

The Role of Theatre, Rituals and Religious Ceremonies in Improving the Concept of Spiritual Tourism (Case Study: Iran)

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Abstract

Spiritual tourism and fulfilling its promotion and development is one of the challenges of this recently blooming industry during the last decade. Such matter must be reconsidered by the society inside the country on one hand, and promoting and organizing such approach internationally on the other. To improve and create variety in this industry and helping to introduce and develop the spiritual culture of this country therefore, finding innovative and interesting methods seem to be a major necessity. The religious-cultural potentials of the country and religious rituals and theatrical performance and national religious semi-theatres in particular are some of the most significant instances which could be under instruction and short and/or long-term planning of tourism industry managers. By investigating these arts and rituals, their features and the way they could be applied in this survey, in this article we would introduce and then explain each item and discuss their potentials afterwards. So what is emphasized in this article is that the Persian theatre, rituals and Persian Ta'zieh in particular are so potent and have their cultural and artistic functions which could be included in grand programs based on a precise, systematic plan and contribute to their rapid growth and becoming one of the major tourist spots and attractions. In this respect, we introduce and respect such rituals and their characteristics and features to our citizens and other nationalities to recognize spiritual tourism in particular. We aim to propose approaches and suggestions in order to recognize, record, organize and collect such rituals in both domestic and foreign tourism. This article has a descriptive-analysis approach based on library documented records.

Keywords: Culture, Rituals, Spiritual tourism, Theatrical performance arts

Introduction

In spiritual tourism, understanding, introducing and promoting the domestic and foreign outlook is one of the major concerns and a priority for directors and managers. Obtaining policies to achieve such goal and reaching to methods that lead to a more extensive perspective towards spiritual tourism is quite significant. In this regard, the authors of this article believe the new methods and introducing new tourist attractions would contribute to development and improvement of this industry. There have been some preparations during the last decades in the field of tourism such as religious tourism, health and nature tourism and etc., yet no specific plan and/or operation mainly included art, theatrical performances, semi-theatres, local, national, religious and traditional rituals. It is important therefore, to be able to introduce and respect the rich ancient Persian-Islamic culture regarding our unknown local, national and religious tourist attractions and at the same time, familiarizing other nationalities with our spiritual values such as faith, empathy, justice and other human morals and values. This fulfills the necessity of sharing such live museums of Persian arts and rituals in spiritual tourism so as to embrace and promote our Persian-Islamic virtues and send the same message for foreign tourists and eventually get close to developing Iran's spiritual tourism industry. Regarding the relevant potentials of theatres and performances, theatrical performances, traditional religious rituals in different regions of Iran, and their varieties, they could be recognized and organized in order to be added to the tourism programs and gain support of the relevant institutions according to an integrated plan.

So what is emphasized in this article is not only recognizing the tourist attractions, but also studying the functions of the possible utilities and principles of applying the necessary methods. As a result, it proposes questions on the essence and definitions of the religious and traditional rituals and their characteristics in the first place it then briefly discusses the subject and introduces applicable methods and approaches as an initiation for further studies in the near future.

2. Literature review

In the context of the subject matter of this article, the Persian language has not yet written a book or article that deals extensively and comprehensively with the subject matter in question.

In an article on the performing arts of Ta'ziyeh as the only Iranian dramatic attraction for tourism, a brief introduction to field research and application of the SWOT model, Hadiani and Sabzi (2013) presented the statistics and results that proved the popularity and popular support of this art. They emphasized the use of Ta'ziyeh as a potential attraction.

In another article, Meshkini and Dawiran (2013) presented a detailed description of the ceremony of the first 10 days of Muharram in Shahr-ye Zanzan, and introduced the ceremony as a tourist attraction of the city, although they didn't mention the mechanism or organization of the ceremony for visiting tourists.

In another article, Ghadiri, et al. (2009), described the mourning ceremonies of Muharram in several neighborhoods of Tehran and recommended the ceremony as a tourist attraction, with the views of the people and the location of the mourning places.

Rifai (2011) presented a broader and more comprehensive look at the topic at hand, which deals with diverse approaches to tourism in Asia and the Pacific, while addressing the issue of religious tourism in Asia and the Pacific.

Finally, Singh (2009) explained the spiritual tourism as an anthropological perspective.

By reviewing the brief history and literature, we find that each of them has somehow referred to the necessity of the subject, but none of them are enough comprehensive to cover all the related features and rituals.

3. The position of art in strengthening the spiritual perspective on tourism

Cultural organizers and organizations has always considered “Art” as the best and most profound instrument of broadcasting messages among different types of social media. Regarding art in different fields such as cinema, TV and their vast, universal functions in political, cultural, social and religious areas indicates the fact that each and every new move or act, necessarily needs the company and participation of art; we can observe the growing advertisements of tourism and tourism itself in different forms around the globe such as festivals, exhibitions, cinema forums, TV series, visual theatrical/performing festivals and etc. being hold in Europe, America and Asia aim at broadcasting universal peace and friendship and developing tourism. In fact, “tourism” is considered as the direct or indirect purpose of such cultural-artistic event. As for spiritual tourism, the same acquisitions and awareness is needed. Such category would remain silent and passive if it does not maintain the necessary collaboration from different fields of art. In order to expand spiritual tourism, we must resort to various forms of art and theaters as previously stated.

It is absolutely clear that if such matter is considered, supported and cooperated with, by the executive institutions and relevant officials so they begin producing and publishing relevant works, there will be a new realm in tourism in the society and in the country and the next thing we know, is the development and growth of such matter into the neighboring countries and consider it as a universal subject matter after all.

4. History of tourism and ritual arts attractions in Iran

Iran’s Islamic culture and its special features has been an attraction, a matter of scrutiny and a research subject for the Europeans and Americans during the past and recent centuries so they left many publications such as books, articles, travel literatures, photos and reports from holding ceremonies, rituals and religious performances and theatres and mourning ceremonies in Iran. Yet the oldest European journeys shows the depth of such relationship. Travel literatures and itineraries of Lavigo, *Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau*, Tavernier Brothers, Chardine, etc. are among some documents which indicate the

fact that many Islamic-Iranian rituals have been quite interesting for Orientalists and Iran experts in particular. The scientist French diplomat, *Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau* who was living in Iran for some years, states in his book *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*⁴ (first published in 1866) states that:

In the historical events of Karbala, even though the nation not only stares at one of the most sorrowful destinies, but also extend and developed it as if they have expressed themselves and included whatever was in their heart which they respect and cared for so lively and represent it at the scene; Imam Hossein is not only son of Ali, but the husband of a Persian princess. The princess and her father and all Imams are the resemblance of Persians and their land which is occupied by the strangers. They hurt people and stole their goods and deserted the land from human; the right which Imam Hossein was abandoned from, and so as that of the Persians would be both included and become one. (Gobineau, *Bitá*, 56)

It is of course important to mention the fact that during Muharram and Safar Ta'zieh and some of the rituals and (theatrical) performances are held in many Shia countries besides Iran. Yet the atmosphere of ceremonies in Iran and the identity and essence of holding such ceremony is different from other regions. As Peter J. Chlkowski states about one of the most significant and reliable sources of Ta'zieh, *Rawdat al-shuhada*, by [Mulla Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi](#) (d. 910/1504):

Rawdat al-shuhada is the outstanding version of Shia' literature which has preserved the tragedy of Karbala the same way Shia societies would compare themselves with principles and values of Imam Hossein. For Shia, *Rawdat al-shuhada* has provided a chance to fight against injustice, oppression and cruelty. (Chlkowski, 75, 1988)

The art of Ta'zieh therefore, has been recognized as an Islamic-Iranian culture and art, living in the souls of people that expresses the artistic sense of Iranians national and religious field of art, adored by the fans and relevant cultural experts. In that, we could use such

⁴ *Religion and Philosophy in the Central Asia*

context to create relationships and cultural-spiritual messages that has been extended in the Iranian literature and culture.

5. The relationship of International Tourism and Ritual Attractions in Iran

There are cities around the world that are into attracting millions of tourists through holding religious ceremonies and traditional rituals each year in Mashhad, Mecca, Bombay, Lourdes, Rome, holy places in Ki mountains in Japan. Such plans and programs not only contributes to economic growth in tourism industry, but also helps nourishing the relationships and reflecting the culture and concept of the hosting country. Such countries would fulfil their purpose of reflecting spiritual beliefs through tourism and plan to invite other countries and cultures to experience hearing messages of peace, equality and friendship by such programs. To meet such condition, they must apply talents and raise awareness.

Domestic and foreign tourism has developed during the recent years mostly because of attempts related to the Imam-zadeh (holy shrines) and pilgrimages. However, there were few attempts to plan, organize and make use of performances and rituals that are more than thousand years old. According to aesthetic approaches, rituals, religious ceremonies are various based on each region and they are insisted of different elements of visual arts such as color, form, music, poem, narration, solo vocal, chorus and theatrical performances. The mentioned features are the attractive symbolic concepts which create a humane atmosphere one might be looking for.

It is absolutely clear that emphasizing on Iran, is not based on Chauvinisme or prejudice of any kind; Iran is a multicultural country and as a result: a) the variety of cultures and ethnics would highly rank it regarding its pattern and food hierarchy, b) the music belong to different tribes has enriched the folklore in Iran c) the handicrafts have promoted the local finance d) the oral culture outstands Iran among important countries, e) the stories and narrations own a strong illustrative aspect. All we need to do is to focus on how Chinese, Brazilians and Indians recruit such power and the theatre in Iran would be capable of different types of tourism plans. (Karroubi, 2008: 322)

6. Ritual Theatres

Almost in all cultures, the rituals and traditional ceremonies are the reflection and representation of religious and/or traditional thoughts and beliefs. They create culture and they are cultures themselves based on the society's belief and its needs with a deep history, inherited in generations; they evolved during time and were adopted according to the needs of people in different times.

One of the fundamental factors of each religion, is the rituals and ceremonies the followers practice in order to reach their spiritual goals. The word *Manasek* (plural form of *Mansek*) an Arabic work for ritual, which refers to angel or solitary. In Sufism, the origination of the word is *Nasaka* and *Nasoka*, which refers to piety that roots in Mysticism. In a general concept, it means the collection of ritual practices relevant to religion. The rituals are considered as a holy text that helps the holy resemblance of the holy order, created through performing rituals. These rituals might consist of praying, reading the holy text, practices, specific voices or vocals, scattering specific scents, symbols and music and everything that involves in the holy emerging. *Manasek* (ritual in English), is possibly the most common origination of a religious experiment for most people. (Shahmohammadi, 2005: 18)

The rituals and religious ceremonies held in places such as mosques, holy shrines, *Hussaynieh*, *Tekyeh* and regions during Muharram and Safar months are different. Some are forgotten today and they are only documented in books and other sources. The significance of such rituals today is organizing a cultural system and including it into tourism industry. While many countries planned for their tourist attraction through their rituals and religious theatres and performances, our country could not provide a chance to earn a tourism-related program which could work on its economic growth at the same time. In the meantime, we could absolutely practice to plane and create programs for absorbing tourists to such rituals and theatres and work on the economy of tourism along with developing and improving the spiritual outlook towards tourism in both domestic and foreign contexts.

There are many theatres and ritual performances in Iran some of which are explained here as potential means of spiritual tourism: Mourning ceremonies of Muharram, *Nakhl Gardani* in Tabas, Yazd and the vicinity, *Karab Zani* (sticking small pieces of woods together as a sign of mourning) in Lahijan, *Tasht Gozari* (pouring water in several chamber pots as a sign of respect for Imam Hussein) in Ardabil, flower-coating in Tasu'a and Ashura in Lorestan, carpet washing in Mashhad and Kashan and, etc.

The carpet washing in Mashhad, also known as *Jom-e Ghal*, and other names which imply expressions such as washing carpet day, washing carpet week, carpet washing and etc. The ceremony is hold in Mashhad Ardehal, 40 kilometers to Kashan in an Imam-zadeh, Sultan Ali grandson of Imam Bagher, the fifth Shia Imam. The ceremony is hold each autumn on the second Friday.

In this day people of Fin and Kashan would gather together in Mashhad Ardehal, wearing black and holding sticks in their hands, chest beating and singing and listening to *Noha*. Then someone stands on Minbar and deliver sermons and describes the events of martyrdom of Imam-zadeh Sultan Ali and start cursing the enemy. He then goes to the courtyard of the shrine and picks up a carpet and move to the water stream close to the shrine, and pour water on the carpet with their wooden sticks. The inherited right of the Finnies must be preserved in this ceremony. They pick up the carpet and return to the shrine among the audience who have come to visit the ritual from different places. After *tawaf* around the Imam they would put the carpet back on and start mourning again. (Bolook-bashi, 2011: 53-58)

Muharram and *Safar* and *Tasu'a* and *Ashura* in particular along with *Shabih khani*, (a kind of *Ta'zieh* in which a person is selected as a similar character of the ones in the real event and acts), that runs in mosques and *Tekyeh* during these days are among the rituals and ceremonies that are rooted in Persian culture and kind of live anthropology and Persian culture museums and each year many foreign tourists would come to visit such ceremonies.

Another ceremony is *Nakhl Gardani* as previously mentioned in which a large wooden room is decorated with colorful fabrics, mirrors, colorful glasses, swords, daggers and etc. at the beginning of Ashura. In

the mourning ceremony of the third Shia Imam, Hussein Ibn Ali, *Nakhl* is carried on the shoulders and mourn by chest beatings and singing and listening to *Noha*. It is very heavy and made of walnut wood. Tens of men must pick it up from the ground and carry it on their shoulders. In *Dehkhoda Dictionary* Nakhl is defined as a large coffin with expensive fabrics, mirrors, colorful glasses, swords, daggers which would be Imam Hussein's coffin and it is called Nakhl (palm) because it resembles a date tree.

According to the old ceremonies, part of an audience presence is necessary which could be part of the ceremony itself. They have forms to accompany the ceremony; wearing special clothes and interacting during singing in different episodes and ways of drinking and eating in the carnival are some of the practices they are involved with. As a way of influential communication, interaction seems to be one of the major features of modern and post-modern theatres and arts in particular, but here such interaction was practiced for a long time.

Tourism has obtained an approach which emphasizes on the excitement and company of the audience to be recognized and used as a means of spiritual journey and familiarizing them with spiritual aspects of such rituals and ceremonies to get them reach a better understanding towards Persian culture.

7. Ritual Theatres in Iran

Theatre as its general meaning has always been going on in every cultures in the form of ceremonies and social behaviors. In other words, theatre is present in all ceremonies and rituals which carry a group and social messaging such as marriages. Funerals, sports, religious and/or politic rituals such as protests and rallies, gatherings, games and etc. although the participants are not necessarily aware of the fact that technically they are in a theatre, they are all theatre and the participants are the performers and/or the actors according to the theatre; a concept which is quite common in every culture. Theatre, is originated from ceremonies, rituals and traditional practices and has maintained a form of theatre in ancient Greece during centuries. It then reached to Asia, Europe and other regions such as Iran. The history and background of theatre in Iran therefore, is almost 150 years. The forms of local,

religious and national theatres dates back to centuries ago according to some evidences and comments. Nonetheless, these signs were not unified due to lack of general researches and reliable documents and the relativity of such signs could not be found and so we were left with some possible guesses about the background of forming Persian theatre. There were comments about Ta'zieh which is specific to Iran and the history of theatre and its form before Islam and the ceremonies and rituals after Islam in different sources.

Theatre include tragedy, comedy, Ta'zieh, imitation, puppetry, burlesque, grotesque, pantomime and all other theatres such as ballet, opera and even cinema (as far as the theatrical aspects are considered), and so on so forth. Theatre in general, has been existed in all civilizations, and "playing" has been a part of ritual. The aim of these games were admiring life, helping to extend the life of the society, rising the kindness of gods or respecting the dead. The alteration of rituals as a tool for entertainment or expression, education and illustrating the reality are among outstanding changes. (Shahryari, 1976: 291)

Forms of rituals which are theatres themselves has been performed during centuries in Iran till today; Ta'zieh, *Naqali* (*Shahnameh* storytelling), Attack-based storytelling (Hamleh Khani), Screen-based storytelling (Pardeh Khani), ritual shows, mourning and memorial ceremony of Muharram, group mourning, symbols, tools, carnivals, *Nakhl Gardani* (the act of carrying the Nakhl form point to another, resembling Imam's funeral), Mashhad carpet washing ceremony and etc. Ta'zieh or Persian Opera is of great importance and by itself, is capable enough to become a tourist attraction and to be performed not only during Muharram but as a routine, organized program which could be studied and at the same time observed by domestic and foreign tourists and local and/or national students and other class of people. It has a variety of musical instruments and also it is very much enchanting and engaging regarding the stage, clothing, scenery and accessories and the variety in dialects and songs they sing. Providing its décor and stage tools and instruments does not cost a lot and it could be hold and performed readily.

Ta'zieh is a symbol of love and respect towards Imam Hussein and an indication of art being at the service of religion which was merged as the first theatre in Shia Iran which was established based on principles of religion, featuring its essence in accordance with spiritual and divine ideals and therefore, it leaves a strong, unique influence in different aspects. (Omrani, 2011; Shariati, et al. 2012: 8)

Furthermore, Ta'zieh is performed in different places all over the country since its origination very long ago; the Tekyeh are in the middle of a round short platform which is specified for holding Ta'zieh during Muharram and Safar months. Persian Ta'zieh has undergone alterations during its 500 history to what we see as of today.

Tekyeh is among the oldest amphitheaters in Iran which has been considered as a holy place and after they were built turned into public properties so the founder(s) did not own the right to destroy or change its application. It was dedicated to holding Ta'zieh and other rituals, the establishers were only in charge of running it only. They gained their own architecture; separate platforms for men and women, performing platform, a space around the platform for running and riding in particular, an entrance and an exit for animals so the horses, camels and in some cases elephants could easily enter and exit through these gates and etc. (Gharibpour, 2005: 40-41)

Naghali (also *Naqali* or *Shahnameh Khani*) is also another type of theatre which has a national aspect and is well known and considered quite interesting for many Iranians. The history reaches back to the time before Islam narrating heroic stories. The narrator tells stories of *Shahnameh* through a kind of solo theatrical performance, adopting each character's different dialects, moves and mimics for each hero accompanied by Heroic Sport (*Pahlevāni* and *Zoorkhāneh*) special music. The special Zoorkhaneh percussion is the music he uses for his narration of *Shahnameh* along with the poems which creates senses of war and peace, friendship, faith, patriotism and empathy. It is quite unfortunate to know the very professional and traditional masters are not alive today. However, many male and female performers continue this profession as participate in relevant festivals of ritual theatres for girls and women for instance which is adored and loved by the

audience. Screen-based storytelling therefore is also almost fading away. The narrator (*Naghal*) stands before a large screen full of different figures and characters and sings and narrates the story, using a different tone for each person and re-form the events of Karbala for instance. Nowadays, the old screens are kept in the museums and presented as visual art objects. Such performances are being forgotten in Ira while in countries such as China and India and some countries in Europe and Asia, children are taught in order to preserve national and traditional arts and include them as tourism attractions related to rituals and national traditional arts.

8. Conclusion

As we discussed previously, one of the methods to increase and strengthen the spiritual outlook in economy of tourism of Iran, is to look for relative fruitful, effective methods and approaches, applying talents and opportunities in our country which has been living in our culture along with all sorts of arts such as theatrical, musical, ritual and national, having the potential of influencing the audience in a strong way. We could add such plans to the tourism protocols and apply the experiences of the countries with same tourism plans. Such approach would fulfil by emphasizing on the art context of Iran and organizing such programs through the relevant organizations and researches and in accordance with capabilities of such organizations to present programs for domestic and foreign tourists. In this respect, the following steps needs to be considered:

- Establishing a research center for ritual and religious ceremonies aiming at present the practical and executive results to add to the tourism programs
- Producing movies with the tourism approaches
- Participating in making documented TV series regarding spiritual tourism
- Holding theatre festivals regarding spiritual tourism
- Holding painting, photography, graphic design and illustration exhibition
- Holding international visual biennales regarding spiritual tourism
- Holding carnivals of theatrical ritual

These are some suggestions that could be considered to be practiced by being in the agenda of observation of officials, masters and professionals in each major regarding short term and long term economic programs.

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