

RESEARCH NOTE

PENANG'S HAJJ HERITAGE: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE SEA TRANSPORTATION ERA

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Published online: 28 September 2018

To cite this article: Mahani Musa, Aiza Maslan and Hajar Abdul Rahim. 2018. Penang's hajj heritage: An oral history of the sea transportation era. *Kajian Malaysia* 36(2): 147–164. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.2.7>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.2.7>

ABSTRACT

For almost 200 years, from 1786 until 1977, Penang (also known as Pulau Pinang) was the embarkation point for hajj pilgrims from Malaya and other countries in the region, notably Siam (Thailand) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Its vibrant port enabled Penang to become a major centre for ocean going ships and transportation of hajj pilgrims. This long history only came to an end in 1977 when air transport took over the role of ships in transporting pilgrims to the holy land. Although stories of transportation and management of hajj pilgrims who travelled by sea to Mecca have appeared in official records, other aspects of this important era of Penang's hajj heritage remain unknown. The experiences, stories and memories of the pilgrims (men, women and children), hajj agents, health inspector, port police officer, local inhabitants, and others who were involved directly and indirectly in the hajj enterprise in Penang, have never been documented or made known to the public. Hence, the current hajj heritage project which sets out to bridge the lacunae in our knowledge of this important era of Penang's hajj heritage.

Keywords: Penang, oral history, hajj, heritage, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The history of Penang (also known as Pulau Pinang) is often focused on the role of Penang, particularly its capital city George Town, and its trade which brought about a cosmopolitan community of mixed heritage. This rich history fulfilled the requirement for George Town to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. However, the role of Penang Port as an embarkation point for hajj pilgrims from the region has not been given much emphasis in the island's historical accounts. This is despite the crucial role the port played in Penang's hajj heritage since the era of Francis Light until the 1970s, especially as the point of embarkation and disembarkation for hajj pilgrims who travelled to Mecca by ship. A seminar on the hajj in Penang held in 2013 co-organised by Penang Heritage Trust and Think City mostly focused on academic matters rather than on hajj pilgrims. This means that narratives relating to human experiences of the hajj were never given much emphasis in these forums. Narratives surrounding the era of sea transportation are especially important as they provide insight into a historical period when Penang was not just as a trading port but also as a crucial centre for Muslim pilgrims in the region. Realising the importance of this part of Penang's heritage, an oral history project on the hajj heritage in Penang was carried out to document experiences of those involved in the hajj enterprise in Malaya (Malaysia) during the sea transportation era, focusing on three spatial contexts namely the local space, the sea journey and the destination, i.e. Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Although activities surrounding the hajj during the sea transportation era were seasonal, they carried on for almost two centuries, from 1786 to 1977, contributing not only to the economy of the state but also established Penang's crucial role in the history of Islam in Malaysia and the region.

EXISTING STUDIES ON THE HAJJ

Much research on the hajj in Malaysia, including publications by Alwi Sheikh Abdul Hadi (1955), William R. Roff (1982), Muhammad Salleh (1986), Mary B. McDonnell (1986), and more recently by Aiza Maslan (2014) focus on specific issues such as preparation for hajj by the Malays, socio-economic status of Malay pilgrims, the difficulties experienced at sea, passenger overloading in hajj ships, cleanliness and safety measures at sea, contagious diseases, and British response to the issues of welfare of hajj pilgrims. To date, only one study, namely by Eric Tagliacozzo (2013) has analysed the history of hajj pilgrims in the Southeast Asia region. In his book titled *The longest journey: Southeast Asians and pilgrimage to Mecca*, Tagliacozzo dedicates a chapter on oral history based on interviews

with hajj pilgrims. Tagliacozzo believes that although records from the colonial period are important in hajj research, they are not the same as "the lived history of the pilgrimage from the inside" (2013: 271–272). Tagliacozzo's study took him to almost the whole of Southeast Asia where he interviewed more than a 100 *hajjis* (male muslim pilgrims) and *hajjahs* (female Muslim pilgrims). The oral history of the hajj, in Tagliacozzo's view, "allows entrance into the world's earliest and most sacred religiously exclusive spaces" (2013: 288). The present project is informed by Tagliacozzo's study but unlike his study, this project focused only on Penang, given the island's history as the main embarkation point for pilgrims to the Holy Land and inevitably a point of convergence for pilgrims in the Malay Archipelago.

According to M. Dien Majid (2008), in the early days when there were no specially assigned ships to transport hajj pilgrims other than cargo ships, Singapore or Penang were the embarkation ports for many hajj pilgrims. From the Malay Archipelago en route to Jeddah, the ships that sailed from Penang passed through Singapore, Colombo, Aden and the Red Sea. In relation to this, several archival documents referring to Penang's involvement as the embarkation point to Mecca since the 18th century have been found. Among them was a letter dated 23 *Rabiul Akhir* 1204 (9 January 1790) from Sultan Mansur of Terengganu to Francis Light (SOAS MS40320/11, f.77) regarding the management of hajj pilgrims from the east coast state. In the letter, Sultan Mansur stated that he had sent Lebai Amin and a number of his friends to Penang who were going on their pilgrimage. He appealed for Light's goodwill to let them sail to India or Surat whichever Lebai Amin chose.¹

Another important archival document is the diary of Sheikh Omar Basheer, one of the most important Muslim leaders in Penang in the mid-19th century (Mahani, 1995).² His diary which is presently exhibited at the Penang State Museum contains information on his involvement in recruiting hajj pilgrims (most probably as a small-scale hajj agent) as well as carefully recorded names of ships from Penang heading for Jeddah. For example, the entry for 15 *Syaaban* 1280 (24 January 1864) in the diary refers to one Sayyid Safi who sailed from Penang in his small ship which he had taken over upon the demise of Mohd Ismail. Sheikh Omar noted that it was the last hajj ship which sailed from Penang that year. Sayyid Safi's ship was again mentioned in Sheikh Omar's diary on 6 *Rabiul Akhir* 1281 (7 September 1864) as it arrived at Penang Port at 3 pm from Jeddah. Sheikh Omar's record shows that it took 32 days to reach Penang from Jeddah.

Besides recording the movements of local ships from Penang Port, Sheikh Omar Basheer also took note of ships from the Middle East and Indonesia. For instance, there is a record of a ship owned by Haji Abdul Manan that left Surabaya with a load of 300 hajj pilgrims and called at Penang Port on 22 *Jamadal Akhir* 1281 (21 November 1864). Also making entry into the port were the Arab ships

Fatah al-Karim and the *Air Tawar* with hajj pilgrims from Semarang, Indonesia. The *Air Tawar* was owned by Saiyid Mohsin al-Jafri. Besides the names of the ships, their passengers and cargo types, Sheikh Omar also documented the fares from Penang to Jeddah which, according to his records, was \$14.00 for a one way trip. The diary also documents a myriad of activities in George Town during the hajj season. For his keen observations and documentation of the hajj activities in George Town during his time, Sheikh Omar Basheer should be considered a key personality in Penang's hajj heritage.³

Besides tangible evidence such as records and documents, peoples' experiences, stories and memories also form a body of knowledge that contributes to the understanding of hajj history in Penang and local history. In his study of the history of Acheen Street in Penang in which he describes the hustle and bustle in George Town during the hajj season, Izrin (2012) found that Penang's hajj legacy is still strongly remembered by locals. Using fieldwork and oral history methods, Izrin interviewed former residents of Acheen Street and those who were familiar with the area (Acheen Street) about experiences that they could recall. The hajj stories of these residents do not only form part of their memory of their hajj experiences, but also importantly provide crucial information that enables the mapping of important buildings and businesses on Acheen Street pertaining to the hajj. For instance, the shophouse at No. 87 Acheen Street became the focus of hajj brokers, agents and hajj sheikhs. It was here that tickets and hajj passports were issued.

There are still several buildings on Acheen Street and Lumut Lane which residents still remember as hajj centres. The shophouse at No. 81 Acheen Street served as an office for Sheikh Ahmad Ismail. He was a hajj agent from Kebun Sireh in Bukit Mertajam, Penang. House No. 2 was the centre for pilgrim brokers, Sheikh Mansoor Abdullah (known as Mansoor Martapura) and his son, Sheikh Abdul Rahman. Sheikh Mansoor's other son, Sheikh Abdullah used house No. 4 Lumut Lane as his hajj Sheikh office. House No. 4 on the same road also served as the Penang office for pilgrim broker Shaikh Haji Mohd Pati bin Itam from Kampung Gajah, Perak. Sheikh Abdullah Mansoor and Shaikh Haji Mohd Pati were believed to be close friends. Other than local hajj brokers and agents, Acheen Street served as a base for pilgrimage brokers from Mecca who came in search of prospective pilgrims. Enterprising local residents rented their homes to pilgrim brokers and collected fees for providing wooden trunks known as *peti sahara* which pilgrims used before suitcases were introduced (Izrin, 2012).

Another recent study which looked at the types of businesses during the hajj season in Penang is by Siti Amirah (2015). Other than brokers, sheikhs and hajj runners, Siti Amirah also examined the business of printing religious books owned by Malay traders. Although she did not specifically study Chinese traders, Siti Amirah found that they dominated the inns and hotel business as well as lorry

services to transport the *peti sahara* to Penang Port. In short, George Town was a bustling place during the hajj season. There were not only hajj pilgrims and their families, but all kinds of businesses and religious activities that went on in the city area throughout the season.

METHODOLOGY

While Tagliacozzo (2013) focused on the oral history relating to the voyage to Mecca and the spiritual aspect of hajj, and Izrin (2012) and Siti Amirah (2015) concentrated on the hajj trade in the vicinity of Acheen Street in George Town, the current oral history project of the sea transportation era of Penang's hajj history focuses on three spaces, namely (1) the local especially George Town and Penang Port as embarkation point, (2) the journey while on board the ship, and (3) the destination which is the holy city of Mecca.

Oral history refers to the method of interviewing participants in the community involved in certain historical events which they still remember. Scholars like Vansina (1985: 13) argue that the oral history method is important to save historical sources from being completely lost. Yeoh (2003) considers this method as important for historians who work to restore everyday life and activities, as it allows historians to uncover the perspectives of the ordinary people and their life experiences which otherwise are not covered by official records. In the case of Penang's hajj era of transportation by sea, official records are available. However, there are no records of people's experiences or memories of their voyage and pilgrimage to Mecca. Their voices remained unheard. Thus the oral history method becomes crucial as it gives respondents the opportunity to share memories and experiences of the hajj.

The current study used audio equipment (tape recorder) as well as video recordings in collecting the data. While audio recordings are important in oral history, video recordings are also crucial to capture the respondents' emotions and facial expressions when recounting their experiences at different points of their spiritual journey as a Muslim pilgrim. For most pilgrims and their families during the sea transportation era, the hajj journey was a journey of life or death because it was a long, arduous journey with numerous problems, and the fear of falling ill was ever present. Emotions that interviewees may have during recordings may not be felt by a listener from audio recordings alone as the speaker, the physical gestures and expressions are not visible. As evident in the video recordings of the interviews that were carried out in the current project, there were moments when respondents were emotional and paused to control their emotions. Several respondents were teary when recalling their experiences. The video recordings also captured the sadness of several respondents when they were recounting the highly

emotional scene at the port where family members waved goodbye as the ships sailed out from the port and the pilgrims waved red handkerchiefs as a symbol of parting for a long unknown voyage.

Penang was the embarkation port for hajj not just for those in Penang but also for pilgrims from the other states in the country. The documentation process therefore involved locations outside Penang such as Kedah, Perak and Kuala Lumpur. Via emails and announcements on websites, most respondents were introduced to the project team through families or friends who knew people who had sailed from Penang as pilgrims.

From preliminary interviews, 15 suitable respondents were selected for the oral history documentation. They included passengers (men, women, and children), hajj agents, traders, a boarding officer, a port police officer, a telegraph officer, a Lembaga Tabung Haji assistant information officer (on board the ship to accompany the pilgrims), and Penangites. While most respondents were in their 70s, the oldest was a woman who was in her late 90s at the time of the interview. The selection of respondents for the final interview was based on the following criteria, namely individuals with good memory, in good health and who show a willingness to share their experiences with others.

Most of the interviews were conducted within a time span of six months between September 2017 and February 2018. However, the interview process had started much earlier in 2014 when one respondent was identified. Each interview took between 45–90 minutes depending on the subject matter. After each interview, the data was transcribed with the process taking 2–3 weeks to complete. It should be noted that this was not an easy process as most respondents spoke the northern Malay dialect. For the benefit of researchers or those interested in the transcriptions of the interviews, a glossary was developed for easy reference.

The interviews are supported with collections of photos, documents and artefact evidence from the respondents' personal collection. Thus the current project goes beyond oral history in collecting data and information on the sea transportation era of Penang's hajj history. The methodology employed has made it possible for the project to be brought to the public through an exhibition of both aural and visual materials based on themes of memory and recollections.

MEMORIES OF THE HAJJ (1948–1976)

One of the outcomes of the "Oral History Project: Penang's Hajj Heritage during the Sea Transportation Era" is a documentation of the respondents' memories and experiences during the hajj season from World War II until 1976, a year before sea transportation to Mecca came to an end. These memories were related by the 15 respondents who were interviewed. They included local residents, traders, port

workers, a telecommunication staff who managed pilgrims' telegrams, hajj agents who looked after pilgrims' welfare from the start till their departure and return, and pilgrims and staff on board the ship. Most of them were passengers on the ships named Anking, Ansun and Malaysia Raya which took 14–22 days to sail each way.

The documentation of the memories of pilgrims who travelled by sea reveals interesting information about personalities, events and the unique experiences that cannot be found in official records. For instance, one of the women respondents was involved in the hajj enterprise as an assistant to her husband who was a hajj sheikh. Another interesting personality is a woman who related her voyage by sea to the holy land as a mother with her two very young children in tow. Another respondent, who is now in his 70's recalled the experience of his first pilgrimage to Mecca as a child with his parents. All these experiences are not found in the annals of the hajj voyages and have not been documented but remain in the memories of those who experienced the sea voyages. The following are excerpts from the interviews with the 15 respondents of the project, organised into three spatial contexts namely local space, sea journey and destination.

LOCAL SPACE

Acheen Street during the Hajj Season and *Peti Sahara*

Born in 1933 and growing up at 69, Acheen Street, Mohamed Yahaya remembered vividly the festive atmosphere of the hajj season in Penang. Over three or four days before the ships departure, house No. 67 Acheen Street and houses No. 2 and 6 in Lumut Lane were filled with pilgrims from Kelantan and their families. House No. 4 in Lumut Lane was busy with Banjarese pilgrims as his uncle who managed the house was married to a Banjarese. Mohamed Yahaya was hired to tie up *peti sahara* (wooden trunks) for the pilgrims. Most of the *peti sahara* shops were owned by Chinese and Indians.

The *peti sahara* was inexpensive and of low quality. We [were good] at tying up the *peti sahara* because we were scouts. The Acheen Street mosque was like a port. Whenever a pilgrim came, there would be 20 to 30 of his companions who slept at the mosque. The well in the mosque compound was never dry despite the continuous stream of people bathing 24 hours daily. I remember how pilgrims who came here enjoyed shopping because things were cheap. The most popular purchase was *batik*. When they went through custom, they would wear two or three layers of them. I think the custom officers knew about their antics. The pilgrims also hid cigarettes in their clothing. Cigarettes were cheap, five cents here but ten cents in other states.⁴

Rented Accommodation and *Batik Sarong* Sewing Services

Born in Datuk Keramat in Penang in 1940, Noor Jahan experienced first-hand the hustle and bustle of George Town during the hajj season. As there was always a high demand for accommodation during this time, her family took the opportunity to rent the lower level of their two storey house in Caunter Hall for pilgrims and their families. The space that was rented out was able to house between 10 and 20 people, most of them were from Butterworth, Kelantan and Kuala Lumpur. Hajjah Noor Jahan took the opportunity during this time to sell cloth and to sew *batik sarong* that were purchased by the tenants.

The pilgrims came, stopped by and stayed (on the ground floor). So I sold cloth. They bought *batik sarongs* and asked me to sew them. It was very cheap, only a ringgit (the charge for sewing one piece). Each person bought three to four pieces, for use when they were in Mecca.⁵

Experience as Hajj Sheikh

Born in Penang in 1939, Haji Abdul Aziz started helping his father who was a hajj sheikh after he completed his schooling in the 1950s. In the 1970s, he took over the hajj sheikh business after his father passed away. As a hajj sheikh, he regularly communicated with the *penghulu kampung* (village heads) who were responsible to register the names of pilgrims and who were interested to use his services while in Penang. He would ensure the passports, tickets, accommodation and meals of the pilgrims under his care were properly managed. Two weeks before departure, Abdul Aziz would rent a lorry to pick up the pilgrims' belongings from their village. These were normally packed in the *peti sahara* which were stored in a warehouse at Penang Port one day before departure. The trunks were then moved onto ships using cranes.

The main office of the hajj management was at No. 87 Acheen Street. Omar Al-Mashoor had taken over (the hajj business) from his father, Syed Mohamad Al-Mashoor. It was here that the hajj sheikh picked up all the passports and tickets which were later distributed to the pilgrims. The hajj sheikhs were allowed to board the ships to help the pilgrims. As there were old pilgrims, the sheikhs were the ones who showed them their seats. Sometimes the hajj sheikhs stayed on board until the ship reached Muka Head. That was where we would disembark the ship.⁶

Assisting Her Husband Who Was a Hajj Sheikh and as Caterer

Born in 1936 in Jelutong, Pulau Pinang, Sekha began to be involved in the management of hajj pilgrims when she used to help her husband, Syeikh Hassan Jabir, who was a hajj sheikh based in Mecca. A few months before the hajj season began, Syeikh Hassan would travel to the Malay Peninsula to gather and register pilgrims who required his services while they were in Mecca. Sekha would follow her husband to various places like Alor Setar in Kedah, and Taiping in Perak to promote her husband's services as hajj sheikh to the local people. Due to her husband's pronounced Arabic accent, Sekha helped to provide locals with information with regard the package that was on offer.

I would explain to the potential pilgrims about our package, about the sheikh, where they would stay in Mecca. They were free to choose their meals. If they wanted meals to be included, they had to pay. If they didn't want meals to be included then they would have to stay on their own. I would go along to Mecca. I myself cooked the meals for the pilgrims who took the meal package with us. Our workers were mostly Arabs. We had only one worker from Kelantan.⁷

Experience as Police Officer at Penang Port during the Hajj Season

Born in 1957, Dato' Roslan worked with the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) who was directly involved in overseeing the safety of pilgrims from the beginning of the hajj process until they returned to Malaysia. Throughout the 1970s, between 120 and 150 FRU officers were positioned at Penang Port during the hajj season. Although exhausting, it was always very exciting when he heard the horn of a ship, signalling its departure and the sound of the *azan* (call for prayer) accompanying the ship as it slowly left the port. The biggest challenge was when those who were there to send off the pilgrims crashed through the port entrance so that they could see them off to the ship.

We did not stop using the loud hailer. Even the hajj sheikh used it. If the hajj sheikh came for instance with ten people under his care, so the ten would be there. And those who were sending them off would come by the hundreds in cars. When the schedule (departure time) was out, that was when everyone would rushed to get to the port area. Those who were at the mosques or wherever they were would divert here (the port). Everyone moved in this direction. They were willing to wait for hours at the port, some slept in cars and buses, some by the side of the road near Fort Cornwallis. They camped there.⁸

Experience as Boarding Officer at Penang Port

Born in 1945, Syed Sahil worked as a boarding officer at the Penang Port in the 1970s. When a ship entered the port, officers from various departments would have to board the ship to check and ensure regulations had been adhered to by those who managed the ship. This was to ensure all aspects of passenger and crew safety were fully observed. With regard to medical regulation, the ship's management was responsible to provide medical facilities as well as medical workers including doctors and nurses on board the ship.

As for doctors and nurses, it was the responsibility of the hajj ship management to care for their passengers. Our job was to ensure that there were doctors on the ship to care for the passengers. Otherwise, we did not sign, and the ship could not sail. We didn't allow it.⁹

SEA JOURNEY

Atmosphere at the Port when the Ship Sailed and Ship Cabins

Born in 1926 in Bagan Serai, Haji Utar went on his pilgrimage twice by sea from Penang, the first in 1954 and the second in 1971. The journey to Mecca took approximately 15 days while the return journey to Penang took 12 days. Befitting his Banjarese descent, the tradition of reading the *kitab manaqib* was carried out at his house before a pilgrim left home. The reading of the *kitab* was done by a religious member of the community and was only carried out if the pilgrim had made a *nazar* (religious vow).

It was a sad occasion. We were leaving home, so many were crying. The idea of leaving twice was very difficult. The first was when we boarded the ship. Then, when the ship began to move, the *muezzin* shouted the *azan* (call for prayer). This was done by people at the port and also people on board. Some read prayers. At that time, many people cried. Some people on the ship tossed cloth to those who were sending them off at the port. The cloth was used to wave and some pieces fell into the sea because the ship was very high and huge. In the ship they organised the best cabin competition. The cabins were named according to the village of the pilgrims; *Kampung Durian*, *Kampung Pisang* and so forth. We in the third class did not socialise with those in the second or first class cabins. We met them but we never entered their cabins. The first class cabins were indeed very luxurious in terms of bedding and food. Husband and wife can share. During meals, everything was prepared for them.¹⁰

The Experience of Transiting in Aden on the Journey to Mecca

Born in Alor Binjal, Alor Setar, Kedah, Ayob performed his pilgrimage in 1968 at the age of 30. The journey by sea from Penang took 14 days each way. He was in the second class cabin which accommodated four people. At the time, there were no strict regulations on who could travel, for instance, there was a case of a woman who gave birth on board. The ship that he boarded stopped at the port in Aden, Yemen on its way to Mecca and in Djibouti which is located in southeast Africa on its return journey.

From Penang, we stopped in Aden. There (Aden), shopping was done using ropes that were dropped from the ship because ship officers did not allow pilgrims to disembark (in case they got lost). If they wanted to buy something, they placed money in a basket which was then lowered down from the ship using ropes. Many sellers came in whenever a ship entered the port and they sold various food items like watermelons, vegetables, fish and packed rice. We stopped in Aden for about five hours to refuel.¹¹

Enduring Storm at Sea

Born in 1924 in Kupang, Kedah, Wan Asmah went on her pilgrimage in the very last year ships were used as the main transportation for pilgrims to Mecca (around 1976). On the trip to Mecca she was on board the ship Anking and returned on the ship Anshun. One of the most memorable experiences was to experience a storm for two days while on board the Anshun.

The ship was moving violently. We could walk but very slowly. We saw people vomiting and we threw up as well. Throughout (the two days and two nights) the storm raged. We were very scared. We were all asked to sit in the lower deck. The lower deck was below the water level, the second (middle) deck was slightly higher and the third deck was the top most floor. We were not allowed to stay on the top deck.¹²

Sailing to Mecca as a Child

Born in 1944 in Siputeh Kedah, Wan Salim went on his pilgrimage in 1956 at the age of 13. He, his parents and three of his siblings sailed on the ship Anshun to Mecca and returned on the Anking.

Children were not terribly sick (seasick). So we became helpers, fetching food from the top deck. So the children were the ones who helped the adults to take food because they were seasick. There was a surplus food.

The cooking was the same every day and there was the smell of ship fuel. It was good that the ship management had activities for passengers because sailing was only fun for the first two days, after that we got bored. They had activities like Quran reading competition and lectures. During the stopover at Aden in the south of Yemen, we saw Yemenis selling all kinds of goods from small little boats. The ship management provided ropes for us to drop baskets down to the sellers in which we place the money to pay for our purchases, and the sellers would put the goods in our baskets. We enjoyed watching dolphins, sometimes for up to two or three days before they disappeared. The dolphins followed the ship.¹³

Experience as Assistant Information Officer in Hajj Pilgrim Ships

Born in 1946 in Kupang, Kedah, Md. Daud Che Ngah began to work as an Assistant Information Officer on hajj pilgrim ships in 1974. The first ship he sailed on was Malaysia Raya. The ship left Port Klang and stopped over in Penang (Swettenham Pier) to pick up intending pilgrims. As Assistant Information Officer, Md. Daud was responsible to oversee the pilgrims' welfare, including their safety, meals and religious activities throughout the journey to Mecca.

While on board the ship, the pilgrims learned the rules of the hajj. We had a *surau* on the deck and every day there was a lecture. And it was here also that funeral rites were held. When someone passed away, the ship propeller was turned off and the ship came to a stop. The *kain kafan* (shroud to cover the body of the corpse) was available on board. A doctor would certify the death and the ship would send a telegram to Kuala Lumpur to inform Wisma Putra. We would perform the appropriate prayer, placed the body on the crane and read the *talqin* (burial rites). When I gave the signal (the okay), the captain would lower the body, which was tied to a piece of iron rod, and then let it slip into the water. The ship propeller was only switched on once the body had completely disappeared into the sea.¹⁴

Experience as Radio Officer Managing Telegrams from Pilgrims

Born in Jelutong and raised in Ayer Itam in Penang, Ahmad worked as a Radio Officer for the Civil Radio Receiving Station in Bayan Lepas in Penang in 1970 when ships were still the main form of transportation to the holy land. At the time, the telegram service was a significant form of communication between the pilgrims and their families. The charge for the service was \$1.00 for one word. Telegrams would be sent to the radio officer from the ship using the SLT (*Ship Letter Telegram*) code. The radio officer usually received many telegrams from pilgrims who were on their journey home.

In the telegram, pilgrims began to use the title "haji" and "hajjah" before their names. Telegrams that were addressed to locations near our place of work were normally delivered on the day we received them. For faraway locations, we posted them. In the telegram, the pilgrims would request relatives to bring all sorts of things with them when meeting them at the port. Bring a lorry, saying that they brought back a lot of things, barrels of the *zam-zam* water, all these were in the telegram.¹⁵

Quarantine on Pulau Jerejak

Hajah Hamsatun is from Temoh, Perak. Already in her 90s she went for the hajj in 1948 with her husband and two young sons, one four years old and the other six months. The journey on board the ship Agamemnon to Mecca from the Penang Port took 22 days. The ship was fully managed by the British. It was very spacious and did not have cabins. Only the pilgrims' bags serve as the line between one family and another. Although Hajah Hamsatun had two little children with her, she and her family did not fall sick throughout the journey nor when they were in Mecca. On their journey home however, cholera broke out on the ship and all the passengers had to be quarantined for four days on Pulau Jerejak when they reached Penang.

To investigate the outbreak, pilgrims were directed to move to the top (deck of the ship) and they (ship staff) closed the door. This was done so that they could check the toilets and the human waste. Everyone was reading the *shalawat* (prayers exalting Prophet Muhammad S.A.W.) and praying that we were all safe. However, there were some who had to be quarantined in Pulau Jerejak. It was difficult getting down (from the ship). We had children, so we had to tie up our children properly here (on the waist), held an umbrella and went down the ship steps, then onto the *tongkang* (small boat) to be sent ashore (Pulau Jerejak). There, our bodies were checked. Even pillows must be arranged properly and not left thrown around. If a person was sick, they'd be quarantined.¹⁶

DESTINATION

***Rumah Kupang* (Kupang House) in Mecca**

Born in 1943 in Kampung Tiak, Baling, Kedah, Awang Mahamud went on the pilgrimage in 1956 when he was in his teens. His father sent him to Mecca to study at the Darul 'Ulum religious school. However, this was not to be when the Saudi government directed all pilgrims who entered Mecca that year to return to their countries after completing their pilgrimage. He sailed to Mecca on the ship Anking

and returned on the Anshun. A hajj agent from Penang came to his village to oversee preparations that were made by his family. In Penang, the agent placed him and six others in a house next to the Kapitan Keling Mosque. They were there for two days before departure. The journey for both ways took approximately 28 days. It was filled with various activities including sports. Upon arrival in Jeddah, the Saudi hajj agent brought them to Mecca and his group stayed at *Rumah Kupang* (Kupang House). The house was originally bought by his grandfather and later managed by his uncle. This house was opened to anyone who needed accommodation while in Mecca.

Regardless of who he or she was, the hajj sheikh would allow the person to stay at this *Rumah Kupang*. Many of them were from Kedah. The house was a big, two storey house. There were rooms but they were not big. At night we didn't sleep in our rooms. We slept on the top floor because there was a huge veranda.¹⁷

Helping Hajj Sheikhs in Mecca and Madina

Syed Omar Syed Mohammad al-Saggaff was born in Perlis in 1944 but was raised in Penang. When he was growing up, he took on various jobs including selling *batik sarong* and the *kain pelikat* (pulicat cloth) during the hajj season and earning good income from the business. While pursuing his studies at the University of Madina in 1967, he helped a hajj sheikh in Mecca to manage pilgrims who arrived from Malaya. He served under Sheikh Hassan Jabir Damanhuri and later worked with Sheikh Abdul Yasin Majid.

During the hajj season, over four or five days at the Swettenham Pier, people sending off (the pilgrims) outnumbered pilgrims. The person leaving for hajj would come with a bus load of people, firstly to send off the pilgrim and secondly to undertake shopping. Things were cheap in Penang, so I sold *batik sarong* and pulicat day and night without any sleep for three or four days. Acheen Street was always bright day or night. It was even more festive at night because it was not hot. We didn't do business only once but three times a year because the pilgrim ships sailed three times. While in Mecca and Madina, I assisted the pilgrims. The sheikhs also wanted us to help because we could speak Malay. I helped to manage the pilgrims from the moment they reached Mecca and Madina until they left after completing the hajj. Once everything was over, we went back to university. I helped the pilgrims under the care of my sheikh, Sheikh Hassan Jabir. If any pilgrim wanted to move to another sheikh, payment had to be made to the sheikh and the pilgrim would return to us only after the payment was completed.¹⁸

OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND EXHIBITION

One of the main objectives of the current project is public engagement which aims to share the findings and new knowledge on the hajj enterprise with the general public and researchers in the field of hajj history and heritage. Thus, besides the transcriptions, the project team identified two other ways to achieve this, namely through public talk and exhibition. Both were achieved on 14 April 2018, when a public talk on hajj heritage in Penang was held at the Penang State Museum located at No. 57 Macalister Road.¹⁹ The programme was jointly organised by the Oral History Unit, History Section Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the Penang State Museum, the Malaysiana and Archives Section, Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut USM, and the NGO Badan Warisan Masjid Melayu Lebuah Acheh. More than 100 participants from different backgrounds, including university and college students and faculty members, school students, librarians, local tour guides, local residents, and the general public as far as Pulau Langkawi and Singapore attended the event. Three speakers were invited to share their knowledge and memories on hajj heritage in Penang.

Most of the exhibit items were obtained from respondents. These included a hajj passport and a telegraph code book besides 15 write-ups complete with photographs. These exhibits were well received by visitors and participants with some of them reminiscing stories they have heard from their parents or grandparents.

Overall, the project managed to create awareness among the public on the history and importance of Penang as a point for embarkation for the hajj for almost two centuries. The sharing of memories by those involved in the hajj heritage during the sea transportation era managed to garner interest in those who were present with many coming forward to share their memories of the hajj. In fact, one of the participants who attended the talk offered to give an interview of his experience and this was conducted immediately after the event.

CONCLUSION

Although the oral history method is not very popular and not widely utilised by researchers and historians, its importance in documenting local history and heritage cannot be denied. In the case of the project on Penang's hajj heritage during the sea transportation era, the oral history method facilitated the work that needed to be done in collecting and documenting information on respondents' memories. As stated at the beginning of this paper, the project set out to document experiences of those involved in the hajj enterprise in Malaya (Malaysia) during

the sea transportation era. To this end, the project focused on three spatial contexts namely local space, sea journey and the holy city of Mecca. This allow readers to get an inside story of the hajj experience. This was made possible through the oral history method, as shown in the memories of hajj of the respondents presented above. The memories provide information on the preparation for hajj, graphic accounts of the atmosphere in George Town before the ships sailed and of the people in the local space. The interviews also captured the memories of women, men and children on board the hajj ships, interesting information on inspections of the ships and the safety measures taken on board, and the sights and sounds of the voyages and experiences of the transit in Aden. The experiences of those involved in helping and managing pilgrims in the holy land during the sea transportation era provide insights into Penang's hajj heritage beyond the local space. As exhorted by Vansina (1985: 198) "without oral history, we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world and we would not know them from the inside."

In conclusion, the oral history method employed in this project has allowed the possibility of connecting and sharing with the public new knowledge that helps establish the importance of Penang in the history of Islam in Malaysia and within the region through the hajj enterprise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Think City for funding the oral history project titled "The Hajj Heritage in Penang" from September 2017–February 2018.

NOTES

1. This letter was obtained from Abdur-Rahman bin Mohamed Amin, Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS on 30 April 2018 which the authors greatly acknowledged.
2. Sheikh Omar Basheer lived at No. 69 Lebuah Aceh in George Town.
3. After his death, Sheikh Omar's involvement in the hajj business was continued by his son, Sheikh Zachariah Basheer.
4. Mohamed bin Yahaya, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 9 October 2014.
5. Noor Jahan binti Md. Ismail, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 23 September 2017.
6. Abdul Aziz bin Ismail, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 22 August 2017.
7. Sekha binti Sh. Mohd, interviewed by Habsah Abdul Rahman, 16 February 2015.
8. Roslan bin Haji Abdul Wahid, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 11 August 2017.
9. Syed Sahil bin Syed Haidar, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 11 August 2017.
10. Haji Utar @ Mokhtar bin Osman, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 24 and 25 July 2017.

11. Ayob bin Saad, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 12 October 2017.
12. Wan Asmah binti Wan Mahmud, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 20 December 2017.
13. Wan Salim bin Wan Mohd. Noor, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 20 September 2017
14. Md Daud bin Che' Ngah, interviewed by Aiza Maslan, 27 November 2017.
15. Ahmad Shaari, interviewed by Fujica Azura Fesal, 19 January 2018.
16. Hamsatun binti Haji Salleh, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 21 August 2017.
17. Hj. Awang Mahamud bin Hj. Ibrahim, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 20 December 2017.
18. Syed Omar bin Syed Mohammad al-Sagaff, interviewed by Mahani Musa, 16 February 2017.
19. The Penang hajj heritage during the sea transportation era exhibition officially started on 14 April 2018 and ended on 14 July 2018.

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