



A phenomenological study of Arbaeen foot pilgrimage in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims in their journey to Karbala(Iraq) during the¹Arbaeen pilgrimage. The study deploys an interpretivist paradigm consisting of a phenomenological approach and incorporates the Shia Islamic worldview to synthesize the findings. Findings reveal that Arbaeen foot-pilgrim's motives are driven by perpetual rituals practiced by the Shia community, and concern for society (umma). The 'umma' element recurred as a key motive for those who repeated the Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage. The experiential component emerging of the results indicate: religious; bodily; and hospitality/humanitarian aspects to be the significant elements of experiences. Managerial implications including future planning and policy are deliberated.

1. Introduction

Foot-pilgrimage¹ is increasingly becoming a subject of academic inquiry (Kim, Kim, & King, 2016; Hayes & MacLeod, 2008; González & Medina, 2003; Santos, 2002; Reader, 2007; Murray & Graham, 1997; Blacker, 1984). In the ever-growing literature, bulk of the focus is on the Santiago de Camino and/or walking trails associated to religious values other than the Islamic foot-pilgrimage sites. Continually tourism and pilgrimage scholars seem to reflect on pilgrimage studies set in the western foot-pilgrimage settings, ostensibly neglecting non-western foot-pilgrimages. The lack of scholarly erudition on 'other' foot-pilgrimages reflects on a shortcoming from the discipline's perspective, probably indicating the inability to emancipate its scope. The absence of studies from 'other' foot-pilgrimage sites expose the danger of resultant generalizations that could well underline pilgrimage as an institution with universal or homogeneous phenomenon, Eade and Sallnow (1991, p. 3) assert the contrary to be true. The subterranean level of the subject is more worrisome. The overcrowding of non-western foot-pilgrimage studies would have portentous analytical implications. More and more studies investigating foot-pilgrims would eventually make use of existing work, fulfilling the requirement of standing on the shoulders of the giants and inevitably utilize generic and universal exposition that would be disconnected from the underlying theological foundation of one school of thought, and drawing parallels from the same for other doctrines and denominations.

Current literature on foot-pilgrimage explores variety of themes; repercussions of the economic commodification of long-distance cultural itineraries in Europe (Lourens, 2007; Murray & Graham, 1997),

local government cultural policy for the planning and development of heritage trails (Hayes & MacLeod, 2008), the values exhibited by travelers along the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain (Kim et al., 2016). Those drawing on the consumption lens have examined the motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims (Morishita, 2001; Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). Worth noticing that the aforementioned studies in tourism and other cognate disciplines have largely focused on the Santiago de Camino and/or walking trails associated to other religious values. Any Islamic foot pilgrimage site remains utterly absent from the scholarly research.

This study shall investigate foot-pilgrims on the Arbaeen pilgrimage that attracts 20 million people annually, making it the world's largest annual gathering in one place (Moufahim, 2013; Piggot, 2014). At present, the pilgrim erudition literature embeds the religiosity aspect in a shallow fashion (Ambrosio, 2007; Digance, 2003; Fleischer, 2000; Turner & Turner, 1978). In an attempt to enhance the religiosity aspect and respond to Eade and Sallnow's (1991, p. 3) call to deconstruct pilgrimage into historically and culturally specific instances, this study shall incorporate the Shia Islamic worldview to analyze the motivations and experiences of Arbaeen foot-pilgrims in their journey to Karbala. The purpose is to interrogate foot pilgrims' motivations and experiences as they take on the walking journey to the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala. This investigation would assist in exploring the largest, yet neglected foot-pilgrimage market. The bonus magnetism is that the gathered foot pilgrims are on a non-western foot-pilgrimage geographical site; in Iraq, that has survived in the face of political instability and atrocities and remains a totally understudied pilgrimage site. Given that Iraq houses significant sacred shrines (Ebadi, 2015;

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¹ On the plains of Karbala in 680 CE, Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammed was slayed by the armies of Yazid. The day is commemorated every year on the 10th of the first lunar month 'Muharram' as 'Ashura', 40 days from then on, the 20th of the second lunar month 'Safar', Arbaeen(literal meaning 'forty') is observed.

Shannahan, 2015) and attracts millions every year, the study as a first has the potential to contribute novel insights to tourism scholarship.

The text begins with a literature review outlining foot-pilgrimages and various themes studied under it and the need of worldviews in foot-pilgrimage studies. This is followed by the study's background explaining historical overview of Karbala and Arbaeen. Study methods, findings and a separate section on discussion end with managerial implications and conclusions make the paper a worthwhile read and a journey in its own.

2. Literature review

2.1. Pilgrimages and foot-pilgrimage

In contemporary literature, religious pilgrimage is treated as a subcategory of modern pilgrimage (Jackowski & Smith, 1992, p. 93), that encompasses a religiously motivated travel to a sacred place that could consist of: a) elements of the natural environment such as mountains, rivers, caves, groves or even animals; b) religious sites such as churches, temples, or shrines; c) venue for religious activities, rituals, or festivals (Cohen, 2000, p. 439, Shackley, 2006). Pilgrimage structure entails how a pilgrimage is performed. Walking to the sacred place that is performing the pilgrimage on foot, falls in the premise of a pilgrimage's structure, as it indicates how the pilgrimage is performed (Bremborg, 2013). In order to realize foot pilgrimages, specific routes are developed for pilgrims to embark on the physical journey.

Some religious pilgrimage routes base their claim to authenticity on foot trails only, such as Santiago de Compostella in Spain, Shingon Buddhism on Shikouko in Japan (one to two months needed to complete route in its entirety), and the one-day barefoot August pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick in Northern Ireland. Even today, pilgrims could expect to encounter some form of hardship on their journey, but compared with medieval times, such travails are usually minor and considered to be a quintessential part of the pilgrimage experience.

In addition to the pilgrimage routes, 'pilgrim status' is a key theme explored under western foot-pilgrimage studies. Blackwell (2007) affirms 'pilgrim status' to be a certification for those whose pilgrimage experience involves hardship and suffering. Sherrard's (1977, p.102) work disqualifies the visitors to Mount Athos from the status of pilgrimage, if they hadn't walked the long, steep, often relentless paths. Similar considerations are reestablished in studies of pilgrimage to Santiago (Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). Furthermore, foot-pilgrim's walk pattern is yet another subject within foot-pilgrimage studies. In Japanese pilgrimage sites patterns of pilgrimage are divided into a) 100% walking pilgrimage; b) a pilgrimage where you are invited by someone and go together or c) a pilgrimage done through a combination of walking using the bus/or train (Eiki, 2007 p. 63–64).

2.2. Motivation and experiences

Morinis (1992, 9–21) elucidates that what matters on a pilgrimage is the experience itself. The foot pilgrim being the central character of the pilgrimage story, has certain motivations when undertaking pilgrimage. It is the foot pilgrim's contemplations, motivations and experience that precisely outline the significance of the journey. Researchers drawing on the consumption lens have examined the motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims. For instance, spiritual experiences are emphasized in Slavin's (2003) study on pilgrim's experiences in Spain to the tomb of St James in Santiago de Compostela. Along the same lines, spiritual motivations of foot-pilgrims have been identified in studies that underline quest for self-esteem, and means to obtain self-power through walking as a spiritual practice to Shikoku and Jiba in Japan (Morishita, 2001; Reader, 2007).

Findings have also pinpointed mix of spiritual and other motivations, such as; some sort of nostalgic stimuli a 'search for old values and simple life and partially seeking for Christian symbols (Brämer, 2012 p.

57). Then, there are studies such as the ethnographic research of Frey, to the Camino de Santiago, that notes foot-pilgrim's experiences as a vacation, an escape from the drudgery of the everyday a social reunion, or a personal testing ground (Frey, 1998). And Worobec's (2013) study, that pinpoints no motivation, rather, sincerity being the sentiment for the faithful to undertake pilgrimages on foot, and study that notes traveler on foot have no religious purposes at all, and/or no other reason at all (Schnell & Pali, 2013). Although, none of the researchers have reached a typology specifying the continuum, nonetheless it is apparent that earlier work is focused on juxtapositions between spiritual and other motivations and experiences. This style of research is conspicuously distinctive of pilgrimage related studies that are engaged in binary classifications of pilgrimage as either religious or secular that corresponds to spiritual or sacred tourism and the pilgrim and tourist divide (Fleischer, 2000; Lois González, 2013; Stoddard, 1997).

2.3. Motivations for repeat or revisit behavior

Repetition as a concept is studied by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard who has questioned whether it was possible to repeat an experience. With reference to pilgrimage Kierkegaard argues, Repetition fails, when it is tried as some kind of experiment rather than a commitment (Kierkegaard, 1983). Fernandes, Pimenta, Gonçalves, and Rachão (2012) respondents on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela were positive about repeating the pilgrimage. Lois-González and Santos (2015) thinly mention figures of approximately 25% of repeat pilgrims as noted by the Camino de Santiago's Observatory, however there is no further discussion on why pilgrims repeat the walk. Frey (2010, p. 101–102), has studied the intentions of repeat pilgrims and these are noted as 'renew their feelings', 'to meet friends once again', 'to continue the path of self-discovery', 'to revise how the first pilgrimage was made', as well as to avoid the present of their quotidian lives. "Serial pilgrims," as Frey likes to call them are generally retired men.

2.4. Need of worldview in foot-pilgrimage studies

Foot-pilgrimage studies seem to be analogous to pilgrimage literature. In the way that pilgrimage studies embed the religiosity aspect; in a shallow fashion and analyze rudimentary premise of pilgrims with details of 'who they are' Fleischer (2000) or what do they seek (Ambrosio, 2007; Digance, 2003; Turner & Turner, 1978). Exactly similarly foot-pilgrimage studies so far present findings without engaging in the specific religious worldviews that are reflected in the way pilgrims conceive their pilgrimage. The inability to grasp pilgrim's worldview has been cited as a main difficulty in researching pilgrims (Fedele, 2012), implying that an annexation of worldview has the potential to offer subterranean analysis to the pilgrim's motivations and experiences. Researchers have publicized their dissatisfaction with universalist, structural models of human beliefs and practices (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Eade & Sallnow, 2000, p. ix) and emphasized the importance to investigate how specific groups of people utilize pilgrimage journeys (Warfield, Baker, & Foxx, 2014). Oviedo, de Courcier, and Farias's (2014) observes that many traditional pilgrimages to religious shrines tend to confirm and re-enact forms of conventional religiosity. Hence, inability to incorporate specific religious worldviews can lead to a virtual standstill in pilgrim studies and the need to analyze precise pilgrim's motivations, activities and experiences in light of their religious worldviews seems to be 'just the right thing to do'. This aligns well since people's religion has been characterized as a key factor that influences individuals' behaviors as travelers, and is reflected in their "visitation patterns" (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003, p. 238). There have been limited studies which have but attempted to thinly bring in worldview as a factor, for instance Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000) have analyzed the behavioral characteristics of Christian pilgrims to holy sites. This study shall incorporate the Shia Islamic worldview to study

foot-pilgrims on the Karbala route.

3. Study background

3.1. Shia belief, Karbala and pilgrimage

Islam, like most other religions, has always been characterized by a number of internal divisions. The major division in Islam is between the Sunni and the Shia. All sects in Islam believe in Oneness of Allah and the Holy book and hence the umbrella commonality persists. Shias are the second largest sect in Islam with the belief that after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, there was a chain of twelve pious descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, known as Imams, who were meant to succeed him, beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661 CE) (Aghaie, 2005). The Shia consider these Imams to be infallible religious guides for humanity, although not Prophets, and also believe that devotion to the imams brings them closer to God. Thus, their struggles and tragic lives are of huge importance to Shi'ites (followers of Shia Islam) (Musa, 2013). The Shias believe in the distinct sacredness of the imams has generated the practices of visiting and venerating the places where the imams are buried, resulting in the emphasis on shrine pilgrimage (termed as 'ziyara') more than the Sunnis Muslims (Nasr, 2007 p. 255). The² major ziyara destinations for Shi'ites being Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Medina), Iran (Mashad) and Iraq (Najaf, Karbala, Kadhmain and Samarra) are the cities that house the shrines of the Shi'ites Imams.

Visiting the shrine of Imam Hussain (the 3rd Imam with direct lineage to the Prophet) in Karbala, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad carries exceptional virtues. It is narrated from Imam Sadiq (the 6th Imam), "Allah will erase the sins of those who perform the Ziyara of Hussain (asws) with the intention of gaining the pleasure of Allah. They will be sinless like a newborn baby. Angels will accompany them on their way to Ziyara. The angels will spread their wings over them until they return to their families." (Bin Quluya Al Qummi, Chapter 5, Hadith 5). The unique status of Imam Hussain is concomitant to his sacrifices in the battle of Karbala (680 CE), which is one of the most significant and symbolic events in the Islamic history. On the plains of Karbala in 680 CE, the Imam and 72 of his companions were slain by the armies of Yazid, after denying them food and water for three days. On the 10th day of the first lunar month (Muharram), Imam Hussain's male supporters were killed one by one in combat, with Imam Hussain being the last to be martyred. (Nakash, 1993). The day is commemorated every year on the 10th of the first lunar month 'Muharram' as 'Ashura', 40 days from then on, the 20th Safar (the second lunar month), Arbaeen (literal meaning 'forty') is observed. After the Imam's martyrdom in 680 CE, his son, and his sister, Lady Zainab (SA), along with the noble ladies and children of the Prophet's Household, were taken as captives to Damascus. Upon their release, before returning to Medina (the home town of Prophet Mohamed- located in Saudi Arabia), they arrived in Karbala on the 20th of Safar (the anniversary of Arbaeen). Pilgrims visit Karbala year round, however, the special lunar calendar dates that correspond to the most important time to visit Karbala remain Ashura and Arbaeen (Davidson & Gitlitz, 2002). Visitations during these specific dates are termed 'Ziyara Al Makhsoos' translated as 'specific ziyara'.

² The Shi'ites believe in 12 Imams as the series of successors after the Prophet of Islam, and each of these locations mentioned house the graves and shrines of their holy Imams. Prophet's daughter (Lady Fatimah) and 4 Imams (Imam Hasan (prophet's grandson and 2nd Imam), Imam Zainulabideen (4th Imam), Imam Mohammad Baqir (5th Imam) and Imam Jafar Sadiq (6th Imam) buried in Medina (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), Imam Ali (1st Imam and Prophet's son-in-law) in Najaf (Iraq), Imam Hussain (Prophet's younger grandson and the 3rd Imam), in Karbala (Iraq), Imam Musa Kazim (the 7th Imam) and Imam Mohammad Taqi (the 9th Imam) in Kadhmain (Iraq), Imam Ali Naqi (the 10th Imam) and Imam Hasan Askari (the 11th Imam) in Samarra (Iraq) and Imam Ali Redha (the 8th Imam) in Mashad (Iran). Shi'ites believe that the twelfth Imam, the promised Mahdi went into occultation (ghaibah) and will appear again to fill the world with justice and confront all kinds of corruption.

In remembrance of the battle of Karbala, Shia Muslims commemorate Arbaeen via various ritual practices in their places of residence as well. Mourning congregations (*majalis*) are held during the 40 day mourning period observed from the first of Muharram (the first lunar month in Islamic calendar), signifying the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (Ashura) till the day of Arbaeen. During the congregations scholars deliver speeches and poetries (*latmiyyahs*) are recited narrating the tragedy that befell the holy household of the Prophet in Karbala. Mourning congregations in houses is a recommended act in Shia traditions (Bin Quluya Al Qummi, p. 175).

3.2. The Arbaeen pilgrimage

The annual Arbaeen commemoration in Iraq attracts³ millions of pilgrims making it the world's largest annual gathering in one place (Moufahim, 2013; Piggot, 2014). These pilgrims; known as *zawars* in Arabic (noun for those who perform ziyara pilgrimage), travel to Iraq to reach Karbala, adopting various modes of transportation. A very large number of these *zawars* perform the Arbaeen pilgrimage on foot, a special phenomenon referred to as the *meshaya*, or the *walk*. They walk varied distances; 55 miles, taking the Najaf-Karbala route (Imam Hussain highway) that takes on an average three days, 425 miles, if walking from neighbouring cities of Karbala like the port of Basra, which takes two weeks, or, walking from Iran crossing the border equates hundreds of miles (Mahdi al Modarresi, 2014) (Fig. 1).

Foot-pilgrims of all age groups and gender participate in the walk (*meshaya*) Women *zawars* (pilgrims) are clad in black 'abayas' (long dresses) and men in their regular attire of white/black long dresses. Some are carrying flags with slogans addressing the mother of Imam Hussain (Lady Zahra – daughter of Prophet Muhammad) We promise you oh Zahra we shall not forget Hussain. The sea of millions of pilgrims walk beside numbered poles marking the route, passing through the many lined 'Mawakibs' (temporary tents and some built houses) set up by local Iraqis and some international charities, to provide sleeping space for walkers, food stalls serving hot tea, juices, staple food, refreshments, snacks and much variety of food. *Latmiyyahs* (poetry recitations in remembrance of Imam Hussain and the incident of Karbala) played on high volume, health care dispensaries, chairs lined up to seat those who may feel tired, men and women eager to massage and caress the fatigued feet of the 'zawar' (pilgrims) welcome those who choose to walk the stretch spanning hundreds of miles (Fig. 2).

4. Study methods

This study deploys an interpretivist paradigm consisting of a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is informed by a qualitative design. Pernecky and Jamal (2010) rightfully explicate that phenomenological research is highly complex; it is time-consuming, requiring active researcher's involvement, attentiveness and knowledge of the philosophical underpinning of the particular approach. Although studies exploring religious experiences have adopted positivist methodology approach this has been critiqued for reducing human experiences to numbers and are deemed inadequate (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Moran, 2000).

In order to fathom the experiences of foot pilgrims to Karbala, the author visited Karbala for the purpose of commemorating Arbaeen four times in a row. These visits lasted from 5 to 9 days, each time and involved social interaction between the researcher and other visitors. The

³ Dearden (2014) noted the Arbaeen attendee's figures at 20 million people from 40 countries in 2013, terming it to be "One of the world's biggest and most dangerous pilgrimages". BBC.com reported up to 17 million made the pilgrimage in 2014, and the daily mail quoted Iraqi Defence Minister Khaled al-Obeidi stating number of pilgrims in the city of Karbala to be a record 17.5 million in the same year. Iraqi state-run media said more than 22 million pilgrims have visited Karbala 2015, setting a record for the annual pilgrimage.



Fig. 1. Iraq map, showing borders with Iran, Port of Basra, Najaf and Karbala.

conceptual comprehension of Arbaeen. During the visits in 2014 and 2015, the author had planned to carry on data collection and subsequently gather contacts of foot pilgrims who could communicate in English, Urdu, Persian and Gujarati – interviews conducted in languages other than English were translated before transcribing). Pilgrims had to engage in a semi-structure interview, and personal observations lend the ethnographic flavor to the work, which was mainly focused towards understanding the pilgrims in the natural settings. Being of similar background as with most of the pilgrims, made the pilgrims feel comfortable to engage with the author (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The Arbaeen is a time bound pilgrimage and therefore, the initial conversations only assisted to get the ball rolling and establish rapport, collect contact details, judge communication abilities (author was looking for pilgrims who could communicate in English, Urdu, Persian and Gujarati – interviews conducted in languages other than English were translated before transcribing). 28 interviews were conducted of 12 females and 16 males. Participants comprised of people from Tanzania, Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran, and an age group range from 16 to 60. Interviews lasted from 24 min to an hour and 20 min. Interviews conducted with each in-



Fig. 2. Pictures showing the Najaf-Karbala walk

first-time visit took place in Jan 2012. The visit was not undertaken for research purposes then. The author did not even walk the way however interacted with many foot-pilgrims. This visit offered the opportunity to return in⁴Jan 2013 for Arbaeen. Following the second, third and the fourth visits in Jan 2013, Dec 2014 and Dec 2015, the author gained clarity by walking the Najaf-Karbala route twice, staying in the Mawakibs (free accommodation consisting of mattresses to sleep, washrooms (some even come with bathing and washing facilities), and free food) on route, and this greatly assisted in putting forward a methodology of the study. The most important element in this phenomenological study has been the researcher's involvement and the in-depth

dividual covered question such as, what motivated you to undertake the pilgrimage. 'What was it like traversing the 55 miles on foot? Can you share with me a story about the Arbaeen pilgrimage? Would you like to come back to Karbala? Although, these were the baseline questions, since the interviews were semi structured, conversations sometime led to detailed discussion of the journey that provided rich insights to the foot pilgrimage. All interviews were electronically recorded and notes were made during the course of the interview. Later interviews in English were transcribed and those in other languages were translated. The author is fluent in Urdu and Gujarati, hence these interviews were directly interpreted. Although, the author also possesses very good conversational knowledge of Persian, nonetheless services of a friend, trained Persian speaker who is also fluent in English and Urdu was deployed in order to accurately interpret the interviews in Persian. She provided the translations in audio formats which were later transcribed

⁴ Arbaeen dates are calculated through the lunar cycle that is shortened by approximately 12 days when equated to the solar calendar each year, therefore Arbaeen 2012 took place on the 14th Jan and in 2013 on the 3rd Jan.

for analysis. The interviews were analyzed in an iterative process using thematic analysis, following which, data was placed under major themes and interviewees specific comments were aligned. These are presented in the section below.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Motivations of Arbaeen foot-pilgrims

Interview findings revealed that 11 participants out of 28 had walked the Najaf-Karbala more than once. Hence the findings below on reasons to partake in the 'meshaya' practice are further divided into motivations of first time foot-pilgrims and those repeating it. Data from personal observations also consist of first time foot-pilgrims, and those who walked more than once.

The dominant reason mentioned by pilgrims walking to the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala was 'a burning desire' to perform the ziyara (pilgrimage). This major stimulus enunciated by first time foot-pilgrims, can be separated in two categories, namely, *Rituals-led desire* and *Society-led desire*.

Accounts of *rituals-led desire* point out factors such as *commemorations* held every year at pilgrim's residence countries, in which scholars narrate the tragedy of Karbala. Pilgrims specifically indicated they made an intention (*niyya*) during the ritual practices at home to walk the way, and felt the foot-pilgrimage was their yearnings fulfilled. 'Always wanted to walk to my Imam', was a common comment by many foot pilgrims.

"Every believer has this burning desire to visit the shrine of Imam Hussain and make the Arbaeen pilgrimage on foot, especially when we commemorate Arbaeen in our local Hussainiyas (places where congregations are held). I tend to make an intention and work my way, praying throughout the year to be able to realize the dream".

"After listening in *majalis* (The commemorative mourning gatherings) the hardships that befell him and his family, I cannot imagine taking on any other mode to reach my Imam, – I will always walk to the Imam".

"I walked the route when I was young. During Saddam's time, we were not allowed to walk, after Saddam's downfall, I vowed to myself I will pay homage to my Imam by walking to his shrine".

"I always wanted to feel how people leave their homes and walk for number of days towards the Imam".

Foot-pilgrims explicated that they attended mourning commemorations and another element was the '*technology aspect*', where foot-pilgrims narrated how watching the Arbaeen rituals on various media either live or watching documentaries/pictures/movies and reading stories in written format or posted as Instagram stories, watching friend's stories on snapchat and videos posted by caravans, led to the intention to walk.

"I watch the live telecast on various channels in the Arbaeen period and vow to myself that next year I ought to be amongst the blessed foot pilgrims, that's how I decided I want to walk the way".

"Reading blogs and seeing pictures uploaded on various websites, of the sea of people and the hospitality on the way; I wanted to experience the *ziyara* by walking the route".

"After I decided to go for Arbaeen I was checking the caravan's website, and browsing their Facebook page, I saw videos of previous year's 'meshaya'".

"I had watched the movie, 'The Caravan of Pride', I then decided I must walk to my Imam".

Findings above indicate the significance of *rituals*, both in form of participation and viewing broadcasts of the same. This clearly resonates

with Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917) social ritual theory, wherein Durkheim asserts that rituals transform knowledge into belief, and arouse a passionate intensity and feelings of "effervescence," in which individuals experience something larger than themselves.

Foot pilgrims were motivated by the historical Karbala incident and the sacred figure of Imam Hussain acted as the magnet towards, both the shrine, and the journey towards it. This is quite linked to Prophet of Islam (pbuh)'s narration, 'Indeed, the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (AS) does create such a fire, a burning sensation and heat of a love in the hearts of his believers and loving friends which will never get cold or extinguished' (Nuri, 1987). The Shia religious views are dominant in the pilgrim's accounts in viewing Karbala as a sacred place due to its association to the Imam. Therefore, although annual Arbaeen commemorations are held worldwide in pilgrim's home countries; the yearning to visit Karbala remains a believer's desire. The provision of live telecasts in any shape of form echoes with Reader (2007) and Sep (2014), both of whom link the rising popularity of foot-pilgrimage to Shikoku and Santiago de Compostela to increased media interest and plenty of media coverage.

The other significant category that surfaced was those who embarked on walking, led by the *societal elements*; they were inspired, enthused or led by a confrère during the trip.

"I had no formal plan to walk during my Arbaeen pilgrimage, my friend in the caravan was packing for her walk the night before. In the morning, when the caravan leader was splitting people into diverse groups, I just joined the group of walkers with my friend". There were similar instances where some foot-pilgrims made a last-minute decision to walk the trail because of a friend, a family member, or sometimes a new acquaintance in the caravan or those who cut short their 3-day endeavor to attend family, friend's or caravan acquaintance's needs.

"My husband had walked the entire trail in 2011 and 2012 and, that's what motivated me to walk, since 2013 I have been walking to the holy shrine in Arbaeen".

"I walked because my father had walked the previous years".

The society influence was even more prominent, as some foot-pilgrims walked partial way and took buses available on the parallel road, for reasons such as,

"I just walked for a few hours, just about a day, because I am responsible of taking care of part of the group that does not undertake the walk and of the portmanteau".

"The 3rd time I could only do a partial walk because of my sister".

"I was unable to walk the full trail because of my family members, who were too tired and I had to take care of them".

"The 3rd time I couldn't walk the full trail because of my toddler".

"The 2nd time around my youngest one could not take the cold weather, so sadly we couldn't walk the full trail, but we managed a night and two days, the second day we hopped on buses available on the way".

The motive related to the role of society elements i.e. the society constituent, is linked to social cohesion of community (*'umma*) in Islam (Quran 4:36). The momentous weightiness of social influence is a dominant aspect of an Islamic culture that gives individuals a special responsible behavior in relation to the society.

Additionally, *society-led desire* draws parallels with Turner's (1974) *communitas*, denoting a social element to a spiritual experience and a spiritual element to a social experience. A sense of *communitas* prevails in the foot-pilgrims that transcend their diverse backgrounds due to the sense of shared devotion. The noteworthy aspect that rightly adds to Turner's *communitas* is the fact that the sense of '*umma*' formerly exists amongst the pilgrims, and as such the need to liberate from social identities from conformity (structure) to general norms is not a

requisite to experience the enhanced social bond that, according to Turner's belief is the product of pilgrimage experience. This particular deliberation aligns with the appraisal on Turner's idea of *communitas* which is not subscribed by all, suggesting that some religions (e.g. Hinduism) are highly class-oriented, and the maintenance of social hierarchies is rewarded (Messerschmidt & Sharma, 1981). Hence, considering that broader Islamic teachings emphasize achievement of a greater ideal: '*umma*', a harmonious community (Ayish, 1998), the '*meshaya*' practice provides for an ideal ground to extensively manifest the social element of *communitas* on a much larger scale.

5.2. Reasons for repeating the foot-pilgrimage

Pilgrims who undertook the journey on foot the second-time round, explicated that their stimuli centered on a) *Love and devotion for Imam Hussain* and b) *Concern for society*.

Participants whose sentiments were built around '*love of the Imam*', mentioned their affection and feelings for the Imam and his family had further intensified following their first '*meshaya*' experience, and consequently they narrated,

'Walking the first time was a desire, but, I now wish to come here every year and walk to the Imam'.

'The '*meshaya*' experience from last year, made me feel the physical pain of the tragedy that befell Imam's family, although I know it's not even a minute fraction of the real incident', I am now more propelled to walk'.

'I had heard about '*meshaya*', then I saw it on media and I made a vow to walk, I was blessed with the opportunity this year and for years to come I now want to do this for Imam Hussain to express my love'.

'Second time around, my purpose was to aggrandize my love for the Imam, his sisters, and the females of the Prophet's family'.

'When I first walked I was learning, I now want to do it with more understanding (*maarifat*)'.

'To solely walk it for the Imam only'.

'I want to prostrate on this holy land, where my Imam was'.

The extant foot-pilgrimage literature does not address motivations for 'repeat foot-pilgrims'. The findings related to recapitulating the '*meshaya*' revealed reasons such as, '*love and devotion for the Imam*' are novel to the foot-pilgrimage literature in various fields. Hence, pilgrimage studies see an advancement ascertaining the effect of what surrounds the shrines and how it affects visitors' experience. Della Dora's (2012) study notes that such themes have gone largely understudied, if not ignored. Foot-pilgrims who repeated the '*meshaya*' practice, mentioned their veneration and *reverentia* for the Imam and his family. The walk to Karbala is the demonstration of foot-pilgrim's *reverentia* of the Imam as it accentuates the sanctity of the place where the Imam is buried. According to Peter Brown, *reverentia* implies, "... a willingness to focus on invisible persons... or to direct his attention to specific sites and objects (the shrines and ...)" (Brown, 1982 p.119). This interesting finding of *potentia* of the Imam implies that the credence of the sacred figure is an indicator to the growth in the '*meshaya*' practice as an annual social iteration, and shall keep magnetizing more pilgrims to undertake the endeavor. Additionally, the Shi'ite literature can benefit from the empirical evidence of foot-pilgrim's prerogative to walk for the '*love of the Imam*'

Accounts of foot-pilgrims that reflected their *concern for society* talked about how they wanted their children and family to fathom the vibes in Arbaeen at Iraq and that they wanted to serve the *zawars* (pilgrims) on the walk, they mentioned,

'To bring family and children so that they can witness the grandeur

of humanity and be close to the manifestation of Arbaeen and understand the resolution of Imam Hussain',

'My son is growing up and he needs to see it himself, so that the practice remains alive in generations'.

'I want to bring my entire family and all friends, to experience the Arbaeen in Iraq and witness the actual spirit of giving, love and care in Islam'.

'Because I have walked the way last Arbaeen, I am now inclined this year to volunteer on the way and help other foot-pilgrims (*zawars*)'.

'I want to join the sea of pilgrims to show solidarity with my fellow Shia brothers'.

'I come from Canada, my ultimate motivation is the feeling of social cohesion, want to walk'.

Repeat foot-pilgrims also explicated to draw attention of family and other members of society towards the '*meshaya*' practice, this concern of *umma* shall be a catalyst for sustainability and growth in Arbaeen foot pilgrims, as younger generations continue arriving. The practice of '*meshaya*' is also seen as an ostentatiousness of unification, which is precisely analogous to the annual obligatory hajj that is an expression of unity, equality, and solidarity irrespective of nationality, ethnic origin, sex, and social class (Donnan, 1989; Hameed, 2010; Memish et al., 2014). From the recounts, the feeling of instilling the love of the Prophet and his family is an explication of the Islamic teachings, that is central to the Shi'ite belief and, that asks believers to display love for the nearest relatives of the Prophet of Islam as a reward of the Prophet's preaching I demand not from you any reward for it (preaching prophet-hood) except your Mawaddat (love) of my Quaruba (nearest relatives); (Quran 42:23).

Tabarani also narrates that it is recommended to 'Teach your children three things; Love of your Prophet; Love of his Ahl al-Bait (the Prophet's family) and the recitation of the Quran... (Muttaqi, 1981 p. 456, Hadith 45,409). In the Shi'ite, religious views special mention is made of people who have done service to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and that such service would give them worldly and spiritual returns (Nakash, 1994, p.145). This service is not limited to material things, and any work and effort as a service of Ahl al-Bait (the Prophet's family) is rewarded by Allah(Swt). Ali-al-Kuwaity (2014), narrates reward anecdotes of the people who sacrificed in the service of Ahl al-Bait.

5.3. The Meshaya(walk) experience

Findings indicate that foot-pilgrim's experiences could be classified into three categories: *Religiosity experiences*, *Bodily experiences* and *Humanitarian and Hospitality experiences*. Religiosity category captures accounts of foot-pilgrim's feelings related to reliving Islamic teachings, closeness felt to the Prophet's household and Imam Hussain in particular and supernatural occurrences, Bodily experiences relate to the variety of views on the physical walk endeavor. Humanitarian experiences alluded to sentiments related to generosity and friendliness occurrences during the '*meshaya*'.

In their description of experiences of religiosity and pietism, foot-pilgrims conferred on the association they felt with Islamic teachings. In many ways, they viewed the walk as a reminder to 'their faith, Islamic principles' and 'the tragedy of Karbala', foot-pilgrims also narrated incidents that depicted the walk as a 'spiritually energizing experience'. Some examples are:

On her first walk, an over-prepared female ruminates the feeling of the heavy supplies in the backpack to the heavy sins one would be carrying on the day of judgment (Muslims believe in a linear worldview and an accountability of the actions and conduct in this life on the day of judgment (Qiyamah) that would decide an eternal life in heaven or Hell) (Qur'an 28:70, 4:141).

'The three-day walk makes me think how little we need for survival, yet how obsessed we are with the worldly affairs'.

'I kept comparing this walk journey to my own life journey, pondering on the beginning and end of our lives'.

'this is a journey of spiritual wayfaring', 'every step to Karbala shifts the balance of existence from body to soul, where the body starts the journey and the soul takes over and once I reached Karbala, I was the infinity of my soul'

Many foot pilgrims explicated how the journey on foot made them associate to the atrocities that befell the Prophet's family, who were made to walk thousands of miles fourteen centuries ago. Foot pilgrims had several expressions;

'it brings me close to the Prophet's family as I walk thinking about their painful journey, how it must have been to walk bare feet with women and young children',

'it recreates the incident of Karbala', 'food and water served on the way made me think of Imam's thirst of three days that has resulted in feeding millions', 'gave me the reassurance on Allah's word, 'Surely martyrs are alive (Quran, 2:154).

'As I walked the route, my caravan and I were in a state of mourning, we could not help but shed tears at the tragedy that befell the holy household of the Prophet and we would be lamenting and holding majalis (plural of majlis – congregations to remember the Karbala tragedy'.

"The love of Imam Hussain is what every pilgrim shares".

Further, supernatural occurrences that connected pilgrims to the religious feel of the environment were also noted. Many felt,

'On the route that there was service from unseen force that extended help in all needs'. Few interviewees mentioned that,

'All you need to do was to wish for something and your wish would be heard in no time', they then gave account of various incidents. Female narrated:

'My daughter's uncle in law experienced leg cramps, yet he insisted to walk. As we walked a just a few meters, someone came to give him a walking stick, this made the old man cry, upon inquiry he disclosed that at this very moment he was yearning for a walking stick, reasoning to himself how a walking stick can make life so easy for him'

Some narrated that food cravings would be fulfilled in no time,

'I was looking at the orange carts, fancying having one... at that very moment someone started distributing oranges in the caravan';

It was Sunday morning and for a moment I thought of a Sunday brunch, dusting away the thought as we stepped inside a Mawakib, there was a buffet feast with all that you can have on a typical eastern brunch!

A foot pilgrim told of a unique experience,

'We forgot to pick our passport bag hung outside the public washrooms and carried everything else that we had set aside. By the time we realized the loss, we were way ahead, nonetheless, we returned, looked for it in every possible place, sadly to no avail. Much further down the trail, one of the relatives travelling with us received a call on his mobile, providing him with details of our bags and contact numbers to trace the items. When we called back on the number it was not functional, upon inquiry from locals, we were astonished to know that the code from which the call was received was not an Iraqi code. The person on the call, gave his name as Basheer, in Arabic the name means 'the one who gives news of glad tidings'.

One of the pilgrims said, as I was physically drained, with blisters in

my feet I reached a medical camp. They treated my feet and I asked the Imam to help me. I felt like my remaining walk was so smooth, I just glided through'.

Another foot pilgrim said, 'you get this feeling of some unseen divine force with you, maybe it's the Imam's mother who comes to help all his zawars'.

Accounts of connecting to faith emphasize the Shi'ite perspective, wherein, God remains ontologically separate from and inaccessible to creation and hence the role of the prophets and imams is as intermediaries between the divine and human worlds, and, in their remembrance is the ruminant of Allah (Talib, 2000 p.17).

Findings related to religious experiences during the 'meshaya' practice illustrates that foot-pilgrims unpretentiously bear comparison with Rinschede's (2000) 'pure pilgrim', Morinis's (1992, p.10) "devotional" pilgrim and Adler's (1989), Smith's (1992) and Collins-Kreiner and Kliot's (2000) "pious" pilgrim. However, considering that being on-foot is merely the structure of pilgrimage it can be established that foot-pilgrimage has a 'piety effect' on the Arbaeen pilgrims which is very much desirable in the Shi'ite traditions for pilgrims to attain devoutness. Furthermore, in an era where western foot pilgrimage experiences are entwined between sacred and secular (Digance, 2003), Arbaeen foot-pilgrims promulgate sacramental experiences whilst on the journey. The reminiscence of Islamic tenets of faith resonates with (Turner & Turner's, 1978) work that asserts pilgrimage has traditionally been undertaken to reaffirm basic tenets of faith as opposed to seeking healing and miracles, which is yet another intriguing finding pilgrims reverberate that even those who experienced healing did not walk the way to gain the cure.

The massacre of Imam Hussain and his forces at Karbala was an important milestone in Islamic history and in the Shi'ite sect; this has generated the demonstration of grief and passion. Nakash (1993) elucidates the rituals developed since the Battle of Karbala where recitation of Karbala narratives (qira'ah) by a reciter (qari or khateeb), and niyahah (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry) are performed. The foot-pilgrimage manifests the rituals experience in the real settings and this is meant to increase the rewards of the pilgrims, for it is believed that even a tear shed in the memory of the sufferings of an imam will result in him exercising his intercessory powers (Ayoub, 1978:143). The miraculous acts are the most articulate expression in the recognition of authority associated to the Imams and numerous Shi'ite traditions emphasize the status and authority of the Imam, which is also predicated on his ostensible intercessory powers. The Shia's view the imam's authority is manifested through performing miracles that exhibit his extraordinary powers, for instance, knowledge of hidden matters (Kashshi, 1969, p. 359) and traversing the universe with great ease, heal the sick, and walk on water (Amir-Moezzi, 1994:94–95). The instances above reinforce for the Shi'ites their belief, experienced during the meshaya practice.

In their description of 'Bodily experiences', foot pilgrims had differing views on the physical effort. Some recollected it as 'physically challenging', 'tested to limits' others explained leg pains and blisters in distinct expressions,

'the third day my legs gave up', 'My legs are not that strong, by the 2nd day my knee ache was making me cry every step'.

Then there were those, who mentioned the continuous three days walk as a challenging physical task, yet in a different flavor,

'A spiritual trip with many hardships but full of love for Imam Hussein'.

And some foot pilgrims narrated healing experiences that occurred as they were on the trail. Female recounted how the doctors had given up on her feet after she had survived a severe accident, leaving her unable to walk for anything more than 20 min. To her it was no less than a miracle to walk the Najaf-Karbala trail. She also particularly mentioned that a rod placed in her legs makes it extremely challenging

for her to sit on the floor; a feat she never takes upon. Nonetheless, she slept overnight in Mawakibs (tents) on floor mattresses. Following the walk, her feet have now fully healed.

Male pilgrim narrated his problematic tiredness, particularly in relation to standing and/or walking for short periods. However, he did not feel the exhaustion and after the trip he realized his fatigue condition is no more.

Generally, the healing experiences collectively resonate with the Prophetic stories narrated in Quran, of healing blessings from sacred objects like the touch of Prophet Joseph's shirt curing Prophet Jacob's sight (12:93). The accounts of blessings experienced on the way to Karbala indicate the elements of sacredness associated to the journey and resonate with Hassner (2003, p.5), who elucidates healing as one of functions that characterize a sacred place.

Foot-pilgrims used variety of expressions to elucidate the 'humanitarian experiences' experienced during the walk. The phrases were; 'kindness, selflessness, generosity, bravery, self-sacrificing, humanity at its peak, compassion, warmth, unity, inspiring hospitality, simplicity, humility, enthusiasm, love and sheer devotion'. One of the foot pilgrims exclaimed, this kind of experience fills you up with an ineffable and transcendent energy. All reported that the general feeling of the ambience as virtuous and exemplary. Foot pilgrims also noted the experience of solidarity and unity amongst themselves, regardless of whether the foot-pilgrims were those of their caravans or random volunteers or fellow foot-pilgrims on the road.

Interviewees had long accounts of how, 'hundreds of pilgrims would be accommodated in a Mawakib (tents on the way) at night, served with hot food and treated with utmost love and care as if they were esteemed guests'.

'Morning breakfast on that trail is a treat with warm sweet milk, tea, eggs, bread and all variety of food one can think of'.

The number of children, young and old alike serving the foot pilgrims is nothing short of an ideal human society; free of prejudice and filled with love.

'The locals chanting 'hellabil zawar, ahlan wa sahlan ya zawar (salutations and welcome oh pilgrim) is a mesmerizing move that leaves one so humbled yet the feel of being so fortunate'.

'It is an educating experience on how selflessly the volunteers on the way help out, their hospitality surpasses routineness... and is simply remarkable manifestation of Islamic hospitality'.

'Selflessness of the Iraqi volunteers for all zawars is startling, even small children are offering tissue papers. People have emptied their houses and providing the best for zawars. Facilities such as charging mobile phones, making international phone calls, offering Wi-Fi connections, are all available for free. Everywhere you are very well taken care of'.

'What surprised me the most were the medical camps on the way. You could get all medicines for free. Qualified doctors waiting to serve the zawars of Imam Hussain is a sign of kindness and selflessness'.

'Energy that one feels on the way is unbelievable – I think the atmosphere, the harmony in the air, the love of Imam Hussain is what every pilgrim shares'.

'People give up their comfort for others, the enthusiasm for each other on the way gives a special feeling of unity'.

'The energy of people around adds to the feeling of harmony and solidarity and the feeling of purest flavors of Tawheed (the Islamic belief of oneness of Allah(swt)).

'Sleeping on a mattress, in one big tent (Mawakib) with so many women, children of all age groups, is simply put, 'an act of unity'.

'Self-sacrificing people serve the zawar without partiality towards nationalities, race or culture. The invisible force is the love of Imam Hussain and his sacrifice that drives every single person in one direction. Even police officials are so humble and they treat us like the guests of the Imam'.

"There is a sense of congeniality on the way, people smile at each other... although they don't know them".

The prominence of Iraqi hospitality during the walk experience manifests the distinctive aspect of Islamic hospitality as exemplified in the manner in which the Prophet Abraham (as) treated his guests (Quran 24:27). The warmth and generosity on the way to Karbala offers insights to the local Iraqi food and culture to pilgrims. All food variety served on the walk trail are Iraqi delicacies that range from special tea to fish served on bed of rice with beans, and variety of sweets. Although the Iraqi hospitality towards pilgrims is on a colossal scale, however similar practices are narrated by (Galbraith, 2000 p, 63–64) on hospitality enroute Czestochowa.

The contemporary foot-pilgrimage literature aligns, 'the feeling of energy', to the walk trail being a 'power place' (Fedele, 2014) or, is unpretentiously reasoned to 'walking factor' that generates its own particular kind of experience (Slavin, 2003). Foot-pilgrims collated the energy with the atmosphere of solidarity and oneness, which yet again resonates with the desired state of social cohesion referred to in Islamic literature.

6. Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage – a discussion

This foot-pilgrimage study is a response to the lack of research pertinent to non-western foot-pilgrimages and it achieves the challenge by investigating the Najaf-Karbala route in the Arbaeen pilgrimage. Utilizing 'religious worldview' as a significant denominator, the discussion section shall engage with the Shia Muslim worldview addressing the need for "an in-depth investigation" of the entire religious market, as noted by (Fleischer, 2000).

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to interrogate pilgrims' motivations and experiences of foot-pilgrims' walking the Najaf-Karbala trail to the shrine of Imam Hussain (Prophet Muhammad's grandson) marking Arbaeen, a Shia Islamic pilgrimage that takes place annually in Karbala, Iraq.

Findings indicate that foot-pilgrims were motivated by on-going religious rituals related to the historical event of Karbala. This indeed is a profound addition to the existing contemporary literature wherein pilgrim's motivations are entwined between sacred and secular; motivations of Arbaeen foot-pilgrims are centered on sacramental intentions related to religious rituals. This depicts the power of sacraments and society in Shia religious perspective, the distinct aspect being the absence of touristic motivations of enthused by curiosity or pleasure-seeking. Moreover, although role of rituals is found to play some part in building interpersonal trust and feelings (Ellison & George, 1994) and confirming one's place in a community (Ebstyn King, 2003), its role in initiating the thought process for undertaking the foot-pilgrimage is a novel finding for pilgrimage literature.

The recurrence of 'concern for society (*umma*)' as a motivation for all foot-pilgrims irrespective of the number of times they were enroute, is consistent with Islamic teachings of social responsibility. The force of social responsibility is seen to take center stage, where intriguingly, foot-pilgrims introduce the practice to family members and larger society by use of various platforms of social media, which subsequently bring in sustainability and growth to the 'meshaya' practice. This being a novel finding for repeat foot-pilgrims literature, is however consistent with Kierkegaard's original findings on the very notion of repeating an experience; that underlines commitment as the key to success for an experience's reiteration. The commitment factor here being the 'concern for society (*umma*)'. The societal element, indeed offers much needed advancement of an Islamic perspective to Turner's (1974)

communitas, wherein, the ‘meshaya’ practice supplies an impeccable opportunity to action the social element of communitas on a grander scale. Via repeating the ‘meshaya’ the scope of communitas continually grows.

Another motivational element centers on ‘enhanced love for the Imam’, and this indeed is an insightful finding that draws parallels with the Victorian era wherein pilgrimage was full of emotion (Turner & Turner, 2011, p. xiv). On the contrary, the postmodern accounts of pilgrimage studies sparsely mention the function of emotions (Oviedo et al., 2014; Shine, 2007 p. 193) and where ‘love’ is mentioned, it is noted as a distinguished emotion occurring in connection to God’s love (Collins-Kreiner & Klot, 2000).

Yet again, the findings that repeat foot-pilgrims to Arbaeen, are emotionally charged with the feeling of love for the Imam are consistent with earlier studies that mention saint’s love as the only motivation of undertaking the pilgrimage (Peterson, 1982 p. 73).

The foot-pilgrims market during Arbaeen consists of individuals, males and females, and families across all social classes and it was observed that pilgrims comprised of all age groups from new born babies to aged and elderly inclusive, who may even be wheelchair bound. This finding does not align to the context of Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which revealed that the pilgrim market consisted of middle-aged and older individuals (Fleischer, 2000).

With reference to ‘pilgrim status’, contrary to the extant literature where traditional view does not certify ‘pilgrim status’ to those who choose other modes of transportation (Sherrard, 1977 p.102; Blackwell, 2007; Slavin, 2003), pilgrims walking to the shrine of Imam Hussain in the annual Arbaeen pilgrimage are assured an elevated status according to Shi’ite religious perspective (Bin Quluya, 2014, Chapter 49, Hadith 6). Findings related to ‘meshaya’ walk pattern, in which access to free transport running on parallel roads to the walking route bears comparison to Japanese foot-pilgrimage (Eiki, 2007 p. 63–64).

The ‘meshaya’ experience, converges on religiosity elements, signaling to the sacredness of the journey as opposed to the popular construction of other walking pilgrimages, in which foot-pilgrims draw parallels with five out of six types of pilgrims identified by Morinis (1992), subtracting the first one; “devotional” (p. 10). This deliberation is established for the reason that whilst deliberating bodily experiences, foot-pilgrims yet have a tendency to relate it to religious spirituality by adopting expressions such as ‘pain with different flavor’ and ‘hardships but with love of the Imam’. Furthermore, the hospitality experiences are also associated to ‘manifestation of Islamic hospitality’.

The ‘meshaya’ practice has a spiritual uplifting effect; Turner (1973) perceives pilgrimages as a means to venturing into religious experience through use of the physical body. Hence, the bodily experiences essentially offer rich and out of the ordinary experiences to further precipitate the spiritual status meant to be realized in the life journey of a believer as a traveler (*salik*), essentially this is established from the Islamic worldview (Mujtaba, 2016).

7. Managerial and policy implications

A number of managerial implications from the empirical findings are gathered through direct and active participation, observations and interviews with pilgrims, along the Najaf-Karbala trail.

Both divine figurative value of the Imam, and the findings related to the society constituent are emphasized as elements of growth and sustainability for Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage. Potentially this indicates future boost to Iraqi economy and calls for local government policies towards planning and development. As mentioned, Arbaeen dates are calculated through the lunar cycle that is shortened by approximately 12 days when equated to the solar calendar each year. This implies that by 2022–23, Arbaeen shall start falling in hot weather when⁵

afternoons temperatures average 40 °C. Given that there is a wide age range walking the route and that most foot-pilgrims start more or less at the same time of the day, an increased medical care for foot-pilgrims, augmented and efficient chilling facilities would be required as part of preplanning and a regular upkeep.

One particularly notable managerial implication is also related to the growth element. With increased diverse gathering, directions and amenities would require more international representation; for instance, use of English language and more western toilets.

The finding that the ‘meshaya’ experience, converges on religiosity element offers potential for arrangement by caravan leaders. Provisions keeping in mind the religious need of the foot-pilgrims such as recitation of Karbala narratives (qira’ah) by a reciter on the way would be an added lead for caravans. This would also substantiate the religious experience.

8. Conclusions

The principal contribution of this study is the first empirical input of foot-pilgrim’s motivations and experiences of a non-western, Islamic foot-pilgrimage. All of which offer a foundation for assessing further Islamic foot-pilgrimage studies using quantitative data and positivist approach. In addition to the empirical contribution, this study has advanced conceptual understanding of notions such as communitas by offering the Islamic perspective on it, thus clarifying that although the existing idea on Turner’s communitas is not subscribed by all there is an associated Islamic vantage point.

By finding a directly proportional relationship between religious rituals and desire of foot-pilgrimage, this study contributes to the scholarly deliberations on religiosity and spirituality’s revival in general. In which seemingly future research can explore the potential role of religious rituals beyond simply being a sustainable and growth element of foot-pilgrimages. The interconnected significant input is the convergence on religiosity elements, signaling at the sacred nature of the Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage.

Another contribution is that the study signifies the importance of worldviews in pilgrimage studies. The element of Shi’ite traditions and religious perspectives had a large function in the findings and further analysis, without incorporating which, the findings would merely offer rudimentary analysis. Hence, the study advocates the constant scholarly call of avoiding universal structures whilst interpreting pilgrimage studies.

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⁵ www.baghdad.climatemps.com/september.php.

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