

Ritual of Holy Healing in Northern Iran: Rebellion Rituals of Spiritual Power

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ABSTRACT This paper highlights the historical evolution and transformation of Iranian pilgrimage rituals with a focus on the function, meaning, and form of the ritual of holy healing (rituals of the Hanifiyeh and the Shah-e Shahidan shrines) in northern Iran in Gilan province. In order to achieve this goal, this paper describes a fieldwork study and analysis of the ritual in accordance with other similar rituals in Iran. The researchers take holy healing into account as the key sign of spiritual power that acted against the hierarchy produced by Iranian *Khans* (literally lords). Key components of this ritual, such as the holy elements, are the topics under discussion in this analysis. As such, this paper argues that the ritual of pilgrimage should be taken as a critical response to Iranian Feudalism until about 1952, and then to this time as the space of equality and spiritual liminality.

INTRODUCTION

Field research on a cluster of homogeneous and similar rituals with key feature of holy healing in Iran reveals that they are one of the most important ritual functions. Those rituals, such as *Alam Vachini*, sacred healing at Hanifiyeh shrine, washing carpets, Khaled Nabi shrine, Pire Shaliyar shrine, etc., were excluded from the mythological and ritual studies of Iran due to the lack of a field approach and ethnographic view (see for example, Bahar 1991, 1997). As Stein and Stein (2017: 90) argue, rituals that focus on healing, are among the most important rituals found in many societies. From this standpoint, healing is a key component of rituals (see Goodwyn 2016: 91). Rituals create collective memories and reinforce a sense of belonging as a significant aspect of identity (see Grimes 2010, 2014; Phelan 2017). They create the image of identity as a whole (see Webb 2018: 130) and as can be seen in different cultures, rituals can symbolically show the relation between different strata and classes in every society (see Ing 2017: 74-75).

The ethnological approach used in this paper reveals the function of sacred healing rituals by recording the field events. What has been observed as the core of Iranian rituals of pilgrimage carries the notion of spiritual power

through healing rites. In these rituals, the pilgrim is connected to God as the key and leading source of healing through holy men and women. According to Campbell (2008) and Eliade (1976 see also Eliade 1985, 1997; Bell 1997; Scott 2003; Smit 2008; Babuts 2017; Sharma 2018: 165), rituals are the manifestation of people's attitudes on a spiritual manner and a common aspect of religious experience and perception of God. Scott (2003: 259) illustrates that Eliade has identified that in ritual, an image of the world created by God emerges. The image of the curative God is the central image produced by rituals (Scott 2003), in the face of what produces absurdity and hopelessness in usual life events such as class distance and illness.

Bell (1997: 108) identifies that ritual reenactment makes foundational events observable, which serves to generate a meaningful, mythic, and cyclical sense of time, a temporal sense in which it is as if the original events are happening all over again. As such, the pilgrim who was observed in the ethnographic observation of this paper sought the miracle of healing.

While in the sense of Iranians before and after Islam, illness rotted in evil forces (Hassanzadeh and Karimi 2010; Hassanzadeh 2015, 2016), disease is the outcome of non-sacred time, place and space. Turner (1967, 1988, 2009) argues that spiritual power comes into existence in the face

of social power, the uncle (the brother of the mother) acts as the symbol of spiritual power defying the power of father who owns social and hierarchical power and authority. As Gudeman (2016: 71) discusses, rituals are not separated from economic practice rather they show the key characters of the societies' economy system. As such, rituals are related to the key dimensions of social life (see Grimes 2010). In this sense, ritual is known as total social fact (Hoem 2009: 203-204; Verhezen 2009: 10).

Imamzade or the holy men and women buried in the holy shrine, in liminal shape of rituals, are the representatives of God and key symbol of spiritual power. They can restore health and repel illness as they are connected to God, the source of healing. After the discovery phase of research, the researchers of this paper attempted to locate ethnographic data for the confirmation or rejection of this framework of Iranian rituals' perception. To this purpose, ethnographic narratives of research comprised the first research steps taken by the present authors.

Objectives

Rituals have played an important and vital role in the evolution of Iranian culture and identity. As Isaloo argues (2017: 116), religious symbols and rituals are present in everyday life of Iranian people and Iranian public spheres such as what can be seen in the pilgrimage and *Taziyyeh*. Among Iranian rituals, pilgrimage rites occupy an important status. The ritual is so important that anthropologists refer to it as the national ritual for Iranians (see Hassanzadeh 2013) and emphasize the role of ritual in the definition and redefinition of Iranian Identity (see Beeman 2011). To open a field of discussion of Iranian pilgrimages' roles, functions and changes during the passage of time, a review of previous studies can act as a departure point. Researchers and anthropologists such as Varahram (2017), Isaloo (2017), Khosronejad (2015), Bolukbashi (2000, 2001), Beeman (2011), Hassanzadeh and Karimi (2010), Torab (2007) and Chelkowski (1979) discuss some aspects of rituals of pilgrimages in Iran. These studies mostly concentrate on the emergence of Shiite cultures in this kind of rituals and their attention is not directed to these rituals in relation to Iranian

rigid and closed structure of feudalism. The concept of liminality is applied only as an argument about Iranian urban cultures such as the carnival of soccer and fire feast (see for example, Bromberger 2010; Hassanzadeh 2013). These studies are largely influenced by Bakhtin (1984) and Turner (1968, 1988, 2009). As such liminality is absent in the researches about the Iranian rural areas as an anti-structural force in the Iranian rural societies. As such, this paper attempts to reconstruct the roles that local Iranian rituals have played in that country. Which functions do they have? What meaning does the ritual have for those subjects who have held them throughout history? Answers to these questions can provide insight into this enquiry about the relationship between local and national rituals in Iran.

METHODOLOGY

Owing to the lived dimensions of rituals as an inner and external experience (see Turner and Bruner 1986; Giri and Clamme 2014: 151; Zuckerman 2016: 74), this research employs the key method of anthropology, namely, observation, participant observation and deep interview. The researchers took part in the rituals, interviewed ritual subjects and pilgrims, and recorded visible elements of the ritual such as ritual manners and people's behaviors. To understand the meaning of the pilgrimage ritual, two emic and etic levels as Turner (1967) explained, were the topic of ethnographic questions in this paper.

Ethnographic Background

Rituals at the Hanifiyeh Shrine

On the occasion of Prophet Mohammad's death, 28th of Safar Month lunar calendar, a pilgrimage ritual is held in Loshan City in Bivarzin village in Gilan province every year. Gilan is one of Iran's Northern provinces, located next to Caspian Sea. People from different areas of Gilan and Qazvin provinces come to this shrine for this ritual and pay respect to the memory of the holy man, Hanifiyeh's martyrdom. The researchers took part in the ritual at this shrine in 2002, 2006, and 2012 and observed the ritual manners of people.

Beginning one day before the ritual, people travelled to the shrine and the researchers observed a large crowd of pilgrims from the early morning of the day of this rite. Some pilgrims, especially women, took off their shoes and moved barefoot towards the shrine at the top of the hill where it is located. People extensively took part in the ritual, some of them in wheelchairs and some with signs of acute and harsh illnesses, such as inflation of the forehead. People who had a request in general and ill people in particular entered the shrine, tying a green string, cloth or fabric to their bodies, and made their way towards the metal chamber where *Imamzade* Hanifiyeh is buried. At the Hanifiyeh shrine, the patients bring themselves close to sepulcher in order to reach healing while repeating the Imam's behavior and then falling down on 28th *Safar* (The Prophet Mohammad's death anniversary). Indeed, ill people who receive godly grace for healing, dream of *Imamzade*, who tells the person how he/she can obtain healing and sometimes people believe that this dream alone is enough for healing. When the patients see the holy man dreaming in a trance inside the shrine building, he/she unconsciously rolls outside of the building toward a holy tree (*Qurban-dar*) where *Imamzade* Hanifiyeh was martyred. His/her body while still in a trance rolls back into the shrine again. When a patient accesses the dream and trance of healing and rolls on the earth, other pilgrims follow him/her chanting "God! Bless Mohammad and his progeny". Sometimes people want this person to give them a piece of cloth as a blessed thing. The space where women held this ritual was separate from the male part of the shrine and men are not allowed to join the ritual with the women. A religious performance (*Taziyeh*) that told the story of Imam Hossain martyrdom was enacted in a corner of the big yard of the shrine. The carrier of the shrine's holy flag brought it across external and public space of the shrine and pilgrims paid respect to it and tied a note or a piece of cloth to it. The grave stones of this shrine show its age. People, who had a request, tied a piece of cloth to the holy trees of the shrine. Pilgrims believe that the trees surrounding the shrine are its protection. The meat of sacrifice was distributed among pilgrims. Pilgrims talked about a holy spring that has the power of blessing and healing near the area. Kurdish people of the village serve pilgrims with lunch as an old tradition. An

old man from the village recounted the sacred narrative of this shrine:

The cruel ruler of this area killed the holy man, Hanifiyeh, who had invited them to Islam. An elderly woman was his only follower. After the holy man's martyrdom, an earthquake happened. (He showed the big stones inside a ruin in front of the shrine in a valley, as the remnant of that disaster). It was the punishment of infidel people who killed the holy man. That elderly woman saw the earthquake in a dream one night before the event and went out from that area. She survived and buried the holy body of the Imamzade and built this shrine. From the place where the blood of Imamzade had been shed, a holy tree grew. This tree is the tree of sacrifice, a place where pilgrims go and pay respect. The name of village is rooted in the name of this elderly woman, Bivarizin, which means old widow.

Rituals at the Shah-e Shahidan Shrine

The researchers went to Shah-e Shahidan region in Deylaman on the early morning of Monday, 6th August 2005, and then again 2011. People go there for different reasons from various areas in Gilan, especially Siyahkal. In sight of view of Shah-e Shahidan, there was no sign of an old dome, which was made as a form of conical roofs in the native architecture of Gilan (see Mirshokrai 1995). The circle dome of the holy shrine, *Imamzade*, appeared in the distance. The crowd of people who camped last night around *Imamzade*, the holy shrine, was also visible.

The population, more than ten thousands, was visiting the day-market of *Alam Vachini* and going to *Imamzade*. The meats hang down on a wooden pole and local butchers hack the carcass with a cleaver. Some are sold and the others become religious offerings and food distributed among the pilgrims. The researchers had seen the formation of ceremonial markets in the Qazian area (near the central city of Rasht) with the emergence of a new born *Imamzade* (see Hassanzadeh 2002). The researchers have arrived in Jan'ali village, a suburb of Sangar city in western Gilan Province. Here, rural society reconstructed itself by gathering different sub-cultures, languages, and ethnic groups to help with the ritual as well. On the screen of the entrance gate, there is a sentence: "God, bless Mohammad and his progeny." "Welcome, pilgrims."

Tragedian and ritual celebrants in an emotional play, performed *Taziye* as two groups: Reddish cover as a *Yazidian* - follower of Yazid group (evil) against Greenish cover as *Hossienian* - follower of Hossain (good) group, in other words the stage of battle between two contradictory forces: good and evil. People watch the *Taziye* and drop a coin into a dish after being invited to do so by an actor with a loud speaker in his hands. Then, they kiss the holy object, which is laid down on a green cloth on the ground.

The old wooden tombs of the holy shrine, *Imamzade*'s scene, narrate the age-old ritual and this historic site. The researchers had seen these forms as similar features in *Imamzade* Hanifiyeh's yard but stony graves tell the story about the old history of that ritual and its ritualistic holy shrine and place. One of the main parts of the ceremony include prayers and visiting the martyred holy men (*Imamzade*), as men and women go inward towards the shrine. By early noon, pilgrims enter the *Imamzade* Mosque in order to participate in praying. After that, a ritual flag was brought from the *Imamzade* mosque into the yard in front of the shrine. The shrine flag carrier Younes Shabani says: "I have done this for more than 50 years and people have mourned throughout these years."

At about 3 o'clock, he hangs the flag on his shoulder, with the addition of a few colorful cloths making it even more green, which are tied to the flag. He then takes it among the people. The people, many of whom are women, praised and kissed it. Then they put offertory money in it, but they mostly attached and tied money and a piece of cloth to the ritual flag. Someone else, maybe needy people, just tied a piece of cloth to the holy flag as the intention of *Nazr* (literally religious promise).

At this time, *Imamzade*'s custodian grabbed the people's attention with a loud speaker calling them forward for mourning.

The lamentation of the elegists began and men started to mourn. After some time, the *Alam* (literally the holy flag) circled three times around shrine and people followed the carrier of *Alam*. While circling the tomb, people sang and chanted a religious song².

In a sorrowful and heavy sight and perspective, people convey *Alam* while they repeated the songs of mourning. Those one who have more pain are more distinctive among the mass-

es: tears cover their face like a waterfall. Sometimes people vent their sorrows and cry their hearts out. In the crowd, women cry more than men and their silence spread a spiritual feeling in the atmosphere. After bringing the *Alam* around the shrine and performing the main part of the lamentation three times, matting widens on the ground with a cover and a green pillow on it as the guardians protect it against the invasion of people, as the tone and tempo of the lamentation increases. People drew near it since they believe in its power for miracles, such as holy healing. At this time, the *Alam* is laid on the ground like a living creature and someone opens the cloths around the *Alam* respectfully.

Indeed, the name of this ritual, *Alam Vachini*, is derived from a local word, which means taking from the holy flag the cloth and fabric, which acts as the symbol of people requests. While people cover this holy flag with their request (piece of cloth and fabrics) during *Moharam*, the first lunar calendar, these cloths and fabrics are detached and separated from the holy flag and it is left bare during the *Alam Vachin* ritual. At the end of this ritual, then, they set cloths onto the green bundle regularly. Those who are responsible, a woman and a few men, kiss the *Alam* respectfully.

One of young men cuts a part of *Alam*'s blessed green cloths into pieces and gives it to the pilgrims. The *Alam*'s cloths were then packed into a parcel and taken into the mosque. The *Alam* is accompanied by the *Alam* carrier and his companions. Within *Alam Vachini*, the elegist sang a sorrowful song³ about the sacred death of Imam Hussein (the third Imam of the Shiites).

In some interviews with pilgrims and ritual subjects, they emphasize particular reasons why they participate in the ritual at this shrine, all of which indicate they resolved their difficulties with the grace and help of God or they intended to beg God for overcoming difficulties such as illness, shortage of money and poverty:

As you see, I have offered a carpet to this holy shrine since it helped, my son was cured. We were all hopeless in terms of healing him, but God helped us through the shrine (Male pilgrim, 60 years old).

I am here to wish that my son will come back safe and sound from military service (Female pilgrim, 60 years old).

In addition to chronological narrative of ethnographic observation, some other issues were

observed that provide clues about this ritual. The director of the holy performance (*Taziyyeh*) talked about the sorrowful reality of performing it; this was a story about a woman, who had an abortion, and a man who had been told they could get a daughter, Fatemeh, by offering a religious promise at a shrine. When the daughter grows up and enters university, she suffered from a headache that caused her to be sick and fragile. The mother prayed to Abdolazim shrine, prayed and called Abolfazl⁴ 33 times to cure her daughter, Abolfazl, the majesty, came to her in a dream and cured her as well as possible. The director said to people, many are treated here in front of the flag and it gives them hope. An old man approached and asked the director for a remedy for his ill child from Abolfazl. Inside the shrine, there is a man who presents a carpet to the shrine in order to ensure a remedy for his child's illness and, on the other side; a woman presents pilgrims with soil from the shrine contained in a small sack. Some fill their vessels and containers with blessed water from the spring, in which someone performs ablution by spring water in order to wash their faces as a symbol of blessing. A group hands their tapestries into the *Alam* and sepulcher. The greenish cloths given to people after ritual have healing power and are said to provide good health. People tie them around their children's necks or feet. An old man told us that *Imamzade* had helped him to cure his rheumatism and that he is more than one hundred years old. Eating *Kebab* (cooked meat dishes) as a power of bodily force and symbol of health is an inseparable section of the *Alam Vachini* ritual. Sacrificing meat not only grants power and health to pilgrims by eating it, but also has a close relationship to health and bodily force of life (see Fiddes 2004). Indeed, as Phelan (2017: 51) explicates, pilgrimage provides a metaphor through which different groups become more close to each other during the ritual time. As a matter of fact, anthropological studies have shown that meat serves different functions in rituals (Nick 2004).

RESULTS

Eliade (1976: 61) defines the ritual space as the space of transpersonal God and the enigma of creation. In this situation, while evil takes parts in central evil events like illnesses as the root of sickness (see Amuzgar 2003), rituals restore the

image of God in society and God is no more in exile (see Eliade 1976: 29). The key sign of evil is the destruction of the functions of God's creations and remedies. Eliade (1976: 62) explains that each human is the symbol of God and rituals can help him or her hear the voice of God as an inner voice. As Smit (2008: 48) contends, Eliade, in what he distinguishes as archaic ontology, discusses ritual processes that make the deities' functions explicit. In talking on the image of God, the emergence of miracles play a key part and thinkers who concentrate on the image of God among the people draw up the ritual healing in this respect. However, what is the importance of God in the curative face at the heart of such rituals? As explained above, before land reform (1960), rural people lived in a feudal society in which Iranian lords had endless power. Safinezhad (1966, 1989) reported in his notable ethnographies that farmers were placed at the bottom of hierarchy in Iranian rural society and without permission of the lord for work on his farm, his existence was equated with nothing. Other reports confirm this important ethnographic data (see Al-e Ahmad 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Saedi 1963, 1975, 1976). They had prisons and even more tortured rural rebels and insurgents (see Hassanzadeh 2002). Under such circumstances, rural rituals in general and pilgrimage rituals in particular have a remarkable meaning. In ritual calendars of all parts of Iran, the researchers are faced with chronological pilgrimage rituals that have been held during the year. Most of these rituals have a core that is holy healing, which is carried out by the holy man or woman who is *Imamzade*. This Islamic figure has a pre-Islamic counterpart: Siyavoush (see Meskoub 2015; Hassanzadeh and Karimi 2010). In other cultures, this curative face and vegetative nature of God with the power of remedy and rebirth, is evident (see Bell 1997).

The curative God or figures could be referred to as Greek Asclepius (Edelstei 1998; Jones 2005; Roman and Roman 2010) and Egyptian Thoth (see Pinch 2002: 82-210; Remler 2006: 119) in interior aspects. They were curative gods who could treat the sick and miserable and cure illness. In perfect aspects, they could be named Jesus, in reference to his healing function. The movement from the prototype of the Greek God, Asclepius (see Edelstei 1998; Jones 2005; Roman and Roman 2010) and Egyptian God, Thoth, to Jesus exposes how the spiritual experience of

healing takes the form of religious experience of healing.

In the mythological structure in pre-Islamic Iran, a similar healing figure emerges, a man who can treat patients and cure them. Indeed, some parts of the spiritual experience in Iran include appealing to God for healing. Similar to the sacred death motif found in Jesus' story, Siyavoush in Iran could act a guide for seeking healing in Iranian culture, which could be reconstructed using a comparative study and investigation (see Hassanzadeh and Karimi 2010) as resurrection God, (see Penczak 2007: 31). What connects Siyavoush to the holy faces of *Imamzade*, includes the continuation of the Iranian world view and shows the sustainability of the cultural context in Iran. As Bahar (1997) illustrates, the origins of Siyavoush mythology can be found in Iran far before the Zoroastrian Period. This indicates that in order to trace healing symbols, scholars should focus on pre-Zoroastrian theology and mythology. At the common level of religious experience, local shrines are often connected to the divine origin of healing and continuous rituals that relate to healing have been present from Asclepius to Jesus in Christianity (see Mortley 1996: 71; Edelstein 1998: 132-135; Meier 2005) and from Siyavoush to the present holy men and women at these shrines. When the Iranian people converted to Islam, the symbolic face and figure of rebirth (remedy as the miracle of holy healing) changed, transforming from the image of Siyavoush to the holy face of the third Shiite Imam (Imam Hossain) who is the notable symbol of martyrdom. All holy men and women of local shrines (*Imamzade*) are the mirror of Imam Hossain's martyrdom.

In the public ritual worldview, God is the origin and supreme source of healing, which is considered part of his power and a blessed experience for the religious public to witness (see Stevens and Green 2003: 166). This power is present in some elements such as the healing spring and sacred well (see Varner 2009: 124-125). In this sense, faith and ritual healing unlocks the door (Jacobs 2001: 154-155). The anniversary of the martyrdom is often marked at shrines, which reinforces God's blessed power since the great martyr devoted his all life to God. Therefore, people try to be close to shrines at this time. People are able to be close and draw near to God through the holy men and women and lay down his/her request for healing.

In a review comparing what has been observed in Shahe Shahidan and Hanifiyeh shrines with other shrines, the researchers can see the core of these rituals in depth. While holy springs of Shahzadeh Ebrahim (a shrine in Gilan province) has healing, purification and blessed power, Pir-e Shaliyar (a mausoleum in Kurdistan province), Khaled Nabi (in Golestan province), Mashhad-e Ardahal (in Isfahan province) shrines, are found among springs, rocks and trees. There are two springs at Shahzadeh Ebrahim, called *Chehel Cheshme* (literally 40 springs) and *Tabarake Cheshme* (literally sacred spring) that have healing function. At the Pir-e Shaliyar shrine in the Iranian Kurdish cultural area, the functions of some key elements, such as the pilgrim, spring, and tree are evident. On that day, there is a holy cook that provides a remedy and this can also be observed at Kahled Nabi Shrine as well. The other example is what comes in to view in Kuh-e Khajeh (Khaje Mountain) in Zabol in Sistan and Baluchistan province, as similar rituals where pilgrims roll down the shrine on the eve and threshold of the Iranian New Year. According to the ritual, it provides healing power and cures people of illnesses. In Mashhad-e Ardahal, healing and religious promises are combined (see Bolukbashi 2000). The story of the Pir-e Shaliyar depicts his healing function and indicates that he cured the deaf and dumb daughter of the king of Bokhara (Hassanzadeh and Karimi 2010). The other elders who followed the Pir-e Shaliyar as his disciples with holy powers have healing functions: Pir-e Qalandar treats children's whooping cough, Sheikh Rooholah treats cows, Mola Janolah treats aching feet, and Pir-e Rahbar eliminates plant disease.

The permanent manifestation of a unique approach to sacred healing indicates that one of the most important functions of annual pilgrimages is healing. This simulant function not only shows the experience level of spiritual manner in seeking holy healing, but also brings us to simulant structure. Here, sacred time stands against non-sacred time (historical time) and the conception of time not only breaks separated borders on the gathering of natives, classes, sexes, and ages, but also furnishes the availability of a heavenly and blessed source during a sacred event (such as the memory of martyrdom). The simulant circle of death (martyrdom) and life accompany sickness and health in a unique meaning system that can reach - in the

shattering of time onset - from illness to health when defeating historical time causes sacred time and possibility for healing to emerge. In the usual situation, hierarchy has been constructed based on an ill-defined pattern of authority like the power of lords in the middle ages of Iran, ritual liminality in pilgrimage redefine this situation but based on spiritual hierarchy with emphasis on morality not power, wealth, ownership and properties. Turner (2009) explicates this ritual inverse situation as normative or existential communities. Iranian lords played an important role in shaping the structured form of life during their time of power and this resulted in frustration for villagers. Interestingly, the sacred narrative of the shrines (shrine of *Imamzade Hanifiyeh*) is against the unjust and cruel rulers of the rural world.

DISCUSSION

Alam is known as an element that is related to martyr symbolism in the *Alam Vachini* ritual. This carries the desires of those people who want God's blessing and his ability to cure illness. *Alam* in this ritual is similar to the carpet used in *Qali Shuyan* ritual (in Mashhad Ardashal, each year in October), as it is like the carpet an allegory feature of martyrdom conception (see Bolukbashi 2000, 2001; Hassanzadeh 2013). The *Alam* will be carried around *Imamzade* to mark the day of martyrdom and it represents the people's desires. When it is laid down, it is associated with holy death and martyrdom and thereby represents a godly rebirth. During the *Qali Shuyan* ritual, as a taboo, touching the carpet marks an allegory between the sacred body of *Imamzade*, which is similar to the *Alam Vachini* ritual during which the *Alam* is laid down at the end of the ritual on a pillow and rug. As the *Alam* becomes a martyr like *Imamzade*, it carries the desires of the people and therefore has a similar meaning. Here, like *Imamzade Hanifiyeh*, the force of sacred death that joins with spiritual practice and space complies with the needs and the desires of the people. The holy healing ritual at Hanifiyeh Shrine, shows the trance and holy dream in which ill people can reach healing by God through the holy man. Martyrdom, like the purest moment of spiritual practice and joining to God, is a place for miracles and miraculous healing. As Isaloo (2017: 110) discusses, people are aware of the role of martyrdom in the battle-

field of good and evil. As such, this kind of rituals are viewed as the ritual of collective memory and remembrance (see Murakami 2018: 124).

In the Iranian context, the story of martyrdom is the story of confrontation and battle between the spiritual power whose right is running and the usurper who are the symbol of earthly power (see Beeman 2011). In accordance with what Turner (1967, 2009) argues (see also Hassanzadeh 2013), holy men and women of the shrines are spiritual rulers of every area. Pilgrims, in the time of the shrine, seek refuge in these holy men and women shrines and go out of the structured time and space in which lords had power.

According to folk narratives of the lords' cruelty and oppression, they owned the bride before the groom (folk narratives), they plundered the rice crops, and they imprisoned men (see Hassanzadeh 2002). Rural insurgence in different periods of Iranian feudalism, like the rebellion of Agha Kalnajar in the north (see Payandeh 1991; Hassanzadeh 2002, 2012; Karimi 2013), whose insurgence was turned into folk tales, Aghajan Bak near the first Pahlavi time and the rebellion of women against lords such as Heybat (see Karimi 2013) can be found in the same folk tales about them such as the rebellion of women in *Kore Falak* and *Lash VaNisha* stories (see Hassanzadeh 2002). All show the extreme degree of lords' oppression. As discussed above, the caste-like system of *Boneh* (a traditional system of agriculture in Iran), reported by Safinezhad (1989), elaborates the harsh hierarchical system of Iranian feudalism. Under this circumstance, rituals of pilgrimage with the central role of God who can cure incurable illness emerged at the heart of ritual. Holy men and women who are connected to God symbolized spiritual power versus Lords authority as they have the power of healing. As anthropologists contend (see for example Hallahmi 2008: 159-161) "religion as a social institution is for us the mediator between the invisible supernatural or transcendental world and the visible and natural world." Narratives of miracles provide a discursive shape to rituals (see Hallahmi 2008: 159).

The image of miracles and the observation of miracles in practice are very important for perceiving God's presence. In this line, what Turner argues (see Turner and Turner 1978) as the liminal space of pilgrimage shows the reality beyond what dominates the social world of pil-

grims as a symbolic creation and recreation of the world and society. This ritual space shows how a pilgrim can transcend what is the normative border of the social milieu constructed by social hierarchy. Liminality defines and transforms interpersonal relations (see Kádár 2017: 49) as such in order to perceive a ritual, we should approach it as a primarily relational phenomenon and interactional involvement (Kádár 2017: 55- 61). To join the nature - as a symbol of God - is a means to connect different ethnic groups, which takes place in rituals as pilgrims share a common spiritual experience. At Hani-fiyeh shrine, trance and the holy dream ritual in which holy men and women appear is outside the control of the earthly power of lords. Accordingly, in this perspective, the pilgrimage has a liminal power versus hierarchical powers. Here, as Jansen and Jiménez (2017: 109) discuss liminality transcends every limitations of classes and social strata.

On the other hand, Iranian folk-rural societies are part of a redefinition of the same identity. Anthropological research (see Karimi 2013) shows that people from this area define their identity in association with its rich and green nature and environment. Interestingly, the culture of the pilgrimage is tied to the feeling of belonging to nature in this region. In this sense, nature is a feature of the spiritual experience, as natural aspects like mountains, trees, or rivers appear as a manifestation of God's power (see Zakai 2003: 104-107). As examples, in accordance with the construction of pilgrimages, holy narratives as verbal parts of the ritual, recount how trees are the guardian of the holy shrine, and springs and water well were created as the will of the Imam's descendant and how a mountain has kept the ritual events in its chest. For example, *Imamzade's* footprints on the rocks surrounding the river mark the path taken by *Imamzade* Ebrahim, west of Gilan province. Consequently, in a ritual horizon and perspective, nature is the manifestation of God. For this reason, the pilgrim traveler passes a step with its presence in nature that denotes a manifestation of God and as a result means being near to him. The presence of shrines in nature and the spectacular sights that surround them are the pilgrims' companions; a traveler's journey reveals the connection between nature and spiritual experiences. Pilgrims take off their shoes and walk barefoot toward the holy shrine at the summit of

a mountain. This depicts a direct connection between pilgrims and nature, as they eliminate that distance (shoes) between the pilgrim's body and godly nature. Here, the natural world as the space of God's presence contrasts the social world under control of lords.

The religious travel of pilgrims can be a basis for redefining identity. For instance, it can lead to events like the emigration of pilgrims to the United States, as the basis of their identity was religious travel: American Puritans (see Delbanco and Heimert 2001; Brem 2012). Similarly, immigrants can be identified based on their movement, for instance refugees in Iran and their self-definition. In the redefinition of new and multiple identities (such as those found among Afghan immigrants and Iranian Afghan), religious experience and worshipping have a special status. Karimi (2008), in her study on the identity of Afghani children who were born in Iran, argues that some religious cities are used to give shape to Iranian-Afghani identity in Iran: Ghom, Mash'had and holy shrines in Kerman. They take refuge at the holy shrines when some people humiliate them, and this behavior is similar to the ritual manners of people in pilgrimage culture in Iran. According to the field data of this anthropological study, the definition of identity on a local scale is strongly affected by the ritual of holy healing. However, the question remains as to what is included in the new meaning of these pilgrim rituals after the land reform. Based on what has been observed by the authors of this paper, pilgrims come to the shrine since it gathers them despite their class, gender, age and other structural criteria. They can show and emphasize their common identity in a rural area so they believe they should take part in these rituals, even coming from a distant region. As one participant explained,

I take part in this ritual, put on my best clothes and accompany others since I feel that I belong to this ritual and this rural area (Male Pilgrim, 28 years old).

CONCLUSION

Iranian folk and rural societies from different ethnic groups rush to meet together at different pilgrimage rituals. In this sense, the threshold-liminal time of annual rituals and the spiritual calendar of the Iranian people remove boundaries that separate people and the ritual identity

grants a unity for sub-cultures as well. Spiritual rituals as rituals of upward liminality have different features from secular, carnival, and non-religious cults in Iranian folk societies (like football, fire feast). In the *Alam Vachini* and Hanfieh shrines' holy healing rituals, there are a few sub-cultures that gather pilgrims and this religious journey give a godly meaning to nature. Here, time is known as a sort of sacred-upward time and not *carnivalesque* time or "time out". They are equal to spiritual experience and God and there are not any barriers such as rank, hierarchy, class, stratum, language, tribe and so on to stand against ritual integration and solidarity. This is known as the normative communitas of pilgrimage rituals, which is evident in Iranian local convergence based on their ritual identification. The ethnics define their equality in joining with conception of God and spiritual experience of holy healing: no one is perfect and no one is superior, Kurd, Guilak, Lor or Baloch. According to what was discussed in this paper, the culture of pilgrimage rituals is divided into two periods. One comes back to before land reform and other one includes its aftermath. In the first period, one of the roles that these rituals took on was a kind of ritual rebellion against the power of lords and the hierarchy to which they had given shape. The spiritual power that emerges in holy healings, defined ritual hierarchy and equality within that was against the harsh and strict form of separation between the classes, namely, *Boneh*. In the second period and in the wake of land reform, the feudal hierarchy gradually faded away in rural areas but this ritual still defines ritual equality in which all genders, ages and ethnic groups can take part. Holy healing is seen at the heart of spiritual power since it shows the power of rebirth versus illness and death and is equivalent with miracles, which indicate the power of God as that of the one who is greater and beyond every power. This power has the quality of integration and equality while the earthly power (lords) rests on hierarchy, and gaps and gulfs between the classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In comparison to urban areas, rural areas in Iran are interested in defining identity through nature and environment and the belief in religious principles. Nowadays, the culture of pil-

grimage is seen at the heart of rural culture in Iran as one of the key features in defining rural identity which provide a domain for researches on the matter of identity.

NOTES

- ¹ *Safar* is the second month of lunar calendar.
- ² Soloist: God! Bless Mohammad and his progeny. Oh! Hail to the king of kings. Choir: Hail to the king of martyrs. Soloist: We come near the *Alam*. Choir: Oh! Hail to the king of kings forever. Soloist: Oh! King, Hail. Choir: Oh! King, Hail. Soloist: Ahmad Mokhtar, Hail forever. Choir: Ahmad Mokhtar, Hail forever. Soloist: The master and head, Hail. Choir: The king of kings, Hail. Soloist: The master of brave men, Hail. Choir: The king of kings, Hail. Soloist: Oh! Beheaded king, Hossein. Choir: Oh! Our savior and helper, Hossein, Hail. Soloist: Born in resurrection, Hossein. Choir: Oh! Hossein, Hossein!
- ³ The time of king's grief, what a pity! The world is anguished, what a pity! The universe is distressed, what a pity!
The time of king's grief, what a pity!
- ⁴ Abolfazl is the brother of the third Shiite Imam, Hossain Ibn Ali, who was martyred faithfully and has a sacred place among Shiite.

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