

## “Killed the Pilgrims and Persecuted Them”: Portuguese *Estado da India*’s Encounters with the Hajj in the Sixteenth Century

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*Urumi* (Santosh Sivan, August Cinema, 2011) is a South Indian film, which tells a story of a boy named Kēḷu, who sought to kill Vasco da Gama, one of the earliest European navigators to arrive in the Indian subcontinent. He took an oath upon witnessing a massacre of Hajj-pilgrims by the Portuguese legates. As the voice-over in the background narrates, in his second voyage in 1502, Gama anchored fifteen warships in the waters of Ezhimala at the Malabar Coast. He encountered and subsequently captured a ship returning from Mecca, which contained four-hundred pilgrims including women and children. The ship’s Captain, Khwaja al-Faqi, offered him four shiploads of pepper and gold in exchange for their freedom. Gama declined the offer. In an attempt to release the pilgrims, the local ruler Cirakkal Kottuvāḷ sent his son Kēḷu along with a Brahmin priest to Gama’s ship in the hope that he would not attack an unarmed child and priest. Gama had expected the arrival of the chief-rulers Zamorins or Kōlattiris for negotiations, hence their presence was not welcomed. He moreover despised them and their customs. He cut off the priest’s tongue and ears, wounded the boy’s cheek, and opened fire on the pilgrim-ship. Upon detecting this attack, Kottuvāḷ travelled to Gama’s ship, rescued Kēḷu, cut Gama’s finger and attempted to kill him. Kottuvāḷ was subsequently captured by other Portuguese men on board and was beheaded by Gama. Kēḷu swam to the shore, where he encountered numerous corpses of pilgrims lying on the coastline. Among the corpses was a mother who lay dying. To Kēḷu, she extended the same jewels that she had offered Gama in exchange for the lives of herself and her child. Taking these jewels, he sculpted a golden weapon (called *Urumi*) to fight against the growth of Portuguese power in the Malabar Coast. There he took an oath to kill Gama, and the film progresses with a variety of dramatic twists and chronological whirlpools.

This film is a historical imagination stating that it “is inspired by actual events; all the incidents, characters and timelines have been changed for dramatic purposes.” Beyond the historical imagination and fictional adaptation, the historical accuracy of the events is something that I will revisit below. For

now, suffice it to say that the portrayal of the massacre of Hajj-pilgrims by the Portuguese three-four years after Gama's 'great voyage' to India is a recurrent theme in South Asian regional memories and are revealed through such popular narratives as films, fictions, songs and ballads. Rhetorical accounts of this attack with multiple variations and alterations intermittently appear whenever an indigenous narrative of the Portuguese arrival in the subcontinent is made.<sup>1</sup> This chapter enquires into the historical events in which the "rhetoric of torture" and the earliest European encounters with the Hajj collide in the Indian Ocean waters.

Despite its social, economic and political dimensions, the Hajj is primarily a religious event in which Muslims from across the world gathered annually to perform particular rituals at the arid zones in and around Mecca. Hence, the Portuguese voyagers who had principally economic motivations had no direct prerequisites to intercept such a ritual undertaken by different religious groups. Whilst many historians have made this claim, the entanglement of "secular" Portuguese against the "religious" performance of Hajj is merely a notion taken-for-granted of which the sheath has to be peeled to understand the historical core. It was deeply rooted in the long-tradition of encounters between Europe and the East, with significant religious undertones. The collision between Christian Europe and the Islamic world intensified through the centuries-long crusades. This continued in the waters of the Indian Ocean, in which rituals such as the Hajj became a hot-issue of unmasking the economic interests against religious ventures. In this way, the Portuguese had a special attentiveness towards the Hajj in the sixteenth century. It was fuelled by contemporary developments in Europe on one hand, and in the Indian Ocean on the other. The new Jesuit missionary associated with the Portuguese undertakings brought another dimension as they thought that the rigorous religious movement of the Hajj would constantly counter their dreams of Christianising Asian terrains.

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1 For example, a Bengali short-story titled *Rakta Sandhya*, published in 1930 and republished many times, has a very interesting narrative about a victim of the Portuguese attack on the Hajj-pilgrimage being reborn with a revenge-venture in British colonial times, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam discusses elsewhere. See, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, "Rakta Sandhya" in *Saradindu Amnibasa*, Vol. VI (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1976). For another narrative from the Makran Coast of Baloch, see Inayatullah Baloch, "Islam, the State and Identity: the Zikris of Balochistan," in *Marginality and Modernity*, ed. Paul Titus (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 223–249; Sabir Badalkhan, "Portuguese Encounters with Coastal Makran Baloch during the Sixteenth Century: Some References from a Balochi Heroic Epic," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Third Series) 10 (2000): 153–169.