

Sacred Sites, Rituals, and Performances in the Ecosystem of Religious Tourism

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It is now widely accepted that religious tourism encapsulates the essence of contemporary patterns of travel to sacred and religious sites. On one hand, it remains firmly rooted in, and carries forward, tenets from pilgrimage traditions and religious practices. On the other, such visitations include recreational and leisure components that allow visitors (pilgrims, religious tourists, tourists, and the in betweens) to experience such sacred sites in multiple ways—a trend that has also been observed in many traditional pilgrimage travels. Much of the existing literature, seems to categorize visitors into (sometimes) exclusive and (other times) into overlapping categories based on their motivations. The focus of their journey and the destination is largely determined by the spiritual magnetism of the sacred place. However, what is it that they do in that sacred place that helps to sustain, reinforce, and reproduce its attraction? There should be something more than the place that anchors religious tourism. This is where one must explore the potential of rituals and performances in sacred sites in order to explain contemporary religious tourism.

To explain newer forms of religious tourism, this volume draws attention to different perspectives on place stories, rituals, and performances that are central to pilgrimage and sacred sites. The early literature on pilgrimage studies has been heavily influenced by [Turner and Turner's \(1978\)](#) classic work, where they argued that rituals in pilgrimage, created a rupture and sense of liminality for pilgrims from their everyday life. This essentialist approach, focused on the pilgrim (visitor) and became the bedrock for the debates around the differences between pilgrims and tourists—something that continues to occupy pilgrimage literature. Turnerian tradition seems to have fallen short of giving due credit, to other actors and institutions that assisted the pilgrims in the performance of rituals. Later scholarship strongly argued in favour of the agency held by religious actors, in reinventing rituals for producing and reconstructing the sacredness of a place. The associated consumption economy around rituals also emerged as part of scholarly discussions. Many of these studies were situated in the western context. In comparison, the centrality of both rituals and performances was recognised quite early on, in studies of pilgrimage places in the East and the Orient.

One of the significant conceptualizations to understand pilgrimage and pilgrimage places, based on rituals and tradition, was the Sacred Complex Model. In this model, comprehensively demonstrated by [Vidyarthi \(1961\)](#), a pilgrim-place was seen as developed around a robust ritual economy embedded in religious, as well as cultural, social relationships and networks. This approach puts rituals at its core and comprises three inter-related analytical categories: Sacred geography, sacred specialists, and sacred performances ([Vidyarthi 1961](#)). Sacred geography refers to the physical ensemble of landscape, elements attributed with sacred value, based on stories and legends of gods and deities, that are believed to inhabit that place. It is important that the sacredness of the place be known and made accessible to ordinary people. This is where sacred specialists play the most important role in mediating visitor experience. To partake on the sacredness of the place, visitors need to engage in a variety of rituals and practices, which are collectively known as sacred performances. Despite its criticism, the model has been fruitfully applied to unpack



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and explain the socio-spatial fabric of pilgrim towns, owing to rituals and performances as well as the patronage relationships that they generate.

The interdependencies between the geography of the place, its rituals, and specialists, is increasingly becoming an arena of scholarly study, in other places as well. Those institutions play a significant role in any setting, as it is forcefully argued by Eade (2020), through a comparative study involving the Catholic shrine of Lourdes, France, and the pre-Christian shrine of Avebury, England. Using the two different settings, Eade (2020) analyses the ways in which institutions gain power and agency in articulating rituals (including ceremonies) for pilgrims and seekers, and how those rituals mediate their interactions with the sacred landscape. Similar emphasis on performances and performers is seen in the influential work of Reader (2007) in the case of Japanese Shinto shrines. It was found that “many Buddhist priests and officials of Buddhist organizations . . . emphasized the importance of pilgrimage as a means of bringing people to temples and advocated the creation of new pilgrimage routes to facilitate the process” (Reader 2007, p. 219). In a recent study of pilgrimage in Iran, Moufahim and Lichrou (2019) have convincingly argued that material culture and ritual consumption plays a significant role in “achieving forms of authenticity” in pilgrimages (p. 322). Pilgrims consume the sacred space in many ways, but most importantly, the objects, materials and souvenirs used in such rituals assist to translate the abstract notions of the sacred into a tangible form of doing and experiencing (Higgins and Hamilton 2011). Nevertheless, rituals are dynamic, they can be preserved, adapted, appropriated and invented and re-invented (Laing and Frost 2014).

Do the abovementioned foundational concepts in pilgrimage, help in explaining contemporary religious tourism, which has become eclectic and evolved as a postmodern phenomenon? The answer is partly yes, but such concepts need to be revised and updated, because contemporary religious tourism is more than pilgrimage. Structurally, one can think of a pilgrimage place as a religious setting. According to Kerestetzi (2018), a religious setting is “a coherent space in which objects, bodies, actions, and ideas form a system—or even an ecosystem” (para 2). This also represents “areas of copresence between humans and deities, as well as points where real space and mythical and imagined places meet and intertwine” (Kerestetzi 2018, para 17). While Kerestetzi mentions the concept of ecosystem in fleeting manner, it provides a foundation for developing an approach for religious tourism that is conceptual and pragmatic. The idea of an ecosystem is promising, because it allows for a “systematic and procedural” examination of connections, amongst the constituting parts and their relationship to the whole and finally the whole as one.

The key ideas from the existing literature can be summarised into a conceptual approach of religious tourism, as an ecosystem in which, there is a sacred/divine (inherent by nature or constructed) resource that manifests itself through all material and non-material things, and its experience depends on several factors. These factors, on one side, include the religious framework that defines rituals and performances necessary for a religious and spiritual experience, whereas, on the other, they include the more contemporary touristic dimensions, seen in the consumption of the same setting, for an experience of heritage or the exotic other, while using a tourism infrastructure. In between, there could be multiple combinations possible, where visitors may choose to engage in certain rituals, in alignment with their motivations and the experience they seek. Framing religious tourism as an ecosystem of resources, producers, and consumers, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of religious tourism. There could be further sub-ecosystems depending on what resources are at play. This structural approach is graphically presented in Figure 1.

The articles in this volume explore many dimensions of the demand–supply relationships that are discernible in the proposed ecosystem approach. From the demand side, one can examine what kind of activities visitors engage in at a sacred site; how similar or different are these from their origins often found in traditional pilgrimages; what are their interactions with religious institutions that are often present in sacred sites to offer ritual services for visitors. From the supply side, it becomes crucial to ask questions about how traditional hegemonies of religious actors such as priests, temple-managers, clergymen,

and other social classes of performers are adapting to the changing nature of pilgrimage and religious tourism. What are the materials and objects used in rituals and performances and how do they generate different relationships between producers and consumers in experiencing the sacred? Many of these ideas are explored in the collection of essays in this volume as discussed below.

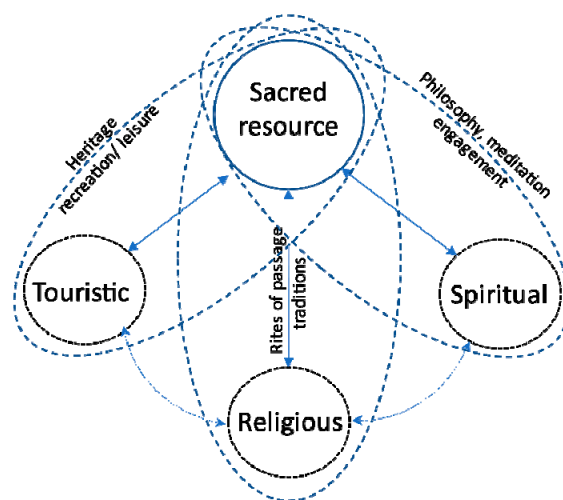


Figure 1. The ecosystem of religious tourism.

The centrality of a sacred resource and its appropriation through the material culture of rituals is ably discussed in two essays. Zang argues that consistent reworking and inventions of rituals at the temple of a popular goddess named Mazu at Meizhou island has increased its religious tourism appeal. Additionally, in a dialectic relation, the increasing religious tourism activities are reinforcing the imagination and presentation of the goddess Mazu as “symbol of common cultural identity in mainland China” for Mazu worshippers. Zang argues that by augmenting many traditional rituals such as “dividing incense”, the temple and its authorities have been able to recreate such a strong cultural identity. The transformations in rituals and performances have also influenced, as well as led to many architectural and liturgical reconfigurations that add to the multi-functionality of the temple, as both a sacred site and a tourist attraction. Many rituals have also been appropriated by local and central governments, as heritage products, for promoting tourism to the island and not surprisingly the Chinese diaspora is attracted to the site in huge numbers, further patronizing the new developments at the temple.

The development of a shrine as tourism attraction is ably demonstrated by Mia Tillonen in her study of Seimei Shrine in Japan. Although a humble local level shrine, the popularity of Seimei Shrine grew after it was presented as a setting for the legend of Abe no Seimei (921–1005) in a novel series and a movie. Capitalising on its increasing fame, the shrine began to install themed statues to realize the legend of no Seimei in material form and reinvented many rituals and performances in which visitors could have sensory experiences of touch and remembrances. The need for these experiences has also provided the basis for the consumptive practices of both religiously motivated pilgrims and those seeking touristic experience. Thus, reinvention of rituals allows the shrine to present itself for multifaceted tourism orientation.

Rituals and performances are the means with which worshippers connect with the sacred resource. This connection is fostered by specialists who are sanctioned to do so. Just how dynamic these connections are is explained by Michelangelo Paganopoulos using his ethnographic research at two monasteries in Mount Athos, Greece. Comparing two rival neighbouring monasteries, he shows how monks are reinventing and reappropriating the traditional values of hospitality in catering to the needs of visitors. Most importantly, through performance of traditional rituals, they emphasize authenticity and influence

visitors to take on roles as “pilgrims”. Thus, rituals provide agency to both hosts and guests as producers and consumers in claiming authentic experiences of pilgrimages.

Through their examination of Buddhist sacred sites, Geary and Shinde, bring the focus back on to religious rituals and traditions as central to pilgrimages. Exploring the emergence of rituals through textual references and drawing on ethnographic research, they talk about the ecology of ritual observances undertaken by most Buddhist pilgrims during their pilgrimage to sites related to Buddha. They argue that the pilgrims connect with the memory of Buddha through the material and corporeal aspects of these rituals. Pilgrims belonging to different paths of Buddhism come from many different countries and because of this they always travel with their own monks and guides from their respective countries, for facilitating their travel and assistance with devotional activities at the pilgrimage sites. Regardless of the diversity of rituals embedded in their own socio-cultural identities, there is a shared sense of place that is evoked because the resource is the same—Buddha.

Izabela Soljan and Justyna Liro discuss the ways in which a sacred resource is manifested in the physical environment and how it leads to different types of spatial processes in pilgrim-towns, based on a study of twenty-six popular Catholic sanctuaries in Europe. They identify a spatial hierarchy of contact zones where visitors, including pilgrims and tourists, interact in different ways with the sacred core of the town. It is well known that a sacred core develops around the main shrines and constitute the most intense zones for performance of pilgrimage-related rituals and activities. As the intensity of pilgrimage-related functions decreases over space, other configurations emerge. Pursuing this line of thinking, Soljan and Liro, conceptualize spatial configurations in pilgrim-towns as sanctuary service zone and based on pilgrim-space interactions further identify a hierarchy within such zones: compact zones (which may be linear or clustered as districts with dominating pilgrimage function), dispersed zones (integrated into the urban space, with their pilgrimage function coexisting with other urban functions), and initial (slightly developed) zones. Delineation of such zone depends on several factors including the history of the place, its hierarchical ranking for pilgrimage practice, and its location in relation to the centre of a town or a city.

The changing roles and imaginations of priests (as producers and consumers of sacred experiences) come across persuasively in Ruth Dowson’s paper. Using an ethnographic approach, Ruth Dowson has explored pilgrimages undertaken by priests on motorbikes in a new diocese in Yorkshire, UK. The motorbiking priests have formed a community as “Biker Revs” and through their travel they not only connect with local people but also find new meanings of their own roles as clergy as they navigate through different places. The interactions on motorbike journeys are almost like “religious retreats” that reinforce the connectedness of participants with sacred landscapes.

Religious festivals are more direct opportunities to explore the ecosystem linkages. While festivals derive from the sacred resources embedded in a place or a person or an event, their organization and management highly influence the experiences of that religious event for the participants. Religious rituals and performances and rituals are scaled up during religious festivals so that more and more people can participate in those celebrations. Joanna Bik and Andrzej Stasiak examine the initial stage of the celebration of the World Youth Day in 2016, which took place in the Archdiocese of Łódź in Poland. As a major event, the World Youth Day (WYD) takes place over a few weeks, but equally important are the preparatory days or the “Days in Dioceses” that set the tone of the mega-event. These preparatory events allow volunteers and participants to spend a good amount of time at different locations across different cities and parishes; their activities under the guidance of clergy reinforce religious values and traditions of the Church. While such events socially and liturgically bind together the young pilgrims from all over the world they are also integral to the “promotional and image-building part” of the place. Clearly, an event of faith is productively and effectively used by different tiers of government in association with the Church for marketing to Łódź to foreign tourists.

There are multiple layers of consumption in a festival. Kuo-Yan Wang, Azilah Kasim, and Jing Yu examine a religious festival in relation to consumer choices and market seg-

mentation. From their study of the festival of Mazu in Taiwan, they are able to identify and classify visitors in four major categories: Fun traveler, devout believer, cultural enthusiast, and religious pragmatist, each with different sets of motivations and behavioural patterns. With such a classification, the authors claim that festival organisers and managers can better promote festivals to potential visitors for specific experiences. However, what is more important to note is that festivals continue to epitomize the original doctrine of the religion and that comes through religious rituals which retain the essence and spirit of faith of believers. Thus, rituals and performances in religious festivals remain the centrepiece of religious tourism.

The collection of articles in this Special Issue point to new ways of thinking about religious tourism, but without losing the sight of the fact that such contemporary travel, is built on long histories of ritual practices that help to maintain its distinction from other forms of tourism.

Papers in this Special Issue:

Geary, David, and Kiran Shinde. 2021. Buddhist Pilgrimage and the Ritual Ecology of Sacred Sites in the Indo-Gangetic Region. *Religions* 12: 385.

Tillonen, Mia. 2021. Constructing and Contesting the Shrine: Tourist Performances at Seimei Shrine, Kyoto. *Religions* 12: 19.

Paganopoulos, Michelangelo. 2021. Contested Authenticity Anthropological Perspectives of Pilgrimage Tourism on Mount Athos. *Religions* 12: 229.

Soljan, Izabela, and Justyna Liro. 2021. Religious Tourism's Impact on City Space: Service Zones around Sanctuaries. *Religions* 12: 165.

Dowson, Ruth. 2021. 'Biker Revs' on Pilgrimage: Motorbiking Vicars Visiting Sacred Sites. *Religions* 12: 148.

Bik, Joanna, and Andrzej Stasiak. 2020. World Youth Day 2016 in the Archdiocese of Lodz: An Example of the Eventization of Faith. *Religions* 11: 503.

Wang, Kuo-Yan, Azilah Kasim, and Jing Yu. 2020. Religious Festival Marketing: Distinguishing between Devout Believers and Tourists. *Religions* 11: 413.

Zhang, Yanchao. 2021. Transnational Religious Tourism in Modern China and the Transformation of the Cult of Mazu. *Religions* 12: 221.

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