A phenomenological study of Arbaeen foot pilgrimage in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims in their journey to Karbala(Iraq) during the Arbaeen pilgrimage. The study deploys an interpretivist paradigm consisting of a phenomenological approach and incorporates the Shia Islamic worldview to synthesize the findings. Findings reveal that Arbaeen foot-pilgrim's motives are driven by perpetual rituals practiced by the Shia community, and concern for society (umma). The 'umma' element recurred as a key motive for those who repeated the Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage. The experiential component emerging of the results indicate: religious; bodily; and hospitality/humanitarian aspects to be the significant elements of experiences. Managerial implications including future planning and policy are deliberated.

1. Introduction

Foot-pilgrimage' is increasingly becoming a subject of academic inquiry (Kim, Kim, & King, 2016; Hayes & MacLeod, 2008; González & Medina, 2003; Santos, 2002; Reader, 2007; Murray & Graham, 1997; Blacker, 1984). In the ever-growing literature, bulk of the focus is on the Santiago de Camino and/or walking trails associated to religious values other than the Islamic foot-pilgrimage sites. Continually tourism and pilgrimage scholars seem to reflect on pilgrimage studies set in the western foot-pilgrimage settings, ostensibly neglecting non-western foot-pilgrimages. The lack of scholarly erudition on 'other' foot-pilgrimages reflects on a shortcoming from the discipline's perspective, probably indicating the inability to emancipate its scope. The absence of studies from ‘other’ foot-pilgrimage sites expose the danger of resultant generalizations that could well undermine pilgrimage as an institution with universal or homogeneous phenomenon, Eade and Sallnow (1991, p. 3) assert the contrary to be true. The subterranean level of the subject is more worrisome. The overcrowding of non-western foot-pilgrimage studies would have portentous analytical implications. More and more studies investigating foot-pilgrims would eventually make use of existing work, fulfilling the requirement of standing on the shoulders of the giants and inevitably utilize generic and universal exposition that would be disconnected from the underlying theological foundation of one school of thought, and drawing parallels from the same for other doctrines and denominations.

Current literature on foot-pilgrimage explores variety of themes; repercussions of the economic commodification of long-distance cultural itineraries in Europe (Lourens, 2007; Murray & Graham, 1997), local government cultural policy for the planning and development of heritage trails (Hayes & MacLeod, 2008), the values exhibited by travelers along the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain (Kim et al., 2016). Those drawing on the consumption lens have examined the motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims (Morishita, 2001; Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). Worth noticing that the aforementioned studies in tourism and other cognate disciplines have largely focused on the Santiago de Camino and/or walking trails associated to other religious values. Any Islamic foot pilgrimage site remains utterly absent from the scholarly research.

This study shall investigate foot-pilgrims on the Arbaeen pilgrimage that attracts 20 million people annually, making it the world's largest annual gathering in one place (Moufahim, 2013; Piggot, 2014). At present, the pilgrim erudition literature embeds the religiosity aspect in a shallow fashion (Ambrosio, 2007; Digance, 2003; Fleischer, 2000; Turner & Turner, 1978). In an attempt to enhance the religiosity aspect and respond to Eade and Sallnow's (1991, p. 3) call to deconstruct pilgrimage into historically and culturally specific instances, this study shall incorporate the Shia Islamic worldview to analyze the motivations and experiences of Arbaeen foot-pilgrims in their journey to Karbala. The purpose is to interrogate foot pilgrims' motivations and experiences as they take on the walking journey to the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala. This investigation would assist in exploring the largest, yet neglected foot-pilgrimage market. The bonus magnetism is that the gathered foot pilgrims are on a non-western foot-pilgrimage geographical site; in Iraq, that has survived in the face of political instability and atrocities and remains a totally understudied pilgrimage site. Given that Iraq houses significant sacred shrines (Ebad, 2015;
Shannaham, 2015) and attracts millions every year, the study as a first has the potential to contribute novel insights to tourism scholarship. The text begins with a literature review outlining foot-pilgrimages and various themes studied under it and the need of worldviews in foot-pilgrimage studies. This is followed by the study’s background explaining historical overview of Karbala and Arbaeen. Study methods, findings and a separate section on discussion end with managerial implications and conclusions make the paper a worthwhile read and a journey in its own.

2. Literature review

2.1. Pilgrimages and foot-pilgrimage

In contemporary literature, religious pilgrimage is treated as a subcategory of modern pilgrimage (Jackowski & Smith, 1992, p. 93), that encompasses a religiously motivated travel to a sacred place that could consist of: a) elements of the natural environment such as mountains, rivers, caves or even animals; b) religious sites such as churches, temples, or shrines; c) venue for religious activities, rituals, or festivals (Cohen, 2000, p. 439, Shackley, 2006). Pilgrimage structure entails how a pilgrimage is performed. Walking to the sacred place that is performing the pilgrimage on foot, falls in the premise of a pilgrimage’s structure, as it indicates how the pilgrimage is performed (Bremborg, 2013). In order to realize foot pilgrimages, specific routes are developed for pilgrims to embark on the physical journey.

Some religious pilgrimage routes base their claim to authenticity on foot trails only, such as Santiago de Compostella in Spain, Shingon Buddhism on Shikoku in Japan (one to two months needed to complete route in its entirety), and the one-day barefoot August pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick in Northern Ireland. Even today, pilgrims could expect to encounter some form of hardship on their journey, but compared with medieval times, such travails are usually minor and considered to be a quintessential part of the pilgrimage experience.

In addition to the pilgrimage routes, ‘pilgrim status’ is a key theme explored under western foot-pilgrimage studies. Blackwell (2007) affirms ‘pilgrim status’ to be a certification for those whose pilgrimage experience involves hardship and suffering. Sherrard’s (1977, p.102) work disqualifies the visitors to Mount Athos from the status of pilgrimage, if they hadn’t walked the long, steep, often relentless paths. Similar considerations are reestablished in studies of pilgrimage to Santiago (Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). Furthermore, foot-pilgrim’s walk pattern is yet another subject within foot-pilgrimage studies. In Japanese pilgrimage sites patterns of pilgrimage are divided into a) 100% walking pilgrimage; b) a pilgrimage where you are invited by someone and go together or c) a pilgrimage done through a combination of walking using the bus/or train (Eiki, 2007 p. 63–64).

2.2. Motivation and experiences

Morinis (1992, 9–21) elucidates what matters on a pilgrimage is the experience itself. The foot pilgrim being the central character of the pilgrimage story, has certain motivations when undertaking pilgrimage. It is the foot pilgrim’s contemplations, motivations and experience that precisely outline the significance of the journey. Researchers drawing on the consumption lens have examined the motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims. For instance, spiritual experiences are emphasized in Slavin’s (2003) study on pilgrim’s experiences in Spain to the tomb of St James in Santiago de Compostela. Along the same lines, spiritual motivations of foot-pilgrims have been identified in studies that underline quest for self-esteem, and means to fill disaffection and re-enact forms of conventional religiosity. Hence, inability to incorporate specific religious worldviews can lead to a virtual standstill in pilgrim studies and the need to analyze precise pilgrim’s motivations, activities and experiences in light of their religious worldviews seems to be ‘just the right thing to do’. This aligns well since people’s religion has been characterized as a key factor that influences individuals’ behaviors as travelers, and is reflected in their “visitation patterns” (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003, p. 238). There have been limited studies which have but attempted to thinly bring in worldview as a factor, for instance Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000) have analyzed the behavioral characteristics of Christian pilgrims to holy sites. This study shall incorporate the Shia Islamic worldview to study
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