INTRODUCTION

Heritage Tourism and Neoliberal Pilgrimages

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Abstract

Sites of pilgrimage and heritage tourism are often sites of social inequality and volatility that are impaired by hostilities between historical, ethnic, and competing religious discourses of morality, personhood, and culture, as well as between imaginaries of nationalism and citizenship. Often these pilgrim sites are much older in national and global history than the actual sovereign nation-state in which they are located. Pertinent issues to do with finance—such as regimes of taxation, livelihoods, and the wealth of regional and national economies—underscore these sites of worship. The articles in this special issue engage with prolix travel arrangement, accommodation, and other aspects of heritage tourism in order to understand how intangible aspects of such tourism proceed. But they also relate back to when and how these modern infrastructures transformed the pilgrimage and explore what the emerging discourses and practices were that gave newer meanings to neoliberal pilgrimages. The different case studies presented in this issue analyze the impact of these journeys on the pilgrims' own subjectivities—especially with regard to the holy sites being situated in their imaginations of historical continuity and discontinuity and with regard to their transformative experiences of worship—using both modern and traditional infrastructures.

Keywords: commodification, dark tourism, infrastructures, intangible heritage, neoliberalism, pilgrimage, pilgrim economies, tangible heritage

This special issue of *Journeys* revolves around global heritage sites and focuses on the many paradoxes of global pilgrimage in the current neoliberal era. In the case studies presented herein, heritage sites are considered to be sites of social inequality and volatility that are impaired by competing

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historical, ethnic, and religious discourses of morality, personhood, and culture. They are seen as being older than the modern nation-state in national memories and popular imaginations of nationalism and citizenship. This issue features ethnographic investigations into modern pilgrimages in the context of widening and modernizing infrastructure—in terms of transportation and accommodation around ancient pilgrimage sites—and intensified entrepreneurial activity. Individual case studies highlight how associations of pilgrimages are transformed when the “holy grail” of sacredness meets the more controversial and contradictory dynamic of neoliberalism and ideology that values market exchange as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Treanor 2005). This issue uses the state-of-the-art approach to understanding neoliberalism, which associates it with “a mode of governance that embraces the idea of the self-regulating free market, with its associated values of competition and self-interest, as the model for effective and efficient government” (Ganti 2014: 91).

Indeed, as with one interpretation of Marcel Mauss’s classic 1925 work *The Gift*, perhaps the potency of the sacredness of holy sites is enhanced in this era of globalizing capital (Carrier 1991; MacCannell 1998). The common theme of all five ethnographies is their focus on modern management and change—the effects created thereby—viewing pilgrims as on a continuum between the visitor and tourist, while also trying to focus on perceptions and interpretations of the sites’ authenticity, sacredness, nationalistic value, and its continuity and adaptive nature with regard to heritage. An ethnographic analysis of such pilgrimages—both with regard to the site and the experience—elucidates how these changes enhance the pilgrim’s desire to experience a sense of authenticity and sacredness. All the case studies discuss how such tensions and contradictions are played out in pilgrimage sites that are subjected to the forces of global, national, and heritage management processes. Who or what are the drivers of such changes? To what end? And with what expectations and views with regard to the pilgrim? What is the impact of the commodification of religion in the form of infrastructure advancements in transportation and accommodation?

The selected pilgrimage sites in the case studies are highly significant in global pilgrimagescapes, as they are rapidly changing due to neoliberal effects on their governing and bureaucratic structures (see Appadurai 1990). Such pilgrimagescapes are at the conflux of ethnoscapes, mediascapes,

financescapes, ideoscapes, and technoscapes that Appadurai has classically identified.

Each contributor to this issue provides a different perspective on the neoliberal forces that are acting upon pilgrimage sites. The case study of the Hajj presented by Shadia Taha shows how the burial chamber of the Prophet Mohammed in Mecca has been removed in order to make way for more a commercial form of pilgrimage management that treats pilgrims more as tourists and consumers. Her article raises the need to interrogate the relationships between religion and the market and to widen the analytical frame to encompass issues of infrastructure and governance.

Similarly, Kate DeConinck offers a fascinating insight into the commodification of the New York City 9/11 Memorial. She focuses on the relationship between the site and the victims' families. These are people who see the memorial site as both providing a quasi-religious experience and as providing them with a site for mourning family members who had either died in the terrorist attacks or working at the site as first responders. Her article lays bare the contradictions inherent in commodifying burial sites and charging people to see a magnanimous memorial to the Twin Towers. Simultaneously, it raises important questions of the relations between the state, memorial-building projects, and tributes to people who died in terrorist attacks on state structures and monuments. The ethnography focuses on how deaths can lead to major sources of tourist income in the form of memorial sites. It demonstrates that although such memorials become sites for multiple and varied practices and meanings, they remain under the control of the state and are designed by the state. In short, experiences of death and tragedy challenge wider American discourses of nationalism and ethnic identity as much as they resist the marketization of memorial sites. This kind of tourism—the kind associated with remembrance and commemoration—is also referred to as “dark pilgrimage” (Collins-Kreiner 2015).

Ethnographies of pilgrimage journeys show how the latter can be appropriated and commoditized (Edensor 1998), raising concerns about trivializing the sacred and authentic meanings implicit in such journeys.

The movement of holy sites from places of worship and contemplation to places of leisure, commerce, and/or investigation shows the various ways in which they are interpreted in contemporary times. Tatsuma Padoan's contribution on contemporary Japan investigates the negotiation and reinvention of subjectivities and modes of economic consumption in the city of

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Tokyo through the practice of religious pilgrimage called *Shichifukujin no meguri* (“Pilgrimage of the Seven Gods of Fortune”). This pilgrimage, which is mainly performed during the New Year festivities, is organized by Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples connected through sacred circuits and located in different parts of the city. The article delves into various tensions that arise as the various ancient sites associated with the Seven Gods are rebranded and promoted in the context of neoliberal tourism and travel markets in Japan. They are specifically promoted under the rubric of the relatively recent “New Spirituality” culture. But, in this article, neoliberalism falls short when confronted with local communities who engage in care of sacred sites and forms of urban activism. These places are shown as being capable of working as alternative ontologies to the numerous commodified public spaces of Tokyo.

It needs to be recalled that not all pilgrim sites and journeys present conflicts of authenticity and sacredness. Some are also about local and regional (mis)interpretations of religious souvenirs and the economies of scale that regulate the flow of pilgrims and international trade arrangements. This is the scenario in Marc Loustau’s case study of the production of Virgin Mary souvenirs in Transylvania in the context of religious labor outside of the borders of the European Union (EU). It considers how local Romanians interpret and price the labor of making souvenirs of the Virgin Mary (which he terms “spiritual labor”) and explains that the views on this kind of labor—from the perspective of the people who buy it and from the perspective of the wider EU economy—are highly conflicted. The article questions whether spiritual and religious labor can be regulated and asks what kinds of challenges religious souvenirs pose along the intersections of commodification and pilgrimage for both local Romanian workers and visitors.

Gabriele Shenar’s ethnography of the tomb of Bar Yochai’s burial site on Mount Meron in Israel and other multi-sited pilgrimage tours, reveal how a neoliberal political economy encourages entrepreneurial competitiveness around re-creating a sense of the sacred. Such underpinnings enhance the experience of religious pilgrims and elevate visitors’ moral status while simultaneously translating the site into a profit center through the setting up of attendant infrastructures and various points of sale for scalar financial transactions. The article looks at what kinds of subjectivities get produced through affective interests in such social and economic assemblages at the

pilgrimage site, what she calls “sensescapes,” in terms of the multisensory and immersive experiences of the pilgrim’s sense of the sacred.

In fact, all the contributors to this special issue present original perspectives on such experiences and journeys. Further, through ethnographic investigations of the commodification of pilgrimages, the case studies raise further important questions to pursue in the neoliberal context of pilgrimage. They compel us think about whether modern pilgrimage studies can easily distinguish between tourism and anthropological studies of ritual and pilgrimage. The ethnographies discussed herein all point to the need for an anthropology of pilgrimage that examines pilgrimage as influenced and transformed by neoliberalism. The conjunction of religious and economic practices and contexts also raises questions as to the positionality of the anthropologist as participant-observer, especially when there are several intersecting layers of inquiry here—whether it be with respect to the pilgrims, the authorities, the traders, or the religious brokers. By considering each of the cases in detail, we can begin to shine some light on the very complex entanglements that pertain to each sacred site.

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