Pilgrimage, consumption and rituals: Spiritual authenticity in a Shia Muslim pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT

A critical dimension of pilgrimage is arguably pilgrims' experience, in particular the authenticity of their experience. The aim of the study is to understand how authenticity is evoked in a religious pilgrimage and the relationship between authenticity, rituals and consumption. The research contributes ethnographic insights from a lesser known, yet significant, Muslim pilgrimage called *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*. In so doing, pilgrimages are conceptualised as a quest for *spiritual authenticity*, a hybrid form of existential, ideological and objective authenticity. The findings section leads to a discussion of the ways in which spiritual authenticity is realised through rituals and the consumption of texts, material objects and space. The contribution of this paper is threefold: 1) it explores the different dimensions of authenticity in a pilgrimage experience; 2) it examines the role of material culture and ritual consumption in achieving forms of authenticity; and 3) it broadens the understanding of the pilgrimage as a context-bound and culturally specific phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Pilgrimages are a feature of all major world religions as well as spiritual and secular movements (Digance, 2003; Margry, 2008). According to UNWTO estimates, between 300 and 330 million tourists visit the world's main religious sites every year, with approximately 600 million national and international religious journeys taking place annually in the world (UNWTO, 2014). Pilgrimages are thus of significant religious, commercial and scholarly interest. Lying at the intersection of religion, travel and tourism (Reader, 2014), pilgrimages have been explored by various traditions and disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (Timothy & Olsen, 2006), including *anthropology* and *sociology* (e.g. Badone & Roseman, 2004; Cohen, 1992a, b; Morinis, 1992, p. 336; Turner & Turner, 1978), *geography* (e.g. Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Singh & Singh, 1987; Stoddard & Morinis, 1997), *religious studies* (e.g. Gesler, 1996; Reader, 2007; Vilaça, 2010) and *tourism* and *hospitality studies* (e.g. Murray & Graham, 1997; Shackley, 2001; Digance, 2003; González & Medina, 2003; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Raj & Morpeth, 2007, pp. 1–14; Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Krešić, Mikulić, & Miličević, 2013; Lois-González & Santos, 2015). Research has focused on a range of diverse issues, such as the institutional and geopolitical implications of pilgrimages (see Holloway & Valins, 2002), migration (see Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014) and the sociological characteristics of pilgrims, that is, their motivations and their

experience of the pilgrimage (see Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Fleischer, 2000; Jackowski & Smith, 1992; Murray & Graham, 1997; Turner & Turner, 1978).

More recently, studies in *marketing* and *consumer research* have contributed to the understanding of pilgrimages (e.g. Croft, 2013; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; Moufahim, 2013; Scott & Maclaran, 2013). The sacred sites of pilgrimages are often important commercial centres featuring vibrant marketplaces, where spiritual goods and services are sold (Scott & Maclaran, 2013). Pilgrims' behaviours provide an insight into the nature of symbolic, mystical and material consumption. For example, personal possessions and artefacts play a critical role in the Christian pilgrimage to Saint Brigid's Holy Well (Turley, 2013). Similarly, Jewish pilgrimages (Zaidman & Lowengart, 2001) to the tombs of local saints in Israel feature the ritualistic sacralisation of objects. For New Age pilgrims to Sedona, Arizona, who seek to experience divine energy, the marketplace enables the materialising of their experience and access to the sacred (Kedzior, 2013). Pilgrimages are sites where the sacred and the profane overlap and where exploration of the relationship between religion, spirituality and consumption can be undertaken (Higgins & Hamilton, 2011).

A critical dimension of pilgrimages is arguably the authenticity of pilgrims' experience, expected to provoke religious 'rapture' or 'exaltation' (Cohen, 1992a). In fact, the religiosity experienced by pilgrims has served as a basis for understanding tourists' search for meaning

more generally (MacCannell, 1999 [1976]), igniting an enduring debate on and fascination with authenticity (e.g. Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Shepherd, 2002; Shepherd, 2015; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Tourism discourse has generally been preoccupied with defining the nature of authenticity and its utility. However, the links of the concept to other phenomena, such as ritual, tradition and aura, has been less explored (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Responding to the need for a better understanding of the relationship between authenticity, ritual and consumption, this research contributes ethnographic insights from a lesser known, yet significant, Muslim pilgrimage called *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*. The context of this study is thus a religious journey to Iraq undertaken by a group of Belgian Muslim women in January 2012.

The aim of the study is to understand how authenticity is evoked in *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*. In so doing, pilgrimage is conceptualised as a quest for *spiritual authenticity,* and the ways in which this form of authenticity is realised through the consumption of texts, material objects and space are examined in detail. The contribution of this paper is thus threefold: 1) to explore and delineate the different dimensions of authenticity in a pilgrimage experience; 2) to understand the role of material culture and ritual consumption in achieving forms of authenticity; and 3) to broaden the understanding of the pilgrimage as a context-bound and culturally specific phenomenon.

2. Consumption, ritual and authenticity

Following the experiential turn in marketing (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), scholars in consumer research have explored the sacred and the profane in consumer behaviour (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), extraordinary consumption experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993) and consumption communities (Cova, 1997; Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2012). In all these contexts, consumers are able to negotiate feelings, meaning and identity through the acquisition and use of products. Products are not solely consumed for their utilitarian functions but for their capacity to invoke hedonic, symbolic and aesthetic experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), which consumers can access and manipulate through ritualistic and quasi-ritualistic practices (McCracken, 1986).

The search for meaning through consumption is posited to be a symptom of the human experience of modernity. On the one hand, modernity is celebrated as material progress and improvement of the human condition, achieved through the enlightenment and industrialisation (Dholakia & Firat, 2003; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). On the other hand, the narrative of progress has been tainted by negative experiences of loss; modern individuals feel disenchanted with everyday life and alienated from the institutions of modern society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). The experience of modernity is thus marked by disillusionment, disintegration and anxiety and hence a desperate search for alternatives (Cova, 1997). Consumption offers opportunities for the re-enchantment of everyday life (Rojek, 2000, pp. 51–70; Ritzer, 2005) as individuals seek meaning and a connection to others in communities that form around the consumption of particular objects, brands and activities (Cova, 1997; Cova et al., 2012).

According to Holt (1995), valued objects are constitutive elements of consumers' identity, and through consumption, individuals socialise and classify themselves and others (Holt, 1995). Consumption experiences bind enthusiasts of a product (or product category) together through shared identity building. Similarly to traditional communities, brand communities exhibit consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions as well as a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). Many different contexts of consumer behaviour exemplify how consumption offers opportunities for meaningful experiences as consumers appropriate cultural meanings (McCracken, 1986) through the manipulation of objects during ritualised activities in their everyday lives (Rook, 1985). A ritual is defined here as:

a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behaviour is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity (Rook, 1985: 252).

Rituals consist of repetitive, episodic behaviours performed according to stereotyped scripts, and their performance involves scripted roles, manipulation or consumption of artefacts and an audience (Rook, 1985). Consumer rituals can be found in everyday, ordinary or mundane behaviours, including, for example, grooming practices (e.g. beauty rituals), possession maintenance (e.g. storing or displaying a collection), item exchange (e.g. gift-giving) and divestment activities (e.g. disposal/destruction of belongings) (McCracken, 1986). Consumption related activities offer opportunities for experiencing the sacred (Belk et al., 1989). In fact, the sacred and the profane are not fixed states but transient realms, because objects, events and people can take on or be deprived of sacred or profane qualities through sacralisation and de-sacralisation processes that occur in everyday consumption. Souvenir consumption is an exemplar of such process. Souvenirs are often thought to be mundane due to being 'cheap' and mass produced objects. However, a particular souvenir bought as part of one's holiday can become 'objectified', i.e. take sacred meaning (Belk et al., 1989), because it symbolises the holiday experience or the specific destination for the tourist. Similarly, mass produced religious kitsch (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016) may hold unique meaning for pilgrims when used either for personal consumption or gift-giving (Moufahim, 2013). In short, the most ordinary objects can assume extraordinary meaning in particular contexts through sacralising processes, such as rituals, pilgrimages, quintessence, gift-giving, collecting, inheritance and external sanction (Belk et al., 1989).

In the case of the MG brand subculture of consumption, for example, enthusiasts' involvement with and commitment to the product and the community transform the status of the car from a mass-produced vehicle to a unique, non-commoditised object (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Hence, a sense of authenticity is built "on the personal investment that is tied to one's identity and communicated to others" (Leigh et al., 2006, p. 491). This sense of authenticity is not merely gained from ownership of the product but through the integration of personal investment, cathartic experiences, communal interaction and product symbolism (Leigh et al., 2006). The implication for marketers is that brands that carry an aura of authenticity are more easily differentiated in the mass market. Brands that are associated with identity myths are often able to facilitate a sense of authenticity for consumers (Holt, 2004). Interestingly, within tourism research, a number of studies have attempted to examine the value of authenticity as a marketing tool (Apostolakis, 2003; Chhabra, 2008; Prentice, 2001). Authenticity is linked to loyalty (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Zhou, Zhang, & Edelheim, 2013), satisfaction (Robinson & Clifford, 2012) and monetary value (Castéran & Roederer, 2013). The concept is therefore important for marketers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

2.1. From authenticity to authentication

MacCannell (1999 [1976]) portrayed the tourist as a modern pilgrim seeking meaningful experiences away from the alienating institutions of modernity. At the heart of his conceptualisation is the concept of authenticity (MacCannell, 1973). Since the publication of MacCannell's seminal work, authenticity has been approached from various perspectives. The essentialist view approaches authenticity as inherent in an object or culture (Chhabra, 2008). According to Cohen (1988) and Wang (1999), this type of 'objective' authenticity originated in the museum and is concerned with verifying the historical truth of an object or place. The essentialist perspective has however been critiqued for failing to acknowledge the hybrid, heterogeneous and differentiated nature of culture (Shepherd, 2002, 2015). Culture and tradition are not