONJE



# Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JAN JUST WITKAM

BRILL

# Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century

Daily Life, Customs and Learning.  
The Moslims of the East-Indian Archipelago

*By*

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translated by J.H. Monahan  
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## INTRODUCTION

### CHRISTIAAN SNOUCK HURGRONJE'S DESCRIPTION OF MECCA

The Dutch Orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (Oosterhout, 8 February 1857–Leiden, 26 June 1936), the reprint of whose study on the daily life in Mecca in the latter part of the nineteenth century is herewith introduced, was not a religious man. From almost every page of his monumental study on Mecca, which was originally published in 1888–1889, it is evident that the author had but few personal religious feelings. Religion as a social phenomenon, on the other hand, had his fascination. His interest laid in finding answers to the question how and to what extent people were willing to shape their private lives and social organisation according to what they accepted as God's commands.

Ever since Snouck Hurgronje published his monograph on Mecca, the book has amazed its readers. Mecca was and is the Holy City for some, the Forbidden City for others. How had a young Western scholar succeeded, and in such a short time, to become accepted by the Meccans as one of them and to write such a detailed description of Mecca's society? Since Snouck Hurgronje has mostly kept silent about this remarkable feat, stories of legendary proportions were bound to come into circulation. That is why we will treat the episode immediately preceding his journey to Mecca in some detail.

The 21st-century reader should realize that the present book is a classic, but in many ways also a modern book. It describes Meccan society in the 1880's, and as such it is an important historical source – in fact till today the only one on the subject. The lively and at times humorous style in which Snouck Hurgronje describes the motives and feelings of some of the inhabitants of Mecca keeps his narrative fresh and attractive. In addition, his ideas of how to have dealings with people of different cultures and religions, and how to describe these, are downright modern.

The work here published is the English translation of what appeared in 1889 in German as the second volume of Snouck Hurgronje's book on Mecca. It contains his account of the public and private life of the Meccans, of the traditional educational system in the Great Mosque,

and, last but not least, of the life of the Jāwah colony in Mecca. The first volume of the original German edition (1888) is a historical study on the City and its rulers. It reads as an account of more than a millennium of ruthless power play and unrestrained greed in the city which is the heart of Islam, but all that is not contained in the present volume. Snouck Hurgronje's realistic approach of Mecca's history does not need to disturb us as anti-Islamic bias on his part, since Muslim historians themselves are quite open-minded on the subject, in the same way, probably, as Roman Catholics think about the secret history of the Vatican: most holy and most unholy often go hand in hand.

The English translation was made by J.H. Monahan, a British consular agent who has had many postings in the Middle East. In 1909 he was British consul in Jeddah, where he became interested in Snouck Hurgronje's book and he started to make a translation. He only completed it twenty years later. The final phase of the translating was done in Leiden under Snouck Hurgronje's personal supervision and the English translation of 1931 is in fact the final authorized version of the text. It was and is a classic of exploration and anthropology, and the selection of illustrations, chosen from Snouck Hurgronje's own photographs made in 1884–1885, make the English edition a pleasantly readable, self-contained description of scenes from the daily life in Mecca as Snouck Hurgronje had experienced it in 1885.

Snouck Hurgronje had come to Jeddah and Mecca for more than one reason. The most important one was, of course, to study Islam in all its aspects in its very centre, in an environment where it was least influenced by non-Islamic elements and where it was not under foreign rule. On 24 November 1880 he had, with honours, defended his doctoral thesis in Leiden University entitled *Het Mekkaansche feest* ('The Meccan festival'). In it he not only described the pilgrimage and its ritual in a historical perspective, but in it he also addressed the question how and why the Prophet Muḥammad had incorporated this pre-Islamic, basically pagan, ritual of the pilgrimage into his new religion. Snouck Hurgronje came up with the answer that this had mainly been for reasons of political expediency. How he debunks the Abrahamic legend in Islam is a telling example of his non-religious perspective. The pilgrimage, the re-enactment of some dramatic episodes in Ibrāhīm's life and divine mission (Hagar's despair, the sacrifice of Ismā'īl), being what it was, irrespective of the question whether it was true or false, needed study as a social, and political, phenomenon.

Snouck Hurgronje had not come to Mecca in order to study the pilgrimage alone. In the end he did not even participate in the pilgrimage, since he was forced to leave Mecca well before the season. He does indeed describe, though rather summarily, the pilgrimage while going through the ritual year. Most Meccans had to earn their yearly income in the short period of a few weeks during the pilgrimage, and in that season they obviously could not devote their attention to anything else. In the rest of the year, however, it was as if they had different personalities. Meccan society outside the hectic season was, therefore, Snouck Hurgronje's main field of study.

He had landed in Jeddah on August 28, 1884, and soon proved to be a keen and cynical observer of human nature, without much esteem of human idealism, often detecting ulterior, usually materialistic motives behind religious acts. He had also come to Jeddah, and Mecca, with a mission of a more practical nature.

Mecca had become, in the eyes of European colonial powers with Muslim subjects, a safe haven for fundamentalist activities ('Muslim fanatics' as they were called in late-19th-century discourse). The city was seen as a place from where pan-Islamic ideas could unhindered radiate all over the Muslim world, a large part of which was by then governed by European nations, the hated unbelievers. These nations felt threatened by pan-Islamism, an ideology which made of the Turkish Sultan and Caliph, in addition to being master of his own subjects, also the ruler of the hearts and minds of all other Muslims in the world, as if he were a sort of Islamic pope. The whole idea was a clever ploy of the Ottomans and they eagerly exploited this wholly un-Islamic concept. To have up-to-date and accurate information about the pan-Islamic ideas living within the Southeast-Asian community in Mecca was therefore deemed of prime importance by the Dutch government, and Snouck Hurgronje had taken upon himself the task to acquire more intimate knowledge on the Jāwah, as the people of the Malayan world are called in Western Arabia. In this connection there was another, more practical reason for political fact-finding in Mecca: The Netherlands had found itself, from 1873 onwards, in a state of war of attrition against the Sultanate of Aceh, an independent state on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, and it was a war with strong Islamic overtones. Snouck Hurgronje's funds for his Meccan expedition had partly been allotted for the specific purpose of finding out to what extent the war was ideologically supported by segments in the Jāwah community in Mecca.

Finally, Snouck Hurgronje had come to Mecca with his academic background and a scholarly interest, being a pupil of Michael Jan de Goeje (1836–1907), that grandmaster of the Leiden school of Oriental philology. It is therefore hardly surprising that he devoted a long chapter of his book on Mecca to intellectual life, to what he called ‘the University of Mecca’, but what was the rather loosely organized educational system operative in Mecca’s Great Mosque. Here too, he had a keen eye for human behaviour and he gave his readers their full share of his observations, not only on the curriculum but also on academic competition and university intrigue, and on the profitable symbiosis of scholars and rulers. With these four subjects, we have referred to the four chapters of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje’s *Mekka*.

Once in Arabia, Snouck Hurgronje made his preparations to his visit to Mecca in several phases. First he acquired as much information on Mecca as possible, and he created for himself a circle of Muslim friends. He spoke with many pilgrims coming back from Mecca (the festival had been on October 1st, 1884), he got acquainted with people involved in the pilgrimage business, and he met many inhabitants of Mecca and Jeddah. To them he must have been a Christian scholar with a remarkable knowledge of Arabic literature and Islamic law. He spoke the Arabic vernacular fluently. The fact that he had brought with him photographic equipment made him interesting as a potential maker of portraits. Snouck Hurgronje evidently exploited the social advantages coming along with that, and his photography proved to be a catalyst for establishing relationships and breaking down social barriers. Especially at a time when photography was still a rare and miraculous art, photographic portraits were very much sought after.

His next phase was the selection of a travel companion to Mecca, whose social network would provide him sufficient safety. In the end the choice fell on Raden Aboe Bakar Djajadinginrat (1854–1914), son of a noble family from Banten, a staunchly Islamic region in the far west of Java. He had lived in Mecca already five years, and he had of course numerous acquaintances among the Jāwah. All that made him a highly valuable person. At the time when Snouck Hurgronje and he met he had already succeeded in ingratiating himself with the Dutch consul in Jeddah by providing the Dutch with ‘useful knowledge’ from Mecca, to which they had no physical access. It was he who would, eventually, accompany Snouck Hurgronje on his momentous journey

from Jeddah to Mecca, where he also was Snouck Hurgronje's first host. This and other services earned him his reward from the Dutch government, a permanent post at the Dutch consulate in Jeddah. After Snouck Hurgronje's departure from the Ḥiǧāz he would remain Snouck Hurgronje's confidential informant on Meccan and Ḥiǧāzī affairs.<sup>1</sup>

In that second phase Snouck Hurgronje must have made known to a select group of Muslim friends – and probably to one or two of his Dutch intimi as well – that he intended to convert to Islam and to study the sacred sciences in Mecca. For that he first had to change his habitat in Jeddah. On the 1st of January 1885 he moved to a house of his own where he lived with Raden Aboe Bakar, away from the Dutch consulate where till then he had received hospitality. The move was also a symbolic one: it marked the moment of his transition from his Christian religion to Islam. Snouck Hurgronje took on the name of 'Abd al-Ghaffār, 'Servant of the Much-Forgiving One'. In January 1885 he gradually started to make his conversion public, among Muslim that is. On January 5, 1885, he wrote in his diary:

'Important visit of Sayyid Muḥammad Muzayyin. [...] For circumcision, which is performed at very diverse ages [...] they use, as I learned from the *muzayyin* [barber], a little iron pincer in the shape of Λ called *'udda* [utensil] in order to squeeze the prepuce, and a razor blade. For the treatment of the wound, a *marḥam* [salve, ointment] is used [...], which is a substance which diminishes the loss of blood and heals the wound. Our friend even told us that he used *talyūn*, which in European pharmacies is called cantarion [...]. It is applied to a piece of textile and that is used for covering the wounded area. After that a *dārūr* [application] is used for drying the wound. There are several different varieties of mixtures for this [...].<sup>2</sup>

It is a crucial passage and a hermetic one at the same time. The superficial reader of Snouck Hurgronje's Jeddah diary can read it as one of the so many anthropological observations, this one on details of the custom of circumcision. However, why would this visit be so 'important' unless the circumcision was to be performed on Snouck Hurgronje

<sup>1</sup> See now Michael Laffan, 'Writing from the colonial margin. The letters of Aboe Bakar Djajadiningrat to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje', in *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31, No. 91 (November 2003), 357–380.

<sup>2</sup> The Jeddah diary, MS Leiden Or. 7112, pp. 44–45.

himself? The passage on wound healing, which immediately follows the passage on circumcision, makes clear that the *muzayyin*, the barber, had not come for a haircut. Circumcision was an important detail of Snouck Hurgronje's preparations to go to Mecca. He simply could not run the risk that a stupid detail such as his foreskin would bring him into difficulties.

On 16 January 1885 Snouck Hurgronje records a visit to Ismā'īl Efendi, the *qāḍī* of Jeddah, and others, as a preparation apparently, for his imminent meeting with 'Uthmān Pasha, the Ottoman gouvernor of the Ḥiğāz who was in Jeddah at the time. One may assume that this visit to the *qāḍī* was also done in order to confirm his conversion to Islam in front of the necessary witnesses. The gouvernor knew, of course, also of the visit to Mecca which this young westerner was going to make, and there was no secrecy in this. In these meetings, photography and portraiture had also been subject of conversation, and several sitting and standing portraits of gouvernor 'Uthmān Pasha were taken.

It has been argued that Snouck Hurgronje's conversion to Islam may not have been genuine and that, by feigning that he had become a Muslim, he had acted in an insincere way towards all those in Jeddah and Mecca, and later in Indonesia as well, who had given him their unreserved trust and their brotherly love. Snouck Hurgronje has always avoided to speak out publicly about this. In his letters, to his mother, to his teacher M.J. de Goeje in Leiden, to his friends Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) and Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), and possibly a few others as well, he has been more straightforward on this, but always up till a certain level. For the agnostic expert of Islamic Law that Snouck Hurgronje was, Islam was a series of outward acts, to be performed without rational questioning and under certain conditions by which they got legal validity. In this sense he had certainly become a Muslim, someone who practices submission. Whether he was also a believer, a *mu'min*, someone with the inner conviction that Islam was the true and only possible religion, Snouck Hurgronje thought of no relevance to outsiders, since that was something between man and his Creator, who was the only One to look into the hearts and to judge accordingly. For our appreciation of Snouck Hurgronje's study of daily life in Jeddah and Mecca as he participated in it in 1884–1885 it is an irrelevant question.

Finally, in the evening of 21 ~~January~~ 1885, after a full day's journey he set foot at Mecca, a moment he would never in his life forget.

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I have treated Snouck Hurgronje's preparations to come to Islam and Mecca in some detail, but I must desist, if only for brevity's sake, from discussing his stay in Mecca in the same way. His description of daily life in Mecca is not, however, a day-to-day account of the period of slightly more than five months during which he stayed in the Holy City. He learned how the sacred sciences were taught in Mecca's great mosque from several teachers, among whom Mecca's most important scholar, Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (1817–1886). He was the great-muftī of the Shāfi'ite school in Mecca and the dean of the other great-muftī's, whom Snouck Hurgronje has styled as the 'rector of the Mecca's University'.<sup>3</sup> Evidently he participated in many private functions and public festivities as well, and he mixed with the Jāwah. He also made a series of photographic portraits of a cross section of the Meccan society.

But when he received, early in August 1885, the order from the Turkish governor to leave Mecca and Arabia, all his expectations for a prolonged stay suddenly came to an end, and he had to devise strategies of damage control.<sup>4</sup> Although he must have realized all the time that his stay in Mecca was on borrowed time, of the book on Mecca, which he must have had in mind, not one letter had been written yet. First he had to save his notes and photographic equipment. The al-Zawāwī family, Raden Aboe Bakar and possibly also the Meccan doctor 'Abd al-Ghaffār, Snouck Hurgronje's namesake by coincidence, they all did their best to help him. In Jeddah Snouck Hurgronje received the best help he could expect from the Dutch honorary vice-consul and shipping agent, P.N. van der Chijs, a wise man with whom he had already concluded a close friendship before he went from Jeddah to Mecca. Van der Chijs kept, between 1885 and 1889, a steady stream going, from Mecca, via Jeddah, to Leiden, of all sorts of information, photographs and

<sup>3</sup> See now Ulrike Freitag, 'Der Orientalist und der Mufti. Kulturcontact im Mekka des 19. Jahrhunderts', in *Die Welt des Islams* 43 (2003), 37–60.

<sup>4</sup> The cause of this expulsion has been extensively described by Snouck Hurgronje, in 'Aus Arabien', and other articles, which were republished together in the 3rd volume of his *Verstreide geschriften* (Bonn/Leipzig 1923).

ethnographical objects. Van der Chijs took also care that the many questions that arose during the writing got appropriate answers. A stream of learned articles on Meccan subjects had flown from Snouck Hurgronje's pen immediately after his return in Leiden, written no doubt on the basis of his field notes. The two volumes on Mecca, however, were written in Leiden, not in Mecca. This does not diminish in any way the originality of Snouck Hurgronje's approach, nor does it need to decrease the value of his observation. His use of photography made him the first westerner in Mecca to do so, and he was the teacher of the third photographer, 'Abd al-Ghaffār, the Meccan doctor.<sup>5</sup>

The Meccan episode is an important episode, if not the most important one, in Snouck Hurgronje's life. In these intensively lived five months he struck friendships for life (as he had done in his students days in Leiden). The final pages of the last chapter of *Mekka* were rightly interpreted by the Minister of Colonial Affairs as a job application. So in 1889 Snouck Hurgronje went to the Dutch East-Indies where he would, during seventeen years of intense work, play an important role as governmental advisor on indigenous, Arab and Islamic affairs. His Meccan connections had given him insight in Muslim life and both his colonial masters and his indigenous and Arab friends were to profit from it. In 1906, when he may have sensed that he had outstayed his welcome in the colony or that his career had reached a cul-de-sac, he grasped the opportunity to succeed his teacher De Goeje, and he enjoyed the Leiden professorship with great gusto. Already on his way back to The Netherlands he laid down ambitious ideas for an anthropological study of the Ḥiǧāz. Mecca had never been far from his mind, nor from his heart, evidently. He had sound recordings made, which in 1909 was as much of a novelty as photography had been in the 1880's. He had informants write down all sorts of texts, from geographical surveys, to *fatwā*'s on early sound recording of the Qur'ān, to texts of popular songs, to lists of manuscripts in Ḥiǧāzī libraries, etc., etc. In the end, however, nothing much came from it. University life (and old age for that matter) had requirements of its own, and he may have underestimated these. The appearance of the English translation in 1931 of his second volume

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<sup>5</sup> See now Claude W. Sui, 'Die Pilgerfahrt zu den heiligen Stätten des Islam und die frühe Photographie', in: Alfried Wiczorek & Claude W. Sui (edd.), *Ins Heilige Land. Pilgerstätten von Jerusalem bis Mekka und Medina*, Heidelberg 2006, 40–63.

of *Mekka* was a last and final act of interest and of recollection to that period which had meant so much to him in his late twenties. It is hoped that this book on the daily life in Mecca, which has now been brought out in a newly typeset edition, will again revive a well-deserved interest in Snouck Hurgronje's phenomenal description of the Meccans in their Holy City.

Leiden, 26 July 2006

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