



A phenomenological study of Arbaeen foot pilgrimage in Iraq

UmmeSalma Mujtaba Husein

Independent scholar, Heriot Watt University, Dubai Campus, 294345 Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims in their journey to Karbala(Iraq) during the¹Arbaeen 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-pilgrimage¹ 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 underline 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 (Ebadi, 2015;

E-mail address: ummesalma.mujtaba@gmail.com.

¹ On the plains of Karbala in 680 CE, Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammed was slayed by the armies of Yazid. The day is commemorated every year on the 10th of the first lunar month 'Muharram' as 'Ashura', 40 days from then on, the 20th of the second lunar month 'Safar', Arbaeen(literal meaning 'forty') is observed.

Shannahan, 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, groves 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 Shikouko 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 that 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 obtain self-power through walking as a spiritual practice to Shikoku and Jiba in Japan (Morishita, 2001; Reader, 2007).

Findings have also pinpointed mix of spiritual and other motivations, such as; some sort of nostalgic stimuli a 'search for old values and simple life and partially seeking for Christian symbols (Brämer, 2012 p.

57). Then, there are studies such as the ethnographic research of Frey, to the Camino de Santiago, that notes foot-pilgrim's experiences as a vacation, an escape from the drudgery of the everyday a social reunion, or a personal testing ground (Frey, 1998). And Worobec's (2013) study, that pinpoints no motivation, rather, sincerity being the sentiment for the faithful to undertake pilgrimages on foot, and study that notes traveler on foot have no religious purposes at all, and/or no other reason at all (Schnell & Pali, 2013). Although, none of the researchers have reached a typology specifying the continuum, nonetheless it is apparent that earlier work is focused on juxtapositions between spiritual and other motivations and experiences. This style of research is conspicuously distinctive of pilgrimage related studies that are engaged in binary classifications of pilgrimage as either religious or secular that corresponds to spiritual or sacred tourism and the pilgrim and tourist divide (Fleischer, 2000; Lois González, 2013; Stoddard, 1997).

2.3. Motivations for repeat or revisit behavior

Repetition as a concept is studied by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard who has questioned whether it was possible to repeat an experience. With reference to pilgrimage Kierkegaard argues, Repetition fails, when it is tried as some kind of experiment rather than a commitment (Kierkegaard, 1983). Fernandes, Pimenta, Gonçalves, and Rachão (2012) respondents on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela were positive about repeating the pilgrimage. Lois-González and Santos (2015) thinly mention figures of approximately 25% of repeat pilgrims as noted by the Camino de Santiago's Observatory, however there is no further discussion on why pilgrims repeat the walk. Frey (2010, p. 101–102), has studied the intentions of repeat pilgrims and these are noted as 'renew their feelings', 'to meet friends once again', 'to continue the path of self-discovery', 'to revise how the first pilgrimage was made', as well as to avoid the present of their quotidian lives. "Serial pilgrims," as Frey likes to call them are generally retired men.

2.4. Need of worldview in foot-pilgrimage studies

Foot-pilgrimage studies seem to be analogous to pilgrimage literature. In the way that pilgrimage studies embed the religiosity aspect; in a shallow fashion and analyze rudimentary premise of pilgrims with details of 'who they are' Fleischer (2000) or what do they seek (Ambrosio, 2007; Digance, 2003; Turner & Turner, 1978). Exactly similarly foot-pilgrimage studies so far present findings without engaging in the specific religious worldviews that are reflected in the way pilgrims conceive their pilgrimage. The inability to grasp pilgrim's worldview has been cited as a main difficulty in researching pilgrims (Fedele, 2012), implying that an annexation of worldview has the potential to offer subterranean analysis to the pilgrim's motivations and experiences. Researchers have publicized their dissatisfaction with universalist, structural models of human beliefs and practices (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Eade & Sallnow, 2000, p. ix) and emphasized the importance to investigate how specific groups of people utilize pilgrimage journeys (Warfield, Baker, & Foxx, 2014). Oviedo, de Courcier, and Farias's (2014) observes that many traditional pilgrimages to religious shrines tend to confirm 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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