

# Religious place attachment, squatting, and “qualitative” research: A commentary

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## Abstract

Religious place attachment (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, in press) can lead people to long for particular places, go on pilgrimage, develop preferences regarding where to live, and take actions related to places. This commentary points out how the religious basis for place attachment can be identified, and how the actions people take to settle in specific places, as well as emergence of conflict among groups, though not inevitable, can be understood. Finally, it describes how “qualitative” methods, if done well, can be useful in answering questions dealing with understanding place attachment and place loss.

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## 1. Introduction

The subjects of place attachment, the longing people have for particular places, and the actions people take to reach and settle in such places, have not been fully understood. The literature informs us that many people develop mild to strong attachment to place, and that particular places can become part of one's identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Feldman, 1990; Cooper Marcus, 1992; Relph, 1976; Rubinstein, & Parmelee, 1992; Rowles, 1983; Tuan, 1974, among others). How place attachment occurs is described by Altman and Low (1992). Loss of place and breakdowns in place attachment have been researched by Erikson (1976), Mazumdar (1992), and Brown and Perkins (1992). Psychological aspects of individual place identity have been described (Proshansky et al., 1983) though the social and cultural dimensions of place attachment are relatively less explored (Low, 1992; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, in press). Though there is a fairly large and growing literature on religion and place (see Eliade, 1959; Sopher, 1967; Eck, 1982; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, in press, 1999, 2001; Perez & Goldberg 2001; and

others), religious place attachment has received only infrequent attention (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, in press). Clearly, the subject area described above could benefit from additional research. This is one attempt in that direction. This piece, however, is not based on empirical research. Rather it is an invited commentary on an anonymized manuscript sent to me that took up some of these issues (the author's name was substituted after my commentary was submitted).

The subject of Possick's (2004) paper is very interesting because it offers a rare opportunity to view and understand the world of squatters who squatted in particular places outside their region. The subject is somewhat unusual in that these were “affordability-independent”, “place-discriminating” squatters who seemed to have a drive to settle in a particular place, and this kind of activity does not occur very often nor is it very widespread. This latter point does not, however, diminish the importance of the subject. These squatters, it turns out, later experienced eviction and loss of place.

For reasons outlined above and the perfunctory and sporadic coverage of settlements in the West Bank, Israel, in the news over the past few years, it is useful to research the subject and to ask: can environmental psychologists and environmental design researchers learn lessons from studying these settlers? Possick

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(2004) provides hope that a number of themes of interest to environmental psychology and environmental design research can emerge from this study.

In writing about these I shall rely on the data and information provided by Possick in that paper. I will take up the following six themes: can the place attachment being discussed be religious rather than ideological place attachment? Next I shall take up place attachment and longing for place, longing and action, visions of life and conflict, squatting and place loss, and “qualitative” research.

Briefly, Possick's (2004) study context was the following. In December 1975, 30 families in Israel were given permission to temporarily settle in the Kadum military camp which came to be known as K'dumim, also known as Tel Haim, from where 15 families chose to move and settle in Rujeib/Itamar in 1977. Eight months later, these 15 squatting families were evicted and offered a place in Mt. Cabir/Alon Moreh, an offer four rejected and were forcibly evicted. Eleven of these families were the focus of the study.

## 2. Religious place attachment?

What kind of attachment to places did the participants feel? Is this a case of ideological place attachment as claimed in Possick's (2004) paper or an example of religious place attachment? The attachment to place described I recognize as a form and example of religious place attachment. This conclusion is based on information supplied in that paper, which contains over a dozen statements that provide clues to this. I shall draw on examples and quotes from Possick's paper to demonstrate that a case can be made for religious place attachment from the data supplied in the paper.

What constitutes religious place attachment? The way to recognize whether the attachment exhibited is religious or not is to examine if there are any connections to religion, religious beliefs and ideas. On this, from that paper we learn the following.

The squatters selected a specific place for squatting:

The goal of the group of the original Samaria settlers was to settle in and around Shechem/Nablus (Possick, 2004, p. 54).

The significance of the place selected is described in the quote below:

Shechem was the first place Abraham laid claim to in the Promised Land. In addition, many important Biblical events took place there. Dina, the daughter of Jacob was raped and avenged in Shechem. Joseph's remains were brought from Egypt and interred there. Joshua assembled the tribes for a great covenant in Shechem and built an altar on the

site. The Priests stood on the two mountains on either side of the city (Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eival) and delivered God's blessings and curses to the Nation of Israel who were congregated in the valley below (Possick, 2004, p. 54).

The above story comes from the Bible. There is a clear reference to God, and beliefs regarding God's actions, blessings, and curses toward the Nation of Israel. The characters in it are important personages credited with starting the religion of Judaism. The events and occurrences described happen to these important persons in places considered significant in the religion. There is mention of a “Promised Land”. This story, and the characters, events, actions, and places, have special significance and meaning to Jews and have little meaning to followers of other religions, especially the nonAbrahamic religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and others. The significance of the place and its selection therefore seems to be tied to and derived from religion.

In Judaism, belief in the Messiah is one of the thirteen basic principles, according to Maimonides, and the Messiah, it is believed, will come and deliver the followers to the land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) (Jacobs, 1984, p. 221). This day of deliverance and redemption is an important theme:

The length of their residence and their age mitigate against further moves, but they remain faithful to a place ideology which requires eternal readiness to move for the sake of actively settling The Land of Israel. The structure of their narratives are characterized by an almost seamless progression through time; past, present, and future are one undivided unit. They postpone closure until “the ultimate redemption” (the coming of the Messiah) (Possick, 2004, p. 64).

Attempts are made at staying faithful to the religious beliefs regarding the coming of the Messiah and preparing for that ultimate redemption as stipulated in the religious principles. From this perspective, squatting may be seen some as an act in the service of that ideal in the religion:

Their squatting was in the service of an ideal—the reclamation of the Land of Israel by the Jewish people. In addition, the *derech* was a kind of serial squatting as the original Samaria settlers moved from one squatter settlement to another in an attempt to expand Samaria settlement and to reach Shechem (Possick, 2004, p. 67).

The importance of spirituality derived from religious principles is seen in the following:

In the Samaria settlers' case, the ideologically motivated relocation or return to a place with pre-existing ancestral roots and *spiritual* ties going back

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