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PILGRIMAGE, CONSUMPTION AND RITUALS: SPIRITUAL AUTHENTICITY IN A SHIA MUSLIM PILGRIMAGE

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.

Keywords: Islam, pilgrimage, rituals, consumption, authenticity, ziyara

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 and Olsen, 2006), including *anthropology* and *sociology* (e.g. Turner and Turner, 1978; Morinis, 1992; Cohen, 1992a,b; Badone and Roseman, 2004), *geography* (e.g. Singh and Singh, 1987; Stoddard and Morinis, 1997; Collins-Kreiner, 2010), *religious studies* (e.g. Gesler, 1996; Reader, 2007; Vilaça, 2010) and *tourism* and *hospitality studies* (e.g. Murray and Graham, 1997; Shackley, 2001; Digance, 2003; Gonzáles and Medina, 2003; Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, 2006; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Belhassen et al., 2008; Krešić et al., 2013; Lois-Gonzáles and Santos, 2015). Research has focused on a range of diverse issues, such as the institutional and geopolitical implications of pilgrimages (see Holloway and Valins, 2002), migration (see Hannam et al., 2006) and the sociological characteristics of pilgrims, that is, their motivations and their experience of the pilgrimage (see Jackowski and Smith, 1992; Turner and Turner, 1978; Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, 2006; Fleischer, 2000; Murray and Graham, 1997).

More recently, studies in *marketing* and *consumer research* have contributed to the understanding of pilgrimages (e.g. Croft, 2012; Scott and Maclaran, 2013; Moufahim, 2013; Higgins and Hamilton, 2016). The sacred sites of pilgrimages are often important commercial centres featuring vibrant marketplaces, where spiritual goods and services are sold (Scott and

Maclaran, 2012). 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, 2012). Similarly, Jewish pilgrimages (Zaidman and 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 and 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; Wang, 1999; Shepherd, 2002; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Shepherd, 2015). 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 *Ziyarat-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 and Hirschman, 1982), scholars in consumer research have explored the sacred and the profane in consumer behaviour (Belk et al., 1989), extraordinary consumption experiences (Arnould and Price, 1993) and consumption communities (Cova, 1996; Cova et al., 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 and 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 (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Dholakia and Firat, 2003). 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 and Venkatesh, 1995). The experience of modernity is thus marked by disillusionment, disintegration and anxiety and hence a desperate search for alternatives (Cova, 1996). Consumption offers opportunities for the re-enchantment of everyday life (Rojek, 2000; 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, 1996; 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 and 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 and 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 et al., 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: 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 (Prentice, 2001; Apostolakis, 2003; Chhabra, 2008). Authenticity is linked to loyalty (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Zhou et al., 2013; Castéran and Roederer, 2013), satisfaction (Robinson and Clifford, 2012) and monetary value (Castéran and Roederer, 2013). The concept is therefore important for marketers (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

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; Shepherd, 2015). Culture and tradition are not static but constantly emerging; to try and keep a culture 'real' in the objective sense is to keep it frozen and protected from death (Ritzer and Liska, 1997). Cohen (1988) discusses the concept of 'emergent authenticity', observing that something initially thought of as inauthentic may become authentic with the passage of time, particularly when a culture is in decline. The constructivist approach thus views authenticity as pluralistic; a struggle for competing interests. It has indeed been observed that tourists are in search of symbolic and not objective authenticity (Wang, 1999). The paradox of Las Vegas, a place so

unique in its inauthenticity that it has achieved status as authentic (Douglass and Raento, 2004), is often cited as an example of the fluid nature of authenticity.

Wang (1999) advocates a different conception of authenticity, which he calls 'existential authenticity'. This perspective is concerned with the subjective experience of the tourist and the transformative potential of the self, achieved through bodily feelings, liminality and pilgrimage (Wang 1999; Badone and Roseman, 2004). Existential authenticity involves *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* dimensions. Intrapersonal authenticity relates to bodily feelings; both the sensual (the body as subject/body as feeling) and the symbolic, where the body becomes a display of personal identity (health, naturalness, youth, fitness, movement, beauty, etc.). Intrapersonal authenticity is essentially concerned with 'self-making' (e.g. Kim and Jamal, 2007), while interpersonal authenticity relates to the formation of 'touristic communitas' (Wang, 1999). While the shift of discourse from object to experience and from universal to personal has opened up opportunities for insights into the diverse nature and potential of tourist experiences, some commentators argue that what is missing in this stance is an appreciation of the ideological dimension (Belhassen et al., 2008) and the so-called politics of authenticity (Hughes, 1995). Objects and experiences are framed by the shared meanings that exist in a given society.

The proliferation of perspectives on authenticity has brought about the need to move beyond the 'objective vs. existential' debate. A call has been made to shift the focus onto the need for 'hybrid' authenticity, which is essentially a reconciliation of object, constructive and existential authenticity (Chhabra, 2008). Chhabra (2008), for example, in her studies on the museum, discusses a form of hybrid authenticity that reconciles objective and existential

dimensions, which emerges through the negotiation of value inherent in the exhibits themselves and the value of the museum experience. Rickly-Boyd (2012) goes further, calling for consideration of authenticity in all its complexity, linking object, site and experience. In the case of pilgrimages, this would involve incorporating the ideological dimension of pilgrimage (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008), i.e. the shared religious narratives that link experiences of particular places, objects and actors (Kelner, 2001).

In addition, attention can also be drawn to the *process* through which an object, site or experience becomes authenticated (Cohen and Cohen, 2012). Cohen and Cohen (2012) define “‘authentication’ as a process by which something—a role, product, site, object or event—is confirmed as ‘original’, ‘genuine’, ‘real’ or ‘trustworthy’” (2012: 1296). They distinguish between two modes of authentication, i.e. hot and cool. First, cool authentication is similar to the practice of certification by which something is declared to be “original, genuine or real, rather than a copy, fake or spurious” (Cohen and Cohen, 2012: 1298). This mode of authentication “may be based on scientific knowledge (cf. Selwyn, 1996, p. 26), on (personal) experience and expertise, or even divine inspiration” (Cohen and Cohen, 2012, p. 1298). Second, hot authentication is defined as “an immanent, reiterative, informal performative process of creating, preserving and reinforcing an object’s, site’s or event’s authenticity”. It is emotionally loaded and typically based on belief rather than proof (Cohen and Cohen, 2012: 1300).

The explanatory power of the different conceptualisations of authenticity above is deployed within the context of a Muslim pilgrimage. Pilgrimages present a fertile ground for an holistic exploration of authenticity and processes of authentication in what is a particularly rich context

of meaningful experiences and consumption practices. In turn, studying a lesser known form of pilgrimage in a ‘non-Western’ context is useful in terms of enriching current conceptualisations.

3- Methodology

3.1. Context: Ziyara-t-Arba’een

There is a need to study pilgrimage in new contexts, in particular given the generalisations in some older pilgrimage research, which do not necessarily apply to non-Western contexts, where the political and religious domains are intricately connected (Cohen, 1992b, p. 47). Eade and Sallnow (1991) also argue against a global essentialist approach that focuses on universal characteristics and social functions of pilgrimages, which has characterised much pilgrimage research. Rather they advocate analysing each specific pilgrimage in terms of its particular social context and its “historically and culturally specific behaviours and meanings” (Eade and Sallnow, 1991, pp. 3, 5). Hence, the focus of this research is on a particularly understudied type of pilgrimage in tourism studies: the *ziyara* (i.e. ‘visitation’), a form of Islamic pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages are an important dimension of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The Hajj –the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia– is an obligatory religious commandment for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford its financial costs. While the Hajj is the most widely performed Islamic pilgrimage, there are several Islamic holy sites associated with saints, many of the Sufi order, and martyrs in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, which attract millions of visitors. The visitations to these sites are known as *ziyara* (Bhardwaj, 1998). One of the major *ziyaras* is called *Ziyara-t-Arba’een*, translated as ‘the visitation of the Fortieth [day]’ (henceforth *Arba’een*), and it is one of the largest pilgrimages in the world. In January 2016, 22 million

pilgrims were reported to have gathered at Karbala, Iraq, for this pilgrimage. *Arba'een* takes place 40 days after *Ashura* which commemorates the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammed, by the armies of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD. The 77 men of his small army all died as martyrs in battle. The Battle of Karbala and its main protagonists are potent symbols in Shi'a Islam (Pinto, 2007). *Ashura* and the pilgrimage to the tombs of its martyrs are central to the historical development and organisation of Shi'a Islam (Pinto, 2007). The *Ashura* commemorations were forcefully forbidden under Saddam Hussein, who feared their revolutionary potential. This fear might not have been misplaced given the centrality of Karbala narrative in the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Arba'een is an ideal context to study pilgrimages because it is the largest annual pilgrimage on earth. Karbala plays host to millions of local and international pilgrims, who create a vast demand for goods and services (e.g. transportation and catering). The management of the pilgrims' safety, comfort and religious experience are of prime importance and pose significant challenges in troubled Iraq.

3.2. Data collection and Analysis

This study is located within the interpretive research paradigm. Social reality is understood as relative and shaped by human experiences and social contexts, and the subject should be studied within its socio-historic context via the subjective interpretations of the various participants of the study (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). An ethnographic approach to fieldwork, data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) was considered the most appropriate given the nature of this research. Ethnography has been discussed as a research methodology that involves collaborating with research informants to

co-construct an understanding of their culturally infused meanings (Schembri and Boyle, 2013). Ethnographic researchers emphasise interpretation of individual scenarios, settings and realities, permitting and encouraging research participants to depict their own rich and complex social and cultural environments (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Goulding, 2005).

Ethnographies can yield abundant insights into religious consumption practices (Goulding, 2006) and into pilgrimages and the experience of pilgrims (Badone and Roseman, 2004; Ebron, 1999; Frey, 1998). Full-time immersion in the natural setting provides the opportunity to experience reality in the same manner as the participants (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and thereby gain a deep understanding of consumer behaviour in context, including the tourism experience (for recent examples of ethnographies in tourism research see Prince and Ioannides, 2017; Komppula and Gartner, 2013; Tie et al., 2015; Scarles, 2010).

Data were collected by the principal researcher via participation in a 3-week pilgrimage to holy sites in Syria and Iraq in January 2012. The programme involved a 3-day march from Najaf to Karbala in Iraq (80 km), visitations to holy shrines in Syria and Iraq and participation in religious rituals and gatherings. Full immersion was necessary to build rapport and relationships as well as to ensure a sustained stream of observations and conversations with group participants. They were all made aware of the research project and consented to be part of it. The group consisted of 12 females, aged between 32 and 64 (see Table 1). All the group members were Belgian citizens of Moroccan (9) or Iraqi decent (3). The researcher shares many characteristics with the group participants (gender, ethnicity, religion), which enabled her to build trust and rapport with the participants and take on a participant-observer role. Her

fieldnotes have therefore been used as relevant data to complete, contextualise and problematize accounts and experiences as reported by the participants.

Information was gained by “soak[ing] up relevant data” (Mason, 2002, p. 90) in the mausoleums, shrines and religious sites and through observing the pilgrims (both within and outside the group). In addition to more informal conversations, in-depth interviews with the participants were conducted at different stages of the trip: at the start of the travel, during the march and during the *Arba'een* commemorations. This enabled entry into the pilgrims' religious experience, their reflexive journey and self-introspection. The questions tackled the pilgrims' life stories (including their conversion to Shi'a Islam) as well as their motivations and expectations in relation to the *ziyara*. They were asked to reflect on the pilgrimage experience (thoughts, feelings and affect were probed). This line of questioning was informed by Walls et al. (2011), who propose a framework for analysis of the consumer experience in a tourism context. It is comprised of two axis representing four components, including ordinary, extraordinary, cognitive and emotive. Several factors have an impact on consumer experiences, including perceived physical experience elements, perceived human interaction elements, individual characteristics and situational factors (Komppula and Gartner, 2013). For interpretivist researchers, it is important to understand motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences which are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000).

In total, the data set consists of the first author's field notes and her personal diary, interview transcripts and notes, leaflets, religious texts (prayers and supplications), magazines and maps collected on site. Data sources also include 298 photographs of the pilgrims performing religious rituals, shopping or posing next to historic-religious monuments. Interviews were

transcribed, and both authors were involved in the thematic analysis of data, looking for differences and similarities, recurrent themes and emerging patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis was a multi-stage “iterative process in which ideas were used to make sense of data, and data was used to change ideas” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p.158). The different religious and cultural backgrounds of researchers proved invaluable in critically questioning data and evaluating interpretations. A good balance between an insider’s point of view and emotional distance from the data was achieved through this collaborative analytical process. Analysis was driven primarily by the emic responses, that is, the situated knowledge of the participants (Reinecke et al. 2016). Prior conceptualisations of authenticity also informed an etic side to the analysis, which involved the coding of interview texts that was guided by a protocol based in part on the literature.

Photographs from the field and quotes from the respondents have been added to illustrate the key themes identified. In the following sections, these key emergent themes are presented and discussed.

Table 1- Respondents' profile

Aisha	64	Moroccan Belgian
Sanae	55	Iraqi Belgian
Hanae	52	Iraqi Belgian
Khadija	52	Moroccan Belgian
Fatima	50	Moroccan Belgian
Zayna	48	Moroccan Belgian
Rabab	43	Iraqi Belgian
Soumaya	44	Moroccan Belgian
Badia	42	Moroccan Belgian
Hayat	36	Moroccan Belgian
Naima	32	Moroccan Belgian
Latifa	32	Moroccan Belgian

4- Findings

Authenticity emerged as a core concept in this research on several levels. It emerged as a key dimension of pilgrims' overall experience of the ziyara in relation to 1) religious ideology and rituals, 2) space/sites visited and 3) material objects consumed on-site or purchased for post-pilgrimage consumption. In particular, processes of authentication (Cohen and Cohen, 2012) via various rituals and consumption practices have been identified. Those processes combined to produce a spiritual authentic self for pilgrims.

4.1- The journey to Shia Islam

The group members talked about their yearning for an authentic experience that would allow them to connect with what they called the ‘*real Islam*’. The research participants of Moroccan origin reverted to Shi’ism at some point during their teenage years or adult lives. They all recalled their initial dissatisfaction and questioning of Moroccan cultural practices passing as Islamic and their subsequent efforts to understand their religion better.

“Compared to Sunnism, it [Shiism] is richer, clearer than Sunnism. When you want to know something, when you have a question, you have a clear answer, it is direct, we get an answer, and it is logical... there is a lot of logic in it.” (Naima)

They all spoke about the personal spiritual and intellectual journey that led them to adopt Shi’ism as the ‘*real*’ and ‘*natural Islam*’.

“I attended lectures, I read books... I know what happened to Imam Hussein, I know why they killed him, why they massacred him, so I understand. You get closer to God [by undertaking the ziyara to pay your respects to Hussein].” (Soumaya)

Latifa (35) described her path to conversion in her early 20s, influenced by her husband, who encouraged her to research and compare different dogmas:

“My husband is Shi’a. He taught me about the different schools [of religious law and thought]. I have researched, I have read, I have tried to understand..., and I have joined this one. As a teenager, I was doing the basic stuff: prayer, [fasting during] Ramadan, ... but I wasn’t really following any particular school. Really basic stuff. I had no idea there were so many different schools of thought. I thought it was the same for everybody. I learnt later that even in Sunnism, there are so many Schools.” (Latifa)

Hayat discovered Shi’ism when she was 15 years old. Her brother-in-law introduced her to the basic tenets of Shi’ism. She subsequently attended lectures and read books in French about the

Shia dogma to deepen her understanding. She explained the motivation for her conversion as being her love for the Prophet Muhammad and his family [henceforth *Ahlul Bayt*] thus:

“I read the books about the Karbala tragedy, and it is all about the love for the Ahlul Bayt. ...My sister read the same books, and it never touched her. She was not interested. Each to their own...” (Hayat)

In addition to the ‘logic’ of the arguments, Hayat, Latifa and Naima also spoke of the impact of their studies on their hearts. Similarly, older pilgrims talked of a more organic and emotional connection with the faith.

“The first time friends took me to a Shi’a mosque to listen to a Seyyed Tabataba’i [a religious scholar], he was talking about the Prophet, about Fatima Zahra, about Ahlul Bayt. Then I felt that I had always been a Shi’a... I didn’t feel that I had to research further to be sure. It was direct. I felt I had always been following Ahlul Bayt, even without even knowing I was! [...] My husband and I, we were feeling it. We knew it was the truth. It was the truth; we felt it. It was the path of the Prophet.” (Zayna)

The quotations above can be related to Cohen and Cohen’s (2012) hot and cool authentication process on the path to the faith, with the participants’ references to religious and historical texts, books and lectures (cool authentication) as well as to the labelling of their tacit understanding of Islam (e.g. Zayna in the quote above), validated by their emotional responses (hot authentication). Such validation and authentication of their beliefs occurred by referring to the transformative dimension of their conversion into more spiritual and observant (i.e. better) Muslims.

“Sometimes I prayed, sometimes I didn’t ...Now no: I pray all the time. Since I started coming [to Karbala], I am strong. I am stronger than before.” (Soumaya)

“My family said that I have changed... compared to the way I used to behave. I am still not up to par, but I am learning from Ahlul Bayt. I try to learn their akhlaq [i.e. manners and ethics], and I try to teach my children the akhlaq of Ahlul Bayt... Following the

path of Ahlul Bayt, you know where it leads you, to the path of truth... so we do all we can do.” (Zayna)

“Imam Hussein is a character who fascinates me. He is a man who fought for his ‘deen’ [i.e. creed], who sacrificed himself and his family for our religion, for me, for my spirituality [...] My life has completely changed. Completely. I now have a guide: the Ahlul Bayt... They are my guide. Of course, the Prophet is my guide. Ahlul Bayt too.” (Fatima)

Learning about their religion and behaving according to a particular code of ethics inspired by the Prophet Muhammed and his progeny, the Ahlul Bayt, appeared to be important to the participants and key to the cultivation of their faith. The positive differences in their daily behaviour after their conversion comforted them and guided them along their new path, leading to the authentication of their new reformed faith, which is a more ‘accomplished’ form of their previous more passive or ‘cultural’ faith.

4.2. The journey to Karbala: The Karbala memorial gatherings and rituals

Every year, during the first 10 days of Muharram (the 1st month of the Islamic calendar) until Ashura (the 10th day of Muharram), Muslims all over the world commemorate the tragedy of Karbala and the events leading up to it. In mosques and private homes, mourning gatherings are organised. Commemorations involve attendance to highly ritualised *majalis* [i.e. mourning gatherings], which include accounts of the events before and after the death of Imam Hussein and his partisans and the ordeal of the survivors taken as prisoners to Yazid in Damascus, Syria. These accounts are interspersed with verbatim passages of the speeches delivered on the battleground by Imam Hussein, by his sister Lady Zayneb and by his sole surviving son and successor, Imam Zayn al-Abiddin. This is followed by a sermon by clerics or religious scholars.

A *majalis* then typically closes with a *latmiya*, a sung lamentation about Imam Hussein and the heroes of Karbala.

All the group members reported attending such events in their hometown. Most would even try to commit to hosting at least one *majalis* in their own home. They would dress in dark colours and behave as people in mourning, abstaining from purchasing non-essentials, engaging in frivolous activities, starting new business ventures or taking part in celebrations (e.g. weddings). While mourning commemorations can be performed at home by faithful partisans of Ahlul Bayt (see above), travelling to Karbala and ‘physically’ performing the *ziyara* is considered to be highly desirable: the *ziyara* to Imam Hussein’s shrine is considered to hold a high spiritual value.

“Of course I do as much as I can during Muharram: attend majalis, give [donations] to majalis, ... but it’s not the same as actually coming here, being here, coming here...even with the threats of terrorists ... I don’t care, it’s not the same...I cannot explain it with words.” (Khadija)

“One step done on this walk gives you so many ajar [i.e. rewards]. Angels accompany you and pray for you until the end of times.” (Latifa)

Karbala represents an important locale for pilgrims because of the historical density of the area; it is the site of the massacre of Imam Hussein and his small group of partisans. The pilgrims expressed a sense of attachment to the place. The narratives related in *majalis* transport pilgrims to the time of the events and allow them to emotionally connect with Islamic history, making it more vivid and ‘tangible’ for believers. The material environment (e.g. the desert, the shrines, the monuments and the local markets) also contributes to this connection and for a few pilgrims to a feeling of ‘temporal’ displacement. On the afternoon of the second day of the walk from

Najaf to Karbala, Latifa quipped: *“it is so weird...I feel like any instant, I will see a group of horsemen galloping in front of me”*, a statement that saw Naima and Hayat nodding in assent.

On the side of the road, a number of installations of mannequins (some of them animatronics) representing some of the most iconic events of the battle of Karbala were on display (see photographs 1 and 2). The death of Abdallah, the baby son of Imam Hussein, who was pierced by an enemy’s arrow, was one of those events. Crowds would gather around those bloody tableaux, taking pictures, some in tears, and offer supplications prayers for the departed.



Photograph 1- Staged scene with mannequins



Photograph 2- Representation of Imam Hussein's mutilated body

There were also a number of theatrical re-enactments; actors dressed in red played the role of the tormentors cracking their whips and others dressed in green represented the prisoners in chains in the forced march to Yazid's palace (see photographs 3 and 4). Those performances were successful in stirring up emotions, and many onlookers were weeping.



Photograph 3 Actor clad in red representing the man who decapitated Imam Hussein



Photograph 4- Actors dressed in green, representing the prisoners taken to Syria to be presented to Yazid

The visual iconography of the battle of Karbala and its main protagonists (represented in paintings, banners and flags), the narrations during mourning gatherings and the historical re-enactment performances all provided strong cues to the pilgrims, initiating intense experiences and reconnection with Muslim history.

“I am here for Imam Hussein. His contemporaries abandoned him after they promised him they’d support him to uproot their tyrannical ruler. A few centuries later, I am here. It does not matter. Time does not matter. I am here. I am responding to his call.”
(Khadija)

Such reconnection was also reinforced by the hardship of the pilgrimage, which involves a three day walk from Najaf to Karbala. By the end of the second day, the effects of the sustained march started to be felt acutely.

“I am walking, to try...and I can’t really, but to try to feel in my body what the Ahlul Bayt themselves went through... but I cannot really because I have all this comfort and everything...so they suffered. I want their suffering too. I am feeling good, and unhappy...because... it is like....Imam Hussein is a martyr and I am hurting. I am thinking about what they went through, what they suffered through... at the massacre... it makes me unhappy.... And happy because... it ...it... gives a lesson... it is a lesson ...I learn I am still learning...” (Fatima)

Feeling their bodies ache forced the pilgrims to retreat into reflection and then to experience a deeper connection to the historical characters and the ordeal they went through.

“Look at us, with our walking shoes from Decathlon! Can you imagine? We are taking breaks, we are eating well, we are wearing great footwear, we are sleeping in shelters. Can you imagine what Lady Zeynab and the children went through? Walking in chains, whipped, having witnessed their family members slaughtered and their bodies defiled... Oh Zeynab! Zeynab! Zeynab!” (Hayat)

“My legs and feet hurt, but it’s nothing compared to what the family of the Prophet endured. When we are hungry, there is food; we can stop and have water.... They were left days without water... I cannot even understand how they could have treated the

family of the Prophet like that, women and children! My heart aches... who cares that my feet hurt: I am with them..." (Latifa)

The embodiment of the experience was also felt through the public manifestation of their mourning. Pilgrims cried at the recollection of the massacre, both in the *majalis* and in close proximity to the tombs of the martyrs. They experienced genuine grief for their loss; regardless of the time passed, the sorrow was felt acutely.

*"The first time I went to Imam Hussein, when I saw the dareh [i.e. mosque], I started crying and calling [his name]. *she lets out a long sigh*... the emotion..." (Latifa)*

In addition to sadness, the pilgrims reported an intense emotional response on entering the different mausoleums, in particular the first time they laid eyes on the tombs of the Imams.

"[About her first ziyara to Imam Ali in Najaf] I have been really touched at Imam Ali. I pff...I felt... I ...I had a shock, it was strong... an emotional shock... very positive... so... I cannot find words. It was too beautiful. If I could go again, if I had the chance to return, I wouldn't hesitate. Frankly without any hesitation... I want to do it with my family...with the children, yes. The children, my husband. I want to feel these sensations with my family." (Naima)

Soumaya compared the visitation pilgrimage to the saints to visiting family thus:

"I have the feeling that they are calling me every year. I need to come every year. It's normal [i.e. has to be done]. It's like visiting family." (Soumaya)

Such intimate connection was also echoed by Naima, who spoke of love for the Prophet and his family as justification for undertaking the arduous trip:

"Because the Imam did it, because Zeynab did it, because those who love Ahlul Bayt do it, and we do it for him [Imam Hussein], to get closer to Allah [qorbatayn illa llah], May God accept our ziyara, incha allah, and may God allow us to come back again." (Naima)

This emotional response was an expression of their empathy, attachment and love for the family of the Prophet of Islam. The intense physical response (e.g. some were shaking, several were weeping) experienced on site, in particular at physical proximity to the Imams' tombs, also validated their faith as authentic. For pilgrims, the emotional and physical responses were evidence of their true spiritual connection to the Prophet and his family members and ultimately that they were on a righteous religious path.

4.3.The Authentic self: Consumption, material culture and identity

Shi'a beliefs are sometimes described as heretical by some orthodox Muslim scholars (Nasr, 2006), and many Belgian Shi'a Muslims keep a low profile regarding their beliefs. When the first author disclosed her researcher status and asked for the participants' permission to be observed, photographed and interviewed, they all agreed, with the most notable comment being made by Latifa:

“Yes, do write about us. At least you, you will tell the truth about us [Shi'a Muslim].”

(Latifa)

The pilgrimage experience allows pilgrims to openly express themselves through open rituals, speech and consumption practices. Zayna expressed the wonderment of being part of a very large crowd walking towards to the same destination (Karbala) and for the same purpose (meeting Imam Hussein):

“My first march, I spent it all crying. I felt such an emotion, I was feeling that the Ahlul bayt were walking with people. I kept wondering: why is everyone walking? Where are they going? How do they find the strength... the children, the elderly, the youth? Subhanallah [Praised be God]. On my left, they are going. I turn on my right, they are

*going, rushing...What is waiting for them? Why are they running? They are running to meet Imam Hussein. [*starts to cry*]” (Zayna)*

“[about her ziyara to Imam Ali in Najaf completed before the start of the march to Karbala] Everybody here feels the same, everybody here is for him, for Imam Ali. The atmosphere is particular.” (Naima)

The pursuit of common consumption interests fosters a sense of solidarity and collective identity, enabling consumers to differentiate themselves from others (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Interestingly, the concept of sameness was prevalent in the context of the *ziyara*; the pilgrims appeared to have left their otherness (e.g. as immigrant, as Shia Muslim) back at home in Brussels and were experiencing the elation of being part of a community of believers.

4.4. Material culture: ritual objects, gifts, and souvenirs

During the pilgrimage, the so-called ‘authentic self’ is realised via the symbolic consumption and display of identity markers. The ‘belonging’ to the Shi’a community was crystallised in a number of objects that were not only consumed on-site but also purchased for post-pilgrimage consumption back at home. These items, for example, ‘*aqiq* [i.e. chalcedony Quartz, a semi-precious stone] rings, which were particularly sought after by the group members, would symbolically and visually identify them as Shi’a Muslims. Several pilgrims were tasked by family members to bring them these rings back home.



Photograph 5: embroidered tapestries and wall drapes



Photograph 6: *torba* (mud) stones of various sizes



Photograph 7: small gift of rice and blessed fabric given in exchange of a charitable donation to the shrine of Imam Husseyn

Popular items that were brought home for personal consumption and for gift-giving were embroidered headscarves, rosaries, banners, tapestries (see photograph 5) and wall drapes embroidered with elegies about Imam Hussein, the names of Karbala heroes or verses of the Quran. Pilgrims also purchased various common souvenirs (mugs, wall clocks, keyrings, perfumes, posters) and liturgical and devotional objects, such as prayer beads, prayer mats, torba stones (see photograph 6) and prayer books at the mausoleum shops. The proceeds go to the maintenance of the holy sites and charitable endeavours, which makes pilgrims patronise the mausoleum shops instead of the bazaars for their purchase of ‘religious’ objects. In addition, when a pilgrim makes a donation to the mausoleum, she receives a receipt, a little rice and a piece of green fabric (see photograph 7). Those tokens are believed to be infused by *baraka* and considered to be a gift from the Imam himself. Baraka is an important dimension of the pilgrims’ beliefs. It is the beneficent force from God that flows through the physical and spiritual spheres as prosperity, protection and happiness. *Baraka* can be found within physical objects, places and people chosen by God (e.g. the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants, and their tombs by extension).

Sacred and blessed items were also sought after by the group members. While such items, such as copies of the Quran, are considered to be essentially sacred, others are sacralised via rituals. For example, pilgrims would be seen wiping the mesh of the holy saint with prayer beads (rosaries), scarves, water bottles and green pieces of fabric. These pieces of fabric and prayer beads would often be offered as gifts to friends and family members.

“I have bought the green fabric for the baraka... to rub on the shrine. I did not haggle for these. You don’t haggle for the Baraka.” (Hayat)

These items are sacralised through a ritual of sacred ‘contamination’ (Belk et al., 1989: 6), during which they are imbued with *baraka*. The water, for example, now blessed would be used to cure ailments and/or to bring blessings to the person drinking it. The spiritual power of the *baraka* is reified in the green cloth or infused into the water. Through ritual engagement, objects have the ability to render tangible what is immaterial and make visible what is normally invisible (Kedzior, 2012: 178). The transfer of such *baraka* to the believer also contributes to authenticate beliefs. It is the belief in the *baraka* that will activate its healing or spiritual power. Pilgrims shared stories of healing, problems averted, issues sorted and responses to their prayers following or during their *ziyara*.

The contentment and elation experienced by pilgrims due to achieving and expressing an ‘authentic Shia’ self in the open would linger well after the end of their *ziyara*. The pilgrims reported encouraging friends and family members to undertake the *ziyara* to experience such a raw and emotional connection with the Prophet and express their faith. Several were already planning their next *Ziyarat-Arba’een*. The open expression of their faith when back at home was also a by-product of the pilgrimage for the few pilgrims in the group who were previously discreet about their faith. They explained that they could no longer hide their true self, having undergone this transformative experience. They achieved an authentic self via the experience; they were not willing to go back ‘in the closet’ and were ready to face any potential negative consequences of such openness.

“I am at peace, so at peace...in my relationship with my husband [who disapproves of her Shia faith]. It got worse, but in my personal life I am feeling at ease. Al hamdulillah [i.e. praise to God], I have found my path”. (Soumaya)

5- Discussion

The *ziyara* must be understood in connection with the personal investment of pilgrims to the faith, to God and to significant others (including the saints and the other believers) via associated rituals and material consumption. First, the personal investment in the faith was found to lead to a transformed sense of self in connection with Shi'ism. Self-transformation is indeed found to be an important dimension of pilgrimage in other religious contexts (Higgins and Hamilton, 2016). Given the religious nature of this experience, it is not surprising that the pilgrims expressed a deep existential, spiritual to be exact, drive as their main motivation for participating in the *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*. Many reported their conversion to Shi'ism as a critical moment in relation to their personal transformation, having yearned for an 'authentic' Islamic faith. Their conversion, however, was not a simple matter of fact but required significant personal investment in terms of reading books and attending teachings. Importantly, this personal investment was not merely cognitive but involved an embodied connection to the teachings. As one participant remarked, she was 'touched' by the readings, but her sister was not, despite having read the same sources. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the pilgrims were able to transport themselves to the sacred site both in time, via rituals in their home countries, and in space, via travelling to Karbala to participate in *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*.

Second, being physically present at the place where the slaying of the martyrs took place and the location of their buried bodies enhanced the pilgrims' access and emotional connection to the events and the important persons involved. The sacred status of the place is inextricably linked to the events that led to the martyrdom of Hussein and his companion and is their resting place. This imbues Karbala with sacred meanings and intense emotions. Hence, the place inspires the pilgrims' ideologically and arouses them emotionally. Furthermore, the pilgrims'

physical presence at Karbala, especially in a time of political unrest and danger (terrorist attacks were all too common at the time), also serves as confirmation of their faith and embeds their own narrative within the narrative of resistance against evil (i.e. they would not have faltered in their response to Imam Hussein's call to rise against tyranny).

Third, the pilgrims underwent intense emotional and somatic experiences during the *ziyara*. These included deep sorrow for the slaying of the martyrs, shaking and even aching of the body (e.g. during the three days procession walk) as well as exhilaration. The intense psychosomatic experiences allowed these women to empathically relate to the martyrs and to experience an intimate connection to them. Most of them reported a connection akin to the one they have with close family. Here, the pilgrimage and its associated rituals allowed the pilgrims to experience heightened identification with significant others, including with their fellow pilgrims. For example, the attendance to majalis (mourning gatherings) and the participation to highly ritualised *latmiya* (lamentation songs) contributed to the sharing of the grief, and the subsequent 'emotional solidarity' between mourners. As such an authentic experience can be achieved as much via an engagement with communal rites, as via a deeply individual route as was shown here. Perhaps the friendships that blossomed between some of the group participants, beyond the pilgrimage itself, could be seen as evidence of the quality and depth of the communal dimension of this pilgrimage.

The final important process is the consumption of objects. Consumption activities have been shown to be meaningful to consumers as they allow people to experience shared emotions as well as to build and maintain shared identities (Holt, 1995). Consumption proved to be an important dimension of the pilgrimage as it enabled the materialisation of the experience and acted as a vector of various rituals. The objects and souvenirs consumed embody sacred

meanings through ‘contamination’ (i.e. the transference of sacred qualities from the holy sites and persons to the consumption object) and symbolism (i.e. objects representing the sacred sites and events). Furthermore, the objects consumed serve as identity markers. Conspicuous consumption of these items allowed these women to assert their identity as Shi’a Muslims publicly. These objects were therefore paramount in maintaining and communicating a sense of self in relation to the faith. Our findings echo Pinto’s (2007: 110) observations that “the experiential character of pilgrimage entices the demand for objects and images that can embody the memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to the pilgrimage, such as traveling, performing rituals and being in contact with sacred objects and beings”. Pilgrims were keen to bring objects back home as gifts to families and friends, hence sharing their experience (and identity) with and extending it to others and into their everyday lives. The pilgrimage is thus a significant and integral moment in the process of spiritual praxis.

The aim of the study was to understand how authenticity is evoked in the religious pilgrimage of *Ziyara-t-Arba’een*. This research shows that instead of being clearly delineated or mutually exclusive, different forms of authenticity - existential and objective (Wang, 1999) - can be identified in this pilgrimage experience. In addition, the ideological dimension of authenticity (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008) articulated by historical and religious narratives at the origin of *Ziyara-t-Arba’een* contributed to a meaningful and ‘religiously’ authentic experience for the pilgrims. As devout Muslims, they are all on a path to seek truth and ways to lead a meaningful life according to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The findings also reveal that for the pilgrims in the study authenticity is realised through *both* hot and cool authentication processes within their spiritual praxis. Spiritual praxis for these women involved personal investment on the journey of conversion to Shi'a Islam and engaging in a physically and emotionally taxing pilgrimage. Such authentication of their faith also took place when asserting and sharing their identity during the pilgrimage as well as sharing it at home. Pilgrims drew as much on religious drama and their (inter)personal experiences as on the sacred and the profane aspects of the experience, including ritualistic consumption practices (e.g. *baraka* blessing rituals).

With the *ziyara* engaging the pilgrims' mind, body and spirit, hot and cool authentication processes resulted in what we call *spiritual authenticity*, which is a hybrid form of existential, ideological and objective authenticity. This spiritual authenticity applies to the triumvirate of place, ideology and self, which are authenticated and bound together via religious practices and rituals. Of particular interest in this study is the spiritual authentic self, which is validated – and is validating – beliefs and practices performed at the *ziyara* and back at home. In other words, participating in the pilgrimage 'activated' an enduring transformation of the self into an authentic spiritual self. The pilgrims spoke about the conviction that they were on the right path, that they were better persons and that they were at peace with themselves knowing they were following Muhammed and Ahlul Bayt's teachings. The *ziyara* can of course be viewed as a liminal experience, allowing pilgrims to freely express and 'perform' a Shi'a identity. Importantly however, this identity is consistent with the one they have selected to work on at home. It is therefore more fruitful to conceptualise the pilgrimage as part of a 'work in progress' identity project rather than simply an 'in-the-moment' state of being. This identity project is given material to build on thanks to the 'stickiness' of the authentic self achieved during the pilgrimage, which lingers long after the experience.

Marketers and, more generally, holy site managers need to consider the interplay of the various dimensions of authenticity when seeking to facilitate a positive experience for pilgrims. Given the particular nature of an ‘authentic’ *ziyara* with its critical intangible spiritual dimension, marketers/managers need to facilitate access to an authentically spiritual experience. In the case of the *ziyara* to the shrine of Imam Hussein, the preservation of the authenticity of the site is paramount. Nevertheless, the modernisation and embellishment of the site are of no consequence to the authenticity of the site itself as long as the tomb of the Saint is untouched. Given pilgrims’ need to physically access the tomb itself (to touch it, to transfer *baraka* by contact), space and crowd management are of prime importance. In addition, pilgrims, as has been shown in this research, are avid consumers of souvenirs and devotional objects, in particular when these are perceived to be affiliated to the shrine (e.g. shrine shop, donation bureau). These shops should be well stocked and have extended opening hours. In addition, given the importance of the ideological dimension of an authentic *ziyara* experience, shrine managers should ensure the provision of lessons, courses and sermons related to the *ziyara* to pilgrims, in particular in languages other than Arabic to cater for the needs of the growing number of international visitors. Finally, pilgrims also demand provision of more secular products and services, including accommodation, leisure/recreation, shopping and food (Kim et al., 2016). These are peripheral to the authenticity of the pilgrimage but nevertheless contribute to an overall pleasant experience while on the pilgrimage. Moreover, the touristic aspects of the journey can play an integral role in the overall religious experience, linking the sacred and the profane in a dialectical way (Terzidou *et al.*, 2017).

6- Conclusion

This paper contributes to research on material culture and consumption rituals by focusing on the Islamic context. Muslim pilgrimages are notoriously closed to outsiders, and there has traditionally been little opportunity for research studies to gain access and insights. Authenticity proved to be essential for pilgrims. The exploration of *Ziyara-t-Arba'een* allows a situated appreciation of the complex authentication processes at play that bring together place, experience and objects through ideology, ritual and consumption. The outcome of these authentication processes is what we have called *spiritual authenticity*, which is a combination of various forms of authenticity studied in the literature. In spiritual authenticity, objects, ideology and experience are important. These elements are integrated through shared ideology (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008) shared religious narratives that link experience, objects and actors (Kelner, 2001).

While pilgrimages are highly context-bound and culturally specific phenomenon, we suspect our conceptualisation of spiritual authenticity as hybrid, and its realisation via ritualistic consumption could apply to other forms of religious pilgrimages. Future research should specifically study authenticity and authentication processes in different contexts (e.g. different times of the year) and religious pilgrimages, including in more secular realms. This particular research has focused on Belgian, female, devout, revert Shi'a Muslims, from a North African and Middle-Eastern origins. This theoretical framework should be extended by studying diverse types of pilgrims (including those of various religiosity and commitment to their faith). In the case of *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*, the particular code of ethics in which the pilgrims have invested is essential in experiencing spiritual authenticity associated with the actors, places and events the pilgrimage commemorates. Particular objects serve as manifestations of this spiritual authenticity. As such, the pilgrimage proved important in terms of affirming and reinforcing pilgrims' religious identity.

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