

Ritual Tourism

Revising Social Beliefs at Ritual Ceremonies

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Abstract | Rites, traditions and rituals running in people's lives are deep-rooted in their beliefs and faiths. The compilation of recreation and amusement with pilgrimage, paying visits to the graves of the saints and deceased and showing abiding affections, has been a longstanding custom in Iran since ancient times. This includes the pilgrimage and paying tribute to the shrines of Imams (Saints in Shi'a), their descendants, and other religious figures; a ritual which brings about unique spiritual and sincere experience. The significant, long-lasting tradition of pilgrimage, ritual excursion and outing, has survived up to this time. As group activities, such customs bring together children, youth and the elders, and revive them with enthusiasm. In addition to pilgrimage and joy, "ritual tourism" significantly helps activating the historical-religious sites, which are extremely valuable national heritages.

Keywords | ritual tourism, custom, pilgrimage, holy sites, nature.

Hypothesis | Ritual tourism is one of the best ways of appreciating the cultures of different societies. It might increase the tourists' insight, bring about social affinity, and strengthen human and historical interactions. Popularizing this category of tourism is greatly compatible with the cultural status of Iranian society, and demands huge investments on account of its powerful interactive aspects.

Excursion and Remembrance

More than mere fun and joy, trips and outings, for a day or more, have always been interrelated to popular beliefs. People used to be drawn towards hillsides, fields, springs and rivers or mountain heights to have fun; but owing to their naturalistic beliefs, such enjoyment has been interwoven with worshipping natural elements like water and tree, and paying tribute to the fire, since ancient times.

Later on, when the religious sites were built near the holy elements, and gatherings and rituals were held there, the chance of having fun and worshipping at the same time arose. This tradition continued during the Islamic periods, and the former worshipping sites were changed to preachers and Sufis' sacred shrines. Similar ritual tours are held until today

in towns and villages all over the country. Visiting the graves of the friends and family members has also been a kind of promenade, as well as a religious duty. During the weekends and public/religious holidays, cemeteries like the "Behesht-e-Zahra" (Zahra's Heaven) in Tehran, and all over Iran, are full of pilgrims who want to spend a joyful day nearby the graves of their beloved ones, having some sort of picnic, eating sweets, fruits or even lunch, saying Fatiha (a prayer for the deceased) and recalling the past times together (Fig. 1).

The trips taken on holidays like Nowruz, religious festivals, mourning ceremony of Imam Hossain, as well as paying visit the shrine of holy Imams or their descendants are all in this category: some kind of excursion with a spiritual ambience (Fig.2). In the past, the pilgrims used to stay for about a month in Mashhad, and maybe six months in Karbala in their religious visiting to Imam Hossain or Imam Ali. Most elders recall the sweet memories of trips to Imam Reza, Hazrat

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Fig. 1: Behesht-e-Zahra Cemetery, Tehran. Gathering of people, saying Fatiha (a prayer for the deceased) in memory of their lost beloveds, the ritual of pilgrimage alongside with recreational activities. Source: <http://tnews.ir/news/af9459647622.html>



Fig. 2: Imam Zadeh Salih, Shemiran, Tajrish. Pilgrimage and ritual excursion. Source: <http://aghigh.ir/fa/news>

Masoumah or Hazrat Abd-al-Azim's shrine and having picnic in these pleasant places near rivers, springs, trees or meadows.

Among the sweetest childhood memories of many Iranian is the road trip to the holy shrine of Imamzadeh Davood and Bibi Shahrbanou mountain, with all those food packing, mats, samovar, primus, bread and any trip equipment mounted on mule, happy kids and the elderly travelling with difficulty along the route, but happy to be blessed and purified in the end (Figs.3 - 5). All those experiences are the same for the citizens of Yazd in Pir Sabz shrine which gathers both Muslims and Zoroastrians, and also for the many pilgrims of many other holy shrines, who have preserved the described traditions through constant repetition. The ancient belief of after-death living and the connection between this world and the world of immortal keep these holy places and sacred elements spiritually active. Thus invocation to natural symbols or symbolic elements, created by mankind during the course of time, causes peace and a living filled up with deep thoughts on one hand, and builds a part of people's social life on the other.

The integration of ritual sites and social ceremonies leads to the emergence of certain cultural approaches, the study of which could be an honest narration of the history of a land. In the broad range of ritual tourism, the customs and rituals depend on a more inclusive context of beliefs. In other words, beliefs are the spirits of the places and give life to them. Like the permanent motive forces of the society, these sites and landscapes help the societies survive socially and culturally.

Excursion and Rituals

With their ancient civilization, Iranians have offered the world, a variety of cultural manifestations, including a ritual vision which long existed in their culture. "The man of the age of tradition, believed in a meaning for the world outside which he had the duty to discover" (Mansouri, 2008: 2); he therefore invented myths for the nature and its elements and lived with them. The myths were gradually substituted by sacred beliefs and the very first religions. Pilgrimage is an important aspect of ritual tourism and has intense relation with mythical elements. In spite of the fact that the traditions have diminished somehow, in the modern life, the mythical pilgrimages are still observable within the cultural borders of Iran.

Tourism is an advanced system of understanding, leading to personal growth and heading towards perfection (ibid: 30). Cultural landscape tourism is a combination of geographic, architectural, historical and cultural places strongly linked with sensual and identity-concerned perception (Parchekani, 2013: 34). It can be concluded that ritual tourism could be a result of the union of culture and travel; a travel through which one can explore the ongoing beliefs in the spirit of a place which is rooted in the ancient culture of the society. A ritual is often dependent on earth and place (a site); to put in other words, site and ritual have always survived as one living being. Ritual tourism is a branch of Cultural tourism which informs us about the beliefs of a certain society (Javadi & Qazanfari, 2009: 70).

In the same way, excursion and pilgrimage have been a

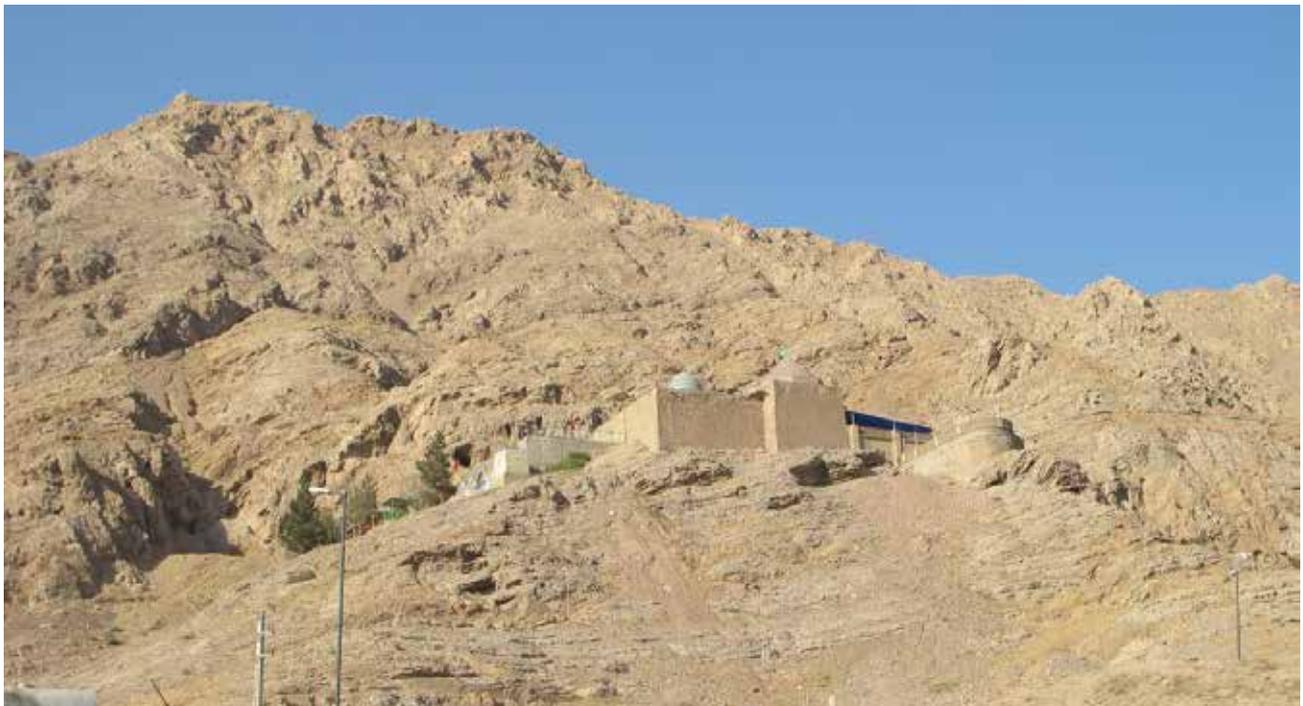


Fig. 3: A panoramic view of Bibi Shahrbanou's shrine, Rey city. photo: Ive luginboul, 2014.

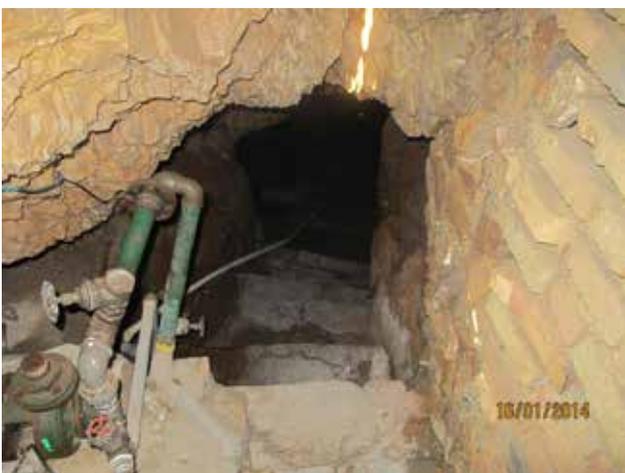


Fig.4: Inside the cave and the entrance stairway of the spring. Photo: Ive luginboul, 2014.



Fig.5: Bibi Shahrbanou's shrine, Rey, Tehran. excursion and cooking divine food offering. Photo: Ive luginboul, 2014.

popular act in European societies and among traditionalist Christians. The sanctuary of the Virgin of the Rosary Fatima in Lisbon (Portugal), the monastery of saint Odile of Alsace in France -located on the heights of a mountainous area, the holy cave (la Sainte-Baume) and statue of Mary Magdalena in a village named Durfort (near Marseille) in south France (Figs. 6-8), and le Mont-Saint-Michel located in north west of France, are religious hotspots which draw the pilgrims on foot, on their knees sometimes, carrying candles and saying mantra, hoping to get their wishes fulfilled, and trying to finish a quest towards the holy spring, cave or any other holy site, symbol of historical-religious incidents. The customary rituals of these excursions are very similar to the Iranian ones. It was a Sunday noon in the summer of 2011 when we reached the Sanctuary of Fatima (virgin of the Rosary) in Lisbon, with the "Nazar scientific-exploring tour", and faced the enormous crowd of the Christian pilgrims coming from different regions (Figs. 9-12). The ritual was being held at the top of the hill, near the fire, and the priest was preaching. In the nave

of this church is located the holy grave of the Three Children Shepherds, a girl and two boys, which is said to have seen the Lady of the Rosary (Virgin Mary) appearing to them -the narrative which has made the site sacred. There are similar narrations in the Islamic tradition, concerning Hazrat Fatima (The Prophet Muhammad's daughter) and holy sites near mountains, springs or trees. Many of these tales are rooted in pre-Islamic beliefs. These pilgrim sites have changed to ritual recreational spots during the course of time, and saved the locale's beliefs and spirits in a new manner.

Likewise, many rituals and carnivals of joy held in summer or certain days of the Christian calendar all over Europe are rooted in religious history and culture. Like Muslims celebrating Eid-e-Fitr feast after the month of Ramadan, Catholics finish their fast through a special religious feast. This ceremony has today been substituted with gatherings, dancing and enjoyment. Nevertheless, all the symbolic accessories and elements held during the festivals, including masks, tools, songs and the dancing, have religious-historical



Fig. 6: Athe sanctuary of the virgin of the rosary Fatima, Lisbon-Portugal. Photo: Archieve of Nazar research center.

roots, and have only been repeatedly imitated during the centuries (Figs.13 - 15).

In the recent years, many ritual-religious sites in Iran have been transformed into tourist hotspots. A huge number of people continue these rituals in their daily lives in order to reconnect to nature -through some features of these rituals- while also seeking for spirituality in modern adventurous life. Keeping this flowing social-epistemic stream and protecting such historical-ritual heritage requires a minute, sharp and unbiased knowledge to preserve and re-organize the related sites. Some of these sites have been ruined due to improper developments and the custodian's ignorance; or have barely been looked after. Founding convenient opportunities and running cultural programs would popularize ritual tourism. Rituals are the symbolic expressions of the beliefs arisen from the culture of a society; thus studying them and interpreting their significance is of essential importance and would deepen people's feelings for their country. Development in educational opportunities of historical, natural, religious and ritual tourism, in addition to reinforcing the approaches concerning social union would result in some sort of cultural-social unity in Iran which would lay the plots of linking Iran's tourism to other societies. Promotion of this method of tourism with its ancient Iranian cultural roots, would spiritually motivate the society on one hand, and familiarize the tourists with the conventions and customs of a vivid and



Fig. 7: sanctuary of the virgin of the rosary Fatima, Lisbon-Portugal. Photo: Archieve of Nazar research center.



Fig. 8: sanctuary of the virgin of the rosary Fatima, Lisbon-Portugal. Photo: Archieve of Nazar research center.

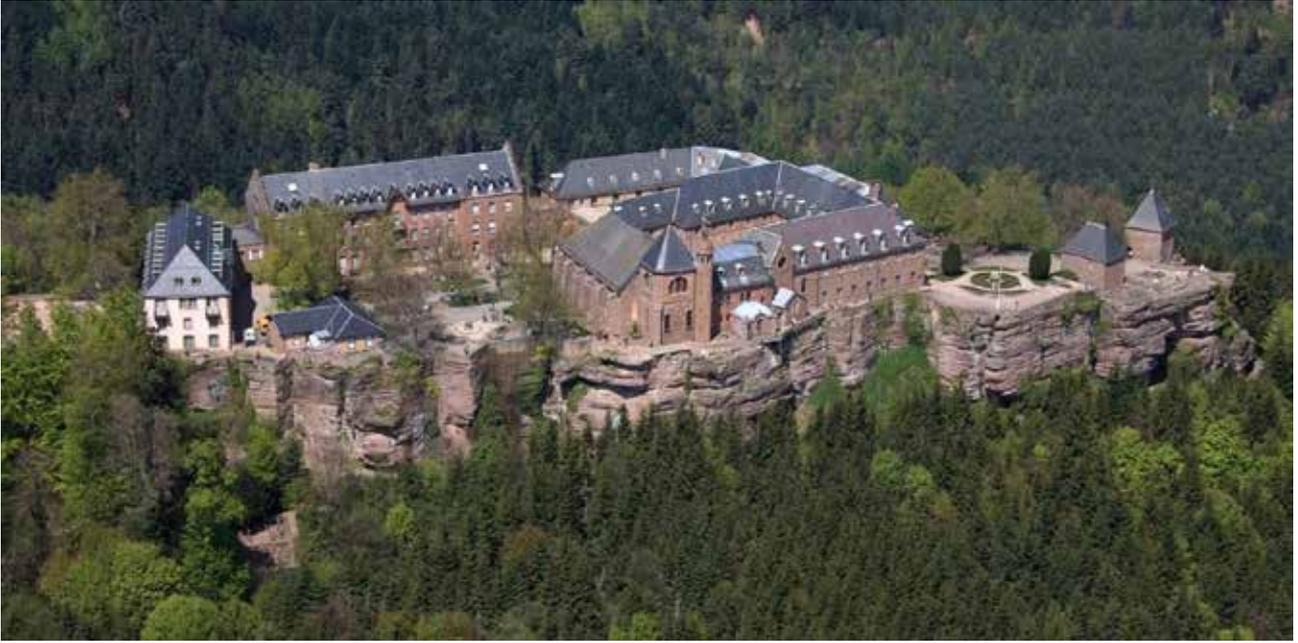


Fig. 9: A plan of the ninth c. a.d. Bulkawara Palace at Samarra, showing the doubled four-garden motif beyond the limits of the palace proper. Source: Koehler & Fischer, n.d.

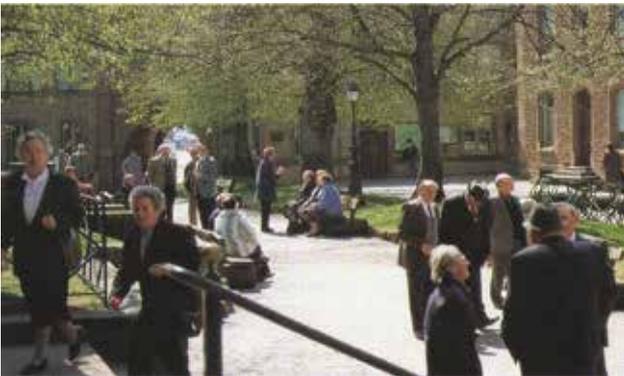


Fig. 10: an old shadow of lemon bee brush trees, old trees which refer to the old age of the locale and the sacred building. Source: Koehler & Fischer, n.d.



Fig. 11: a pilgrimage and enjoyment site for all the group ages. Source: Koehler & Fischer, n.d.

ethical society full of sweet family recreational activities, on the other. Developing and conducting healthy and thoughtful excursions for the young generation, if accompanied with education and awareness -and not mere repetition-, would proliferate our identity and our inherited culture.



Fig. 12: Holy fountain. Source: Koehler & Fischer, n.d.

Conclusion

The man's need for enjoyment, peace and integration with religious beliefs has made a special niche of tourism that has been alive since ancient times. Supporting the ritual tourism is an important issue in perception and development of Iranian-Islamic rich culture. This objective demands considerable protection, preservation and renovation of the religious-recreational sites in accordance to the current needs of the society. The ritual sites, representing the symbols and signs of ancient customs, are part of the valuable Iranian heritage of art and civilization, and must be protected and preserved in their original forms, as they are the manifestations of the cultural and religious continuity since the past. Such an enriched, lively and dynamic heritage in the field of ritual tourism is an honor and dignity for Iran.



Fig. 14: a carnival, Paris-France. Source: <http://gemlaportebonheur.blogspot.com>

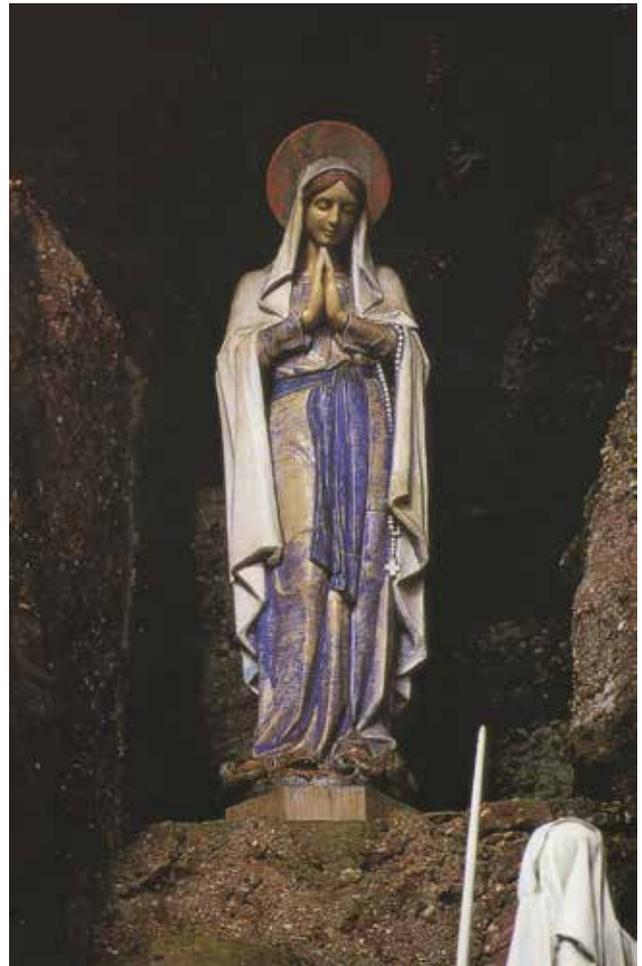


Fig. 13: statue of Mary Magdalena in the holy cave la Sainte-Baume. Source: Koehler & Fischer, n.d.



Fig. 15: Paris carnival in 1950s. Source: http://heroeswiki.com/Where_Is_Hiro

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