

BELIEFS AND RITUALS OF SHRINES IN JERUSALEM DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

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Abstract

The article explores beliefs and rituals associated with the shrines in Jerusalem during the Ottoman rule, rather than provide an analysis of the relationship between the different levels of cultural construction. It presents an ethnographic account of the pilgrimage and beliefs, customs and traditions related to it, in historic Jerusalem. It must be noted that to this day, there are many people who still perform and engage in similar practices. It is also worth mentioning the concern of the ruling Ottoman authority at the time and its interest in keeping the shrines in order to support balanced relationships between different groups of the population.

Keywords: *Islam, pilgrimage, shrines, Jerusalem, Karamat*

Introduction

This article deals with the role and importance of shrines (*Mazar*) in Jerusalem as they are a source of life in its immaterial and spiritual dimension, on the level of social and religious life. A reading of some rituals and beliefs allows analyzing the social practices related to the tomb of Sheikh Muhammad bin Omar bin Muhammad Al-Alami in Jerusalem. During the Ottoman era, Jerusalem witnessed diversity in its cultural, social, economic, religious and urban facilities, which was reflected in religious facilities such as mosques *Zawaya*,¹ schools and shrines that benefited from the environment of religious openness and doctrinal and ideological coexistence.

The history of Jerusalem in the Ottoman period, especially in its cultural and

¹ ZAWYA: a place of worship status for mystics. It is known as a religious school and it looks like the Christian schools. Religion is taught and a recitation of the Holy Book (QURA'AN) by the SHIEKH takes place.

socio-anthropological aspects, is still a fertile field for research, especially when one studies and analyzes the relationship between the man and his spatial environment.

Sunni Islam contains two essential religious tracks in its life through history. The first track is the Orthodox Islam that concerns the doctrines and beliefs and excludes other mediators between a person and God (Kahan 1995: 269). This track defends rational doctrine principles. On the other side, there is the popular Sunni which centralizes on moral concepts such as ascetism, patience, righteousness, humility, discipline, love to God, satisfaction, austerity, submission to the sheikh. However, this group known in "SUFISM" (Lazarus-Yafeh 1980: 80) encompasses special rituals and beliefs such as: believing in the spiritual significance of the righteous men (*Awlia*) and the miracles related to them (*Karamat*); visiting the tombs and venerating the righteous men, alive or dead, and believing that their blessings and their tombs is something that relates to the personal well-being and blessing (Fazlur 1966: 156-165; Abed-Alim 1997: 90-98). Research in the areas of interaction between man and place can reveal the symbolic and structural connotations of the places designated for commemoration and rituals associated with death, including precisely those in the shrines as an important part of the communication between the living and their ancestors.

I should mention that the first track of the tenets of Orthodox Islam does not include visiting the righteous men, neither acknowledges their '*Karamat*'; it does not allow mediators between the person and the God (Allah). This means that, in general, there exist different streams in the 'high' Islamic tradition, and the so called 'popular Islam'.

The phenomenon of pilgrimage is universal; it is a religious and social phenomenon (Barber 1991:23-28). Pilgrimage is common to the religions of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the journey of visiting holy places is a kind of spiritual purification and demonstration of humility and obedience to God in medieval Christianity, for example; it was customary to receive spiritual purification and atonement for the sin one has committed (Bilu 1991: 22-29).

According to Turner, the goal of the Christian pilgrimage is to get rid of the burdens of tension and anxiety and to erase the feeling of guilt, to reconfirm religious values, and to strengthen the social relations which he called "communitas". These ties increase their strength and interdependence at the time of the pilgrimage; it increases the bonds of brotherhood and friendship between people (Turner. V., Turner E. 1978:109-118). Therefore, in all three Abrahamic religions, the purpose of pilgrimage is to pray in the holy places, believing that the prayer in these places is more effective than the prayer from other founders.

There are large religious flows to the holy places in Palestine and Jerusalem, in particular, to ask for forgiveness and mercy, to receive blessings, to heal from diseases: many common and well-known holy places in the three religions. One can mention, for example, the Christian Church of the Nativity in the Holy land or the numerous sanctuaries of Judaism. Muslims venerate a holy place at Baba Sally

where people flock to receive holy water near the holy tomb. Muslims still flock to Jerusalem at the tombs of holy saints to receive blessings, it must be mentioned that there are common shrines for Muslim and Christians, as there is pilgrimage to the same shrine as in the case of the tomb of Sheikh Abraham located in Banias in the Galilee region in the holy land (Elad1992: 63-67; Bowman 2013: 69-78).

It is worth noting that in all three religions, the pilgrimage is a journey up to God and inward, to the heart of faith. It is a journey through spaces, and at the same time a journey into the depths of the religious experience. Victor and Edith Turner defined it this way: “one can see in the pilgrimage a truly extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is an ascension to an introverted rage” (Turner V, Turner E:13-18).

The practice of visiting tombs should be analyzed in the context of pilgrimage studies that have recently become pivotal for the anthropologists of religion. Turner claims that there are many forms of pilgrimage. Thus, pilgrimage comprises of various forms, including marching pilgrimage (rituals of walking that happen during the pilgrimage season) or pilgrimage via other means such as riding motorcycles, etc.

As Morinis assumes, despite the external appearances of the collectivist pilgrimage and repenting trips which been viewed in the first place as an individual personal relation for pilgrims and not as a collectivist relation. In other words, pilgrimage is an individual relation related to the person himself and not related to the whole society (Morinis1992:47-61). According to Coleman and Walter, the tomb is the reason behind pilgrimage: “no pilgrimage without holly place, i.e., tomb” (Coleman 2002:355-365; Walter 1993:29-35).

In the wake of advancing the traveling and movement, the concept of tourism has been intervened to pilgrimage researches as Alphonse Dupront was the first one who touched on pilgrimage tourism impulse. In his claim, the main reason for pilgrimage comes from religious motivation; but the influences of tourism or social communication are just of a secondary character (Margry 2008:32-41).

I shall mention that there are motivations for pilgrimage such as communicating with the saint in order to obtain protection or for healing or getting some happiness. For that, the visitor touches the tomb for gaining spiritual, emotional, physical healing.

In this article, I explore the rituals and practices related to the shrines in Jerusalem during the Ottoman period. I have tried to answer the following questions: What were the features of social life during this period that framed these rituals and practices related to the shrines? What are the status and functions of these shrines? What are the beliefs related to them? After defining certain basic terms, I tried to answer these questions based on the available historical sources and by presenting the case of the shrine of Sheikh Muhammad bin Omar bin Muhammad Al-Alami as a representative model for many shrines in Jerusalem during the Ottoman rule.

Objectives of the article

It is the aim of this article to shed light on the social and religious dimensions, as well as the factors that motivate the pilgrims to visit and venerate the shrines. The article also aims to identify the psychological (health-related) and social functions of visiting shrines and the role of rituals and their impact on the continuous pilgrimage and in general, on the mental and ideological condition of the people. Achieving the objectives of the article requires understanding some of the key terms in the beliefs related to shrines, in order to understand the motives for the pilgrimage.

The significance of the subject

The article addresses one of the significant topics concerning a phenomenon popular among various groups of society. The anthropological approach is crucial in understanding pilgrimage practices: the beliefs and rituals. This article is an attempt to contribute to socio-anthropological studies of religion by discussing important areas and topics of social reality: “A society that does not work to understand the actions and behaviors of its citizens and issues prejudices about their actions is a rigid society” (Rashik, Shamhrouh 2010: 7). Therefore, it is important to understand and clarify the human relationship with the sacred (the shrines and their patrons), through the practices and rituals that translate this relationship.

The time span of the Ottoman rule of Jerusalem (which began with Sultan Selim I entering the city of Jerusalem in 1517) lasted for about four hundred years, and thus it is one of the most continuous regimes that ruled and settled in Jerusalem until 1917. This makes it hard to display all the terms related to the topic in this article, so I would limit myself with the following four terms:

Shrines mazar

Linguistically, the term shrine (*Mazar*) means the whole grave, but technically it is used to refer to the building built on the grave, i.e., above it (Nawar 2002: 112; Ibn Manzur 2005: 230). This is due to the name of the part on the whole. It is called a shrine since it combines the tomb and the building built above it, and the shrine takes its religious and social status from the importance of the person buried in his grave. The shrine is a sacred landmark which is perceived in terms of greatness, prestige and righteousness. This is especially true for those shrines that keep the remains of the righteous saints - *Awliya 'a Salihin* - and the Muslim scholars who were famous and founded the Sufi orders - *Tariqa*, which attracted devotees – *Murid*. It must be mentioned that a shrine is not limited to one grave in one place, as we can find several tombs of one person in separate urban sites. The shrine, in the popular

local tradition, is a symbol of piety and righteousness, and it is a place where prayers for blessings and goodness are answered.

The shrines of Jerusalem, but not only, are divided into types. Firstly, some of them contain the body remains of a holy person, including the so-called “shrines of the vision” - *Roi 'yaa*: those built after ‘seeing’ one of the righteous saints, ‘*Wali*’, in a dream in a specific location; second, the cenotaph which does not contain body remains but was built according to political, social or religious ambitions and considerations instead.

The development and spread of religious architecture in the Islamic world had a great and effective role in building domes as memorial symbols indicating the graves of religious figures (Maher 1976: 46). The dome, in the prevailing belief among the people of Islamic orders *Tariqa*, especially Iraq’s Sufis, is a sacred symbol of a religious figure and a guardian of God’s righteous saints, irrespectively whether the dome contains the guardian’s ‘*Wali*’ bones or it is a place where he used to cross or sit upon. The dome has become a landmark and a shrine for the pilgrimage of the devotees *Muridin* and the dome is called after the saint’s name (the dome of Sidi so and so, i.e. the name of the *Wali*). In his book “*Nafhat al-Basham*”, dedicated to the journey of al-Sham after his visit to the Levant and Palestine in 1885, Muhammad Abd al-Jawad al-Qayati mentioned the existence of certain famous shrines in Jerusalem, including the tomb of Moses, peace be upon him, the shrine of Yunus, peace be upon him, etc. (Al-Quayati 1981: 62).

Various types of Muslim shrines exist, as the spread of shrines in Jerusalem is due to the emergence of Sufi movements in this city, and perhaps this is due to the city’s exposure to wars and conquests, and the latter had an impact on its political, social and cultural transformations (Al-Salihi 2001: 67). There are certain types of shrines called popular shrines, and the term ‘popular’ means every material object or moral practice that is organically connected to the people, irrespectively whether it is produced and created by the people or produced and directed to the people (Saeed 1995: 5).

The popular tombs are the tombs that contain body remains (bones) of a *Wali* about whom no firm historical evidences exist, but just a repository of the popular memory preserves tales and legends about him woven by the popular imagination. Another type of tombs is the Sultanic tombs, which are known after the names of their patrons, among the most famous religious figures known by lineage and knowledge, because history preserves them from oblivion and the cultural heritage related to them is circulated by the generations. A record of their heroic deeds exists such as *Jihad*, spreading religion, etc., and the establishment of religious educational institutions.

Pilgrimage

Linguistically, the act of the pilgrimage visit indicates inclination and desire to join the sacred (Abi Ab-Hassan 1979: 36). Likewise, a visit in Arabic means the

intention to go to a place in order to meet a friend or visit a sick person or a relative. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Mailil defines it in the following way: “The visit is about the coming of some living people for some affection and love” (Al-Mailil 2001: 337). As for the popular meaning of the visit, it has two varieties: first, to visit the sanctuaries and holy places, such as the pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca; visiting the graves of the dead and the shrines of the righteous saints to seek their blessings. Secondly, a visit also implies the objects a visitor donates to the shrine: money, clothing, or other belongings.

The Sufis venerated their *Sheikhs*, their life and death and in the relationship of the dead to the living, as it is obligatory to visit the dead at his grave. Besides, the guardian – a righteous man – does not lose his *Karamat*² (Trimingham 1971: 26-28) after his death, but rather his supernatural abilities remained with him in his grave (Al Nabhani 1911: 29). Sufi scholars and clerics were interested in visiting the graves of their ancestors among the *Sheikhs* of the Sufi orders to obtain blessings, as for example the disciples of Sheikh Muhammad bin Omar bin Muhammad Al-Alami did: they kept frequenting the sanctuary of their *Sheikh* (Khadraj 2019: 7-15).

Thus, the term *Ziyarat* designates in the popular belief a visit to the graves and shrines of the righteous saints. These places are marked by sacredness, and they are also called shrines *Mazarat*. Originally, the latter are places which attract pilgrims seeking blessings from those whose remains lay inside, or were buried there, or the places were named after them (Al-Mailil 2001: 338). The purpose of visiting shrines as sacred monuments varies according to the pilgrims’ beliefs or motivations.

The Guardian ‘Wali’

According to the current definitions, the guardian ‘Wali’ is the one who knows God and His attributes, who perseveres in obedience, who avoids disobedience, who avoids preoccupation with pleasures and desires, who respects good manners, and who is called a ‘Wali’ because he undertakes the worship of God permanently and continuously. He is a person of faith, knowledge, asceticism and righteous deeds, so people resort to seeking blessings from him during his life and after his death, so they seek blessings at his grave (Dahmani 2006:16; Nikolson 1963:120-147).

² Karamat: for the mystical Muslims it implies the supernatural abilities coming from God that some righteous men have – *awlya*. However, for the KARAMAT that might imply “*awlya*” - the gift to predict the future, walk on water and other supernatural capacities, see Trimingham 1971: 26-28.

Social conditions in Jerusalem during the Ottoman era

The status of Jerusalem and its strategic location, its name and fame, were increased by the human influx, either for religious or economic reasons. The human influx and the human diversity in the city led to polarization among the populations, as it was inhabited by people of different nationalities and religions. In light of this, the residents of Jerusalem during the Ottoman rule were divided in terms of their religion into Muslims, Christians and Jews. In 1806, the total population of the city of Jerusalem was 8750, most of whom were Muslims (Ben-Arieh 1975: 51-55).

The main population of the city of Jerusalem consisted of Arabs, Turks, Moroccans, Indians and others (Al-Azali 1989: 252). During the Ottoman rule, Jerusalem was populated by Arabs and immigrants from the Levant cities as well as from other Palestinian cities such as Nablus, Hebron, Gaza and other areas. During their rule in Jerusalem, the Ottoman authorities maintained a loving relationship and closeness with the residents and built a strong social bond and fabric between the residents of different religions: Muslims, Christians and Jews. The Ottomans allowed all components of society in Jerusalem to express themselves within the framework of the Ottoman system (Kawtharani 1988: 67-71). Tolerance, good neighborliness and cooperation were the characteristics that distinguished the relations between the different religious groups in Jerusalem, as each religion enjoyed practicing its religious traditions. Likewise, in terms of work, Christians participated with Muslims and Jews in craftsmanship, in trade, knitting, sewing and other occupations. Jerusalem had its visitors who were treated well by the inhabitants of the city and the Ottoman authorities alike.

Pilgrimage to shrines: between belief and practice

Enumerating the totality of practices and rituals that the residents of Jerusalem used to perform when visiting shrines (during the Ottoman rule) is a difficult task for several reasons, the most prominent of which is the large number of shrines, their diversity, and the multiplicity of desired goals of the visit. However, what is noticeable in this regard is the commitment of the Jerusalemites at the time and their perseverance in performing

these visits to the shrines of the righteous saints, either on weekly, monthly or annual basis, including offering sacrifices, gifts, etc. (Al-Alimi 1973: 65-83). As for the motivations for pilgrimage to the shrines, they can be summarized in three main points:

Prayers for health

A pilgrim hopes to obtain comfort and inner calm, to obtain goodness and blessing, and to respond to supplication (Foqara 2004: 62-65).

Social goals

They vary between asking for help and force, asking for protection and safety, and showing social solidarity (Shalhat 2003: 60).

Religious motivation in the narrow sense

Visiting shrines is represented in achieving spiritual stability and happiness in the world and hereafter and drawing close to God through the good guardian Wali Salih. With regard to the means and methods engaged in this communication between the living and the dead, the patrons of the shrines, in turn, the saints were addressed by direct rituals such as asking for healing from the righteous saint of the shrine, lighting candles, spreading incense, holding circles of remembrance and supplication and other rituals and practices supported by beliefs (Al-Mailil 2001: 330-338).

*Beliefs and rituals related to the shrine (**Mazar**) of Sheikh Muhammad bin Omar bin Muhammad Al-Alami in Jerusalem.*

The shrine of the Righteous Wali Muhammad bin Omar bin Muhammad Al-Alami is one of the most important Muslim shrines in Jerusalem. It is located at the top of Mount Al-Tur in Jerusalem. A corner was built there, known as the Al-Zawiya Al-Asa'diya, in reference to its originator Asaad Effendi Tabrizi (Mana 1986: 122-128). In the corner (Zawiya) there is also a mosque. The tomb of Sheikh Muhammad Al-Alami was the object of veneration by many people who came to it, belonging to different groups and social layers of Jerusalem society, as well as visitors from other

cities (Selim 2014:28-37). The visits to the shrine of Seikh Muhammad Al-Alami were believed to be of benefit in many respects, among them are the following:

- 1) Healing from various ailments, both physical and psychological;
- 2) Driving away the evils of envy, hatred and malice;
- 3) Achieving protection and safety.

As for the rituals practiced at the shrine, they did not differ much from their counterparts at other shrines, and they varied between:

– Gain blessing, which is a benevolent force that radiates from the holy place, so the visitor touches the shrine and passes his hand and body over the shrine to receive the blessing (Canaan 1958: 125). As the visitor kisses the shrine and wraps his body with the shrine curtain, the aim of these actions is to obtain blessings from the shrine and its patron (Abed Alim: 121-130).

– Put private property under the protection of the good guardian Wali Salih next to his tomb.

– Tie the rags (fabrics) which is an old custom followed at most shrines. A rag is tied either to the trees located on the shrine, and if there are no trees, it is tied around the windows of the shrine. This act is a sign of visiting the shrine and fulfilling a religious duty or a symbol of throwing the patient's burden on the guardian, so as the patient ties the rag and he/she says: "I threw my burden on you, O Guardian of God", and people believe that the guardian thereby keeps the disease away from the patient (Abed Alim: 131-135).

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to provide an idea of the beliefs and rituals associated with the shrines in Jerusalem during the Ottoman rule, rather than provide an analysis of the relationship between the levels of cultural construction, i.e., the religious, social, political and even economic levels. Rather, I presented an ethnographic description of the beliefs, customs and traditions practiced by the residents of Jerusalem during their visit to the shrines of the righteous saints. It must be noted that to this day there are many people who still participate in the practice of those rituals and beliefs. It is also worth mentioning the relationship of the ruling Ottoman authority at the time and its interest in visiting the shrines due to the close relationships between different groups of the population.

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