

When Rituals Leave Their Place: Anthropology of the Transition from Traditional Pilgrimage to Virtual Pilgrimage.

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Abstract: This article seeks to approach virtual Hajj as a new ritual where physical presence is absent, and virtual presence takes center stage. Our analysis and reflections are framed within our field of study (anthropology), aiming to observe the ritualistic transformations of Hajj. With the current phenomenon known as the "digital revolution," it has become possible to simulate the rituals and practices of Hajj through the metaversal reality. Thanks to augmented reality, Technology has allowed Muslims—and even non-Muslims—to explore these rituals without physically traveling to Mecca. This virtual experience offers an alternative for those unable to perform the pilgrimage due to various obstacles, most notably health and financial constraints. This transformation raises questions about the authenticity and spirituality of the traditional Hajj experience, its impact on religious practices, and how it reshapes our understanding of modern rituals and worship.

Keywords: Virtual Pilgrimage, Digital Religious Rituals, Technology and Worship, Virtual Reality, Spiritual Digital Experience.

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1- INTRODUCTION

Every year, millions of Muslims converge in Makkah to perform Hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam, making it a central spiritual event. The Hajj rituals, including Ihram, the Tawaf (circumambulation) of the Kaaba, Sa'i (the walk between Safa and Marwa), and the standing at Arafat, unite Muslims globally. These sacred practices must adhere to the prophetic traditions, both in terms of time and place, making the pilgrimage a unique and irreplaceable experience for Muslims. It is a once-in-a-lifetime duty that demands substantial physical and mental preparation—Muslims journey to the Holy Land in Saudi Arabia, performing these rituals under vastly different circumstances.

With the advancements in technology, a "pilgrimage" can now take place in the digital realm, referred to as a "virtual pilgrimage." This modern adaptation enables Muslims who face physical, health, or social challenges to participate in Hajj rituals remotely. Utilizing technologies such as virtual reality and interactive video, virtual pilgrimage simulates the experience of performing Hajj. It extends the traditional pilgrimage rituals, allowing individuals to "visit" sacred sites online, without physically being in Makkah.

This study is crucial for analyzing the varied digital representations of the Hajj experience. It examines how cyberspace presents these religious rituals and the resulting impact. The article delves into the religious references in digital content related to Hajj and investigates the influence of modern technology on Muslims' understanding of the pilgrimage. It also considers the role of online platforms in shaping perceptions of the Hajj and questions how virtual reality technology influences these perceptions.

2- What is Traditional Hajj

Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, representing an obligatory pilgrimage that every adult Muslim must undertake, provided they are financially and physically capable. This sacred duty takes place during the specific months of Hajj in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, starting in Shawwal and concluding on the 13th of Dhu al-Hijjah. The significance of Hajj is emphasized in the Holy Qur'an, where Allah says: "And proclaim to the people the Hajj; they will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every distant pass, that they may witness things that are of benefit to them..." (Surah Al-Hajj, 27). This verse underscores the profound importance of the pilgrimage in Islam and its transformative impact on the lives of believers.

The primary aim of Hajj is to fulfill both spiritual and religious objectives, serving as a means of purification and repentance. It cleanses Muslims spiritually and physically, absolving their sins and renewing their commitment to faith. Moreover, the pilgrimage symbolizes social change and unity within the Muslim community, reflecting the concept of Islamic solidarity. Muslims from diverse backgrounds converge in Mecca to fulfill this sacred obligation, creating a shared religious experience that transcends geographic boundaries and fosters a sense of brotherhood and coexistence within the global Ummah. The rituals of Hajj are meticulously structured and carry deep significance. The pilgrimage begins with the donning of Ihram, a simple garment that symbolizes humility and equality among Muslims. The pilgrimage culminates with the Tawaf, in which worshippers circumambulate the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction, symbolizing their monotheism and devotion to God. This act demonstrates the unity of Muslims in worship, irrespective of social or economic status. The ritual of Sa'i, where pilgrims walk between the hills of Safa and Marwa, commemorates the actions of the Prophet Abraham and his wife Hagar, reminding Muslims of their enduring faith in divine providence and the sacrifices made by their ancestors.

The Waqf at Arafat is a central and indispensable element of Hajj, symbolizing the day when Muslims gather in Arafat Square to pray and seek repentance. This gathering

represents the Day of Resurrection, when individuals will stand before God to account for their deeds. The moment of standing before God is a deeply spiritual occasion for reflection and confession. Similarly, in Mina, the act of throwing pebbles at the Jamarat signifies the struggle against evil, recalling the devil's attempts to tempt the Prophet Abraham during his trial of sacrificing his son, Ishmael. This ritual serves as a reminder of the believer's ability to resist temptation and steadfastly uphold their faith.

The pilgrimage is more than a sequence of rituals; it embodies the core principles of sacrifice and obedience. The physical exertion involved in fulfilling this sacred duty reflects the Muslim's devotion, often requiring substantial travel and financial sacrifice in the Holy Land. Every ritual serves as a testament to profound respect for God's will.

These practices, unchanged since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, are rich in symbolism and are deeply rooted in a long history of obedience to divine commands. The contemporary pilgrimage renews faith among Muslims, reinforcing the belief that Hajj cleanses sins and fosters a spirit of continuous devotion.(Ahmed,2021,p23)

3. The Importance of Rituals in Islam

Islamic rituals, especially those performed during Hajj, represent a profound spiritual commitment to the Creator. These rituals go beyond being mere ceremonies; they embody faith and complete submission to God's will. Through the pilgrimage, Muslims surrender themselves wholly to God, seeking to grow closer to Him, cultivate humility, and engage in repentance. These rituals redirect the individual's focus towards God, offering an opportunity to cleanse one's sins and renew the spirit, thereby strengthening one's faith and attachment to the Divine.

Among these rituals, the act of throwing pebbles holds profound symbolic significance. This ritual reenacts a pivotal event in Islamic tradition, the rejection of Satan's temptation of the Prophet Abraham. When Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, in obedience to God, Satan sought to dissuade him (Turner,1973,p11) . The act of casting the pebbles symbolizes our rejection of evil's temptation and the resolute defense of faith. This daily battle against temptation is echoed in this act, where we turn away from worldly distractions and refocus our attention on God. Through this ritual, we reaffirm our steadfast devotion and spiritual resolve.

Pilgrims, shedding their worldly roles, unite in purpose. Seven circumambulations around the Kaaba serve as a spiritual cleansing and renewal of faith. As planets orbit their center, so do the believers revolve around their spiritual core. This ancient rite unites Muslims, transcending the bounds of time and space. Rich and poor, young and old, converge in this shared act, bound by their faith. The counterclockwise movement, like a cosmic dance, weaves believers together, irrespective of their social standing. The ritual reinforces the idea that all Muslims, no matter their background, are united in their devotion to the Creator.

These pilgrimage rituals unify Muslims worldwide, creating an unbreakable bond of community and spirituality. In these sacred moments, individuals come together to perform identical rituals in unison, embodying the strength of the brotherhood that binds them in worship. The Hajj promotes the ideal of a single, unified Islamic nation, underscoring the importance of Muslim unity. This renewal of collective spirit serves to transcend social, cultural, and ethnic divisions, demonstrating the shared commitment to faith and unity in Islam. (Turner,1973,p11)

The rituals of Hajj are not merely acts of worship; they serve to connect the believer with their religious and spiritual identity. They reshape this identity within the context of a unified global community. Muslims share this deeply personal spiritual experience, which fosters a sense of belonging and collective purpose. Through these rituals, pilgrims not

only strengthen their personal faith but also reinforce their place within the larger, faith-driven Muslim community. (Goffman,1967,p43).

3.1 Anthropological Perspective on Rituals

Arnold van Gennep describes pilgrimage as a pivotal rite of passage that marks a transformation, guiding the pilgrim into a new phase of their spiritual and social journey. During Hajj, pilgrims leave behind their everyday lives, setting aside worldly distractions and responsibilities to embark on a profound spiritual quest focused on worship and closeness to God. This journey includes a "transition phase," signifying a shift in both social and spiritual consciousness. Unlike routine activities, pilgrimage is a sacred ritual that liberates individuals from material concerns, thereby enhancing their spiritual well-being. In this sacred space, pilgrims transcend the boundaries of time and place, fostering a direct, intimate connection with the Divine. (Van Genep,2019,p54)

The pilgrimage journey surpasses physical limitations, bridging various realms of existence. Sacred rituals, such as Ihram, Tawaf (the act of circling the Kaaba), Sa'i, and the vigil at Arafat, all serve to anchor individuals in their faith. These practices purify the soul and transform the inner self. Through these rites, pilgrims shed their former identities and emerge renewed in both spirit and community. The pilgrimage is, therefore, a deeply transformative experience, creating new identities that are rooted in faith and shared spiritual connections. It elevates the individual above the routines of daily life, revealing profound truths and fostering strong bonds with both the Divine and fellow believers.

Victor Turner emphasized that rituals not only facilitate individual transformation but also encourage "collective communion" among participants. As a communal ritual, Hajj brings together Muslims from across the globe in a shared experience that transcends ethnic, cultural, and economic boundaries. In this collective communion, social distinctions fade, and hierarchies from everyday life diminish. This interaction lays the foundation for a shared social identity anchored in spirituality and worship. (Turner,1973,p25)

The unity among pilgrims is exemplified in their shared experience of wearing the simple Ihram attire, which removes any outward markers of status. The Ihram strips away symbols of social class, fostering a sense of unity and collective harmony among pilgrims. Despite the many differences in their personal lives, the pilgrimage binds them together, making the ritual a social process that emphasizes spiritual equality in the eyes of God. During this sacred journey, each pilgrim becomes part of a larger community, one that transcends geographical boundaries and social distinctions, united by a common faith and devotion.

Thus, Hajj transcends being a purely individual ritual; it becomes an occasion that transforms the pilgrim within a collective context, diminishing distinctions between people and underscoring their shared belonging to the Islamic Ummah. Through this experience, the pilgrim gains a deeper understanding of themselves within the broader context of daily life, becoming part of a collective journey that embodies a unified Islamic identity, free from material disparities.

3.2. Identity and Self-Remodeling

Ihram, the distinctive attire worn by pilgrims, serves as a potent symbol of equality and impartiality. By donning Ihram, the pilgrim symbolically relinquishes all elements of daily life, including the social and economic identities that typically define individuals in the external world. This act of transition is not merely ceremonial but marks a crucial spiritual and physical transformation that a Muslim undergoes during Hajj. The significance of this symbolic gesture lies in its capacity to highlight the essential equality

of all pilgrims, while also reflecting the profound internal metamorphosis that occurs during their sacred journey in the Holy Land.

In shedding their customary attire and donning the Ihram, pilgrims become indistinguishable from one another, reinforcing the concept of Islamic unity and the egalitarian nature of the pilgrimage. In this purified state, they are no longer viewed through the lens of their socio-economic standing, but as equal members of the larger Muslim Ummah. This symbolic equality is a direct manifestation of Islam's vision of solidarity and fraternity, with the pilgrimage serving as a tangible reflection of the fundamental Islamic principle that devotion to God transcends distinctions based on social class, wealth, or lineage. (Turner,1973,p12)

Ihram acts as a conduit for the pilgrim's reconnection to their authentic identity, one that is not defined by societal roles but by their relationship with God. From this perspective, Ihram can be understood not only as a religious rite but as a means of integrating the individual into the larger collective of the Muslim community, thereby fostering a unified spiritual experience. It is through this collective act that the individual is reoriented, not merely as an isolated believer but as a member of a broader spiritual collective.(Turner,1973,p15)

This transformative process extends well beyond the confines of the religious practices associated with Hajj; it permeates the individual's identity on both personal and collective levels. On a personal level, Hajj provides the opportunity for repentance and spiritual purification, fostering a deep sense of inner tranquility and enhancing the individual's direct connection to God. On a collective level, the pilgrimage strengthens the bonds of solidarity among Muslims worldwide, reaffirming the unity of Islam in the face of the social, political, or cultural forces that seek to divide its adherents. (Van Genep,2019,p55) Through shared rituals, pilgrims partake in a collective spiritual experience that redefines their communal identity, while simultaneously redirecting them toward the central tenets of Islam: unity, humility, and sacrifice.

The transformation of identity brought about by the pilgrimage is not confined solely to the period of the rituals themselves; it extends into the social and psychological dimensions of the pilgrim's life after their return. For many, the experience of Hajj serves as a catalyst for reassessing their personal and familial values, while fostering a heightened awareness of the importance of strengthening social ties and relationships. Moreover, the transformative nature of the pilgrimage often leads to tangible changes in lifestyle, with some pilgrims adopting new behaviors and habits that reflect the spiritual insights gained during their time in the Holy Land.(Al-Saeed, Fatima,2022,p89)

In this regard, it can be argued that Ihram is not merely a garment, but rather a symbolic instrument in a broader process of identity reconstruction. Through this process, Hajj becomes a living embodiment of the values of unity and equality, fostering stronger interpersonal relationships within the Islamic community. It underscores the shared spirituality that binds Muslims together, reaffirming their collective bond in the presence of God and their shared commitment to the core principles of the faith.

4. The Totem Dimension of Hajj: An Anthropological Study in Collective Symbolism and Shared Holiness

Both pilgrimage and totemism represent symbolic dynamics that seek to connect individuals with the sacred while reinforcing collective identity. From an anthropological perspective, these two concepts share a ritualistic experience that cultivates a sense of community belonging and loyalty, transcending differences in cultural and religious contexts. To further explore this relationship, we examine the Hajj as a global symbolic

phenomenon that mirrors aspects of traditional totemism within the expansive framework of global Islam.

4.1. Totem and Pilgrimage: The Centrality of Symbols in Collective Rituals

Emile Durkheim argued that in traditional societies, totems function as sacred symbols that articulate group identity and spiritual values, through which social bonds are consecrated and reinforced by collective rituals. (Durkheim, Émile, 1912, p47) In the Islamic context, the Kaaba occupies a central position as a symbol of unity among Muslims, with the act of circumambulation serving as a shared expression of commitment to the Islamic faith. Durkheim noted that totem-related rituals are vital for renewing collective bonds and reinvigorating social identity. This concept is similarly applicable to the Hajj, where Muslims from all parts of the world come together to engage in unifying rituals that reaffirm their collective belonging. (Durkheim, Émile, 1912, p64)

4.2. Rituals as Uniform Practices of Identity

Victor Turner highlighted that collective rituals, such as the circumambulation of the Kaaba, effectively dissolve individual distinctions and transform participants into a state of "communitas." (Turner, 1973, p64) The Hajj creates an environment that transcends social class and cultural differences, with all participants donning Ihram, emphasizing absolute equality and fostering a sense of belonging to a broader collective; namely, the Islamic Ummah.

In traditional societies, totems typically focus on unifying smaller groups, yet they perform a similar function by promoting harmony and shared identity among members. In both contexts, rituals serve as mechanisms for transitioning individuals from a personal state to a sacred, group-oriented existence. These rituals renew a sense of belonging and reinforce one's place within the larger community.

4.3. The circumambulation of the Kaaba and totemism: a representation of central holiness

In totemic societies, the act of circumambulating the totem symbolizes a rotation around a sacred center, reflecting cosmic harmony and collective belonging. The Tawaf, or circumambulation of the Kaaba, mirrors this concept, signifying the Muslim's alignment with the universe and submission to the will of God. Tawaf also embodies the cyclical nature of life, reinforcing the spiritual and collective values that are foundational to Islam. (Turner, 1973, p33)

Turner suggested that such rituals are forms of "Symbolic Reordering," in which the world is structured to offer participants a sense of spiritual and social equilibrium. In the case of the Hajj, the ritual of Tawaf serves as both a spiritual and social reorganization, facilitating a deeper connection to the divine and the Muslim community. (Turner, 1973, p35)

4.4. Totemism and Pilgrimage: Collective Experience and Identity Reproduction

From Durkheim's perspective, rituals offer participants the opportunity to experience "Collective Effervescence," a phenomenon that generates a sense of unity and shared belonging. In the case of Hajj, this collective experience is clearly illustrated by the immense numbers of Muslims who gather around the Kaaba to perform a unified ritual, making them feel as though they are part of a vast, universal spiritual community. (Durkheim, 1912, p71)

Pilgrimage, as a ritualistic phenomenon, provides a unique occasion for individuals to reshape both their individual and collective identities. The rituals practiced during the Hajj express deeply held values that unify the Muslim community, much as totemism does within smaller, traditional societies. In both cases, rituals serve as mechanisms for

the renewal of collective bonds, offering a means to reinterpret the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

4.5. Modern Totemism: Pilgrimage as a Global Extension of Totemism

While totemism is traditionally associated with small, localized communities, the Hajj exemplifies a form of modern totemism on a global scale. The Kaaba, as the central and unifying symbol, brings together Muslims from diverse ethnicities and cultures, making it a global point of convergence. It serves as a symbol that reflects the collective identity of the Islamic ummah, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries.

Through the performance of collective rituals focused around the Kaaba, the pilgrimage retains elements of totemic practice but is situated within a broader global religious framework. This dynamic highlights the interaction between the local and the global, the individual and the collective, as well as the material and the spiritual, providing a complex and layered experience of shared identity and belief. (Durkheim,1912,p84)

4.6. Pilgrimage and Totemism in Light of Contemporary Anthropology

Contemporary anthropology underscores how sacred symbols, such as the Kaaba, function as vehicles for expressing collective values and fostering social solidarity. Pilgrimage, as a ritualistic experience, draws attention to the profound symbolic role it plays in connecting the individual with both the congregation and the sacred. In this sense, pilgrimage represents a modern extension of traditional totemism, adapting the foundational principles of totemic rituals to a global religious context.

By examining Hajj through the lens of totemism, we can gain a deeper understanding of how symbols and rituals contribute to the strengthening of collective bonds, the shaping of individual and group identity, and the perpetuation of cultural and religious values. The relationship between totemism and pilgrimage reveals the enduring nature of symbols and rituals in the formation of collective identity, as well as their role in reinforcing spiritual and social cohesion.

Thus, the pilgrimage serves as a contemporary manifestation of totemism, highlighting the continuity of sacred symbols in fostering harmony between the individual, the group, and the sacred. Analyzing the Hajj from an anthropological perspective enriches our understanding of how rituals, even in a modern context, continue to shape unity and identity in contemporary societies.

5. Defining Virtual Hajj

Virtual pilgrimage represents a significant advancement in the concept of Hajj, utilizing cutting-edge technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive video to simulate the traditional pilgrimage experience. The primary aim of Virtual Hajj is to offer an opportunity for individuals who are unable to physically perform the pilgrimage, due to health, financial, or logistical challenges, such as the elderly, the sick, or those facing mobility issues, to engage in a pilgrimage-like experience within a digital environment. Through this immersive experience, participants can partake in key rituals, such as circumambulating the Kaaba, walking between Safa and Marwa, or standing in Arafat, employing digital tools that allow them to interact meaningfully with the rituals in a realistic manner.

The benefits of virtual pilgrimage extend both spiritually and psychologically. It provides those unable to attend Hajj the opportunity to engage in religious practices virtually, reinforcing their connection to the Islamic Ummah. For individuals living in remote areas or facing financial or health-related constraints, virtual pilgrimage offers a chance to partake in these sacred rituals without leaving the comfort of their homes. (Al Nuaimi,2022,p35) Scholars note that while virtual pilgrimage does not replace the physical experience of Hajj, it can serve as a "spiritual alternative," providing an avenue

to engage with the sacred rites from a distance. This reflects a notable shift in the understanding of pilgrimage through the integration of technology, expanding access to a deeply spiritual experience.

The VR and AR technologies used in virtual pilgrimage allow users to interact with the digital environment in multiple ways. For example, users can wear VR headsets to take virtual tours of the Kaaba or use AR to guide them through rituals such as the Sa'i, the walk between Safa and Marwa. These digital tools are designed to replicate the authentic experience of Hajj, providing Muslims with a means to use modern technology to enhance their spiritual engagement and extend the reach of this sacred practice. (Ahmed,2021,p49)

It is important to note that the virtual pilgrimage is not merely about simulating the physical experience; it also serves as an educational tool. It helps guide and prepare Muslims who wish to undertake the actual pilgrimage, offering them essential information and practical guidance online. This preparation contributes to improving their spiritual and practical readiness before embarking on the real Hajj. (Jamal,2023,p62) Furthermore, the use of interactive video technologies in virtual pilgrimages facilitates personal engagement with the rituals, allowing users to share their experiences with others via online platforms, fostering a sense of collective participation.

Despite the many benefits of virtual pilgrimage, researchers agree that it remains complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the physical journey of Hajj. It allows Muslims who are unable to undertake the pilgrimage due to various challenges to experience a digital version of the rites, but it is not a replacement for the true spiritual experience of physically traveling to the Holy Land. Virtual pilgrimage signifies the integration of modern technology with Islamic religious practices, offering an innovative perspective on how technology can enhance and extend spiritual engagement in the contemporary world. (Al Nuaimi,2022,p53)

5.1. Virtual and augmented reality technologies

Virtual reality (VR) technologies have emerged as one of the most prominent tools for simulating the pilgrimage experience, offering three-dimensional environments that closely replicate sacred sites. This technology provides an interactive experience, enabling users to immerse themselves in a spatial simulation that closely mimics the environment of the Holy Mosque and the Holy Kaaba. It fosters a profound sense of presence in these sacred places, even in the absence of physical proximity. By utilizing advanced VR headsets, users can digitally engage with the pilgrimage experience, accessing a realistic and compact simulation of the environment.

The primary objective of employing VR in virtual pilgrimage is to bridge the divide between the digital world and the spiritual experience traditionally encountered in physical spaces. Virtual reality enhances immersion in spiritual rituals, allowing users to feel as though they are circumambulating the Kaaba, performing the Sa'i between Safa and Marwa, and completing the other rites of pilgrimage. The integration of carefully crafted visual and auditory elements, such as 360-degree video technologies, heightens realism by enabling users to view the surroundings from all angles, making the experience more dynamic and authentic. (Mujtaba,2021,p129)

Moreover, virtual reality plays a significant role in facilitating the educational and spiritual dimensions of the Hajj. For Muslims who are unable to physically partake in the pilgrimage, VR can offer a valuable resource for learning how to properly perform the rituals. It also serves as a platform for those who wish to engage with the rites of Hajj, particularly for individuals facing physical, financial, or logistical barriers to traveling to Makkah.

Additionally, VR technologies foster a sense of collective belonging among Muslims worldwide. While many pilgrims perform the rites in Makkah, individuals from anywhere in the world can experience a shared sense of participation in this communal spiritual event, thus strengthening the social and spiritual aspects of the virtual pilgrimage. This digital interaction can create a sense of unity among Muslims, transcending geographical boundaries and reflecting the concept of a “unified Islamic world” united under the principles of monotheism.

It is crucial to understand that virtual pilgrimages, though transformative, do not replace the actual pilgrimage. Rather, they offer a complementary experience, allowing Muslims to engage in a meaningful and enriching religious journey without the necessity of physically traveling to Makkah. As technological advancements continue, virtual pilgrimages may become an integral aspect of religious practices, enabling broader access to Islamic rituals for Muslims across the globe. (Mujtaba,2021,129)

5.2. Interactive video

Interactive video represents one of the most innovative technologies in virtual pilgrimage, offering users a dynamic, engaging, and customizable experience while participating in religious rituals. This technology allows users to navigate freely within a three-dimensional environment, significantly enhancing their sense of immersion in the virtual pilgrimage. Through interactive video, users can actively engage with key pilgrimage rituals, such as circumambulating the Kaaba and performing the Sa'i between Safa and Marwa, both of which are fundamental practices during the pilgrimage journey. This interactive capability heightens the sense of genuine participation and direct interaction with the spiritual environment of Makkah, even for those who are geographically distant. By utilizing this technology, users are empowered to independently explore the sacred space, engaging with the scene from various perspectives, whether by manually controlling the animation or adjusting viewpoints within the virtual environment. For instance, they can view the Kaaba from different angles or participate in rituals such as the symbolic casting of pebbles in Mina. This autonomy reinforces a profound sense of collective and spiritual belonging, reflecting a core principle in Islam: the solidarity and interdependence of Muslims across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. The digital experience thus mirrors aspects of the spiritual journey traditionally felt by pilgrims, reinforcing the concept of spiritual unity among Muslims worldwide.

From an anthropological perspective, this digital experience can be analyzed as a reconfiguration of traditional pilgrimage rituals in the virtual realm. These technologies enable the transference of religious experience into the digital space, demonstrating humanity's ability to leverage modern tools to expand spiritual horizons and overcome geographical limitations. While it may initially appear that this approach diminishes the authenticity of religious experiences, it actually creates a new form of spiritual revival that continues to fulfill the religious and symbolic objectives of traditional pilgrimage.

An important concept in this context is the idea of "virtual rituals," in which traditional religious practices are digitally transposed without losing their symbolic or spiritual significance. Victor Turner's anthropological framework suggests that rituals, whether in physical or virtual form, serve to cultivate "collective communion" among individuals. Through this technology, users are able to experience a sense of unity with the global Muslim community, fostering a deep sense of belonging and reinforcing religious bonds despite physical separation. (Turner,1973,p25)

Moreover, interactive video in virtual pilgrimage can be understood through anthropological theories that explore the evolution of identity and spirituality in the digital age. In this context, virtual pilgrimage serves as a manifestation of the "digital ritual", a

contemporary form of ritual in which technology is woven into spiritual practices. This fusion signals a shift in how religious identity is experienced in a globally connected world, where traditional rituals are increasingly flexible and adaptable to the digital era. (Al-Rubaie,2023,p57)

In addition to offering individualized interactions with rituals, interactive video fosters a sense of collective participation. When integrated with other digital platforms, virtual pilgrimages become a shared experience that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries, reinforcing the principle of a "One Islamic World" that unites Muslims around shared values and spiritual practices.

5.3. Provide interactive educational alternatives for people planning to perform the actual Hajj through ritual training

A primary objective of the virtual pilgrimage is to offer an interactive learning experience for Muslims who intend to perform Hajj but face challenges due to financial, health, or logistical constraints. Through the use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, individuals can be trained to carry out essential rituals of Hajj, such as circumambulating the Kaaba, performing the Sa'i between Safa and Marwa, and standing in Arafat. This virtual experience allows Muslims to familiarize themselves with the rituals ahead of time, enabling them to perform them correctly when they undertake the actual journey.

From an anthropological viewpoint, this training represents a reconfiguration of traditional rituals in modern contexts, illustrating how religious practices adapt to contemporary social and technological conditions. Jonathan Z. Smith argues that the technology-driven transformation of rituals occurs through an interaction between social realities and modern technology, where rituals are reproduced in the digital realm to foster spiritual and collective communication. (Smith,2001,p175)

5.4. Promote access to spiritual experience for people unable to travel for Hajj

Virtual pilgrimage provides an invaluable opportunity for individuals who are unable to travel to Mecca due to health or physical limitations to engage with the spiritual experience of Hajj. Through virtual experiences, these individuals can participate in religious rituals without needing to be physically present in Mecca, allowing them to feel immersed in the spiritual atmosphere of the pilgrimage while preserving the sanctity of the experience.

From an anthropological perspective, this form of engagement with spiritual space via technology represents a shift in the concept of the "sacred place." Traditionally, pilgrimage is considered a rite of passage, facilitating a direct connection between individuals and the sacred. However, in this digital context, it becomes a form of engaging in a spiritual experience that allows individuals to achieve a moral connection with the sacred, despite their physical absence from holy sites. This shift involves moving from physical to digital space, which replicates the symbolic and historical significance of the sacred, thus altering the way individuals relate to sacredness in the digital age. (Turner,1973,p40)

5.5. Supporting virtual religious tourism as a way to enhance the recognition of Islamic culture globally

Virtual pilgrimages have emerged as a means of promoting digital religious tourism, a form of cultural tourism that highlights and amplifies the global recognition of Islamic culture. By offering virtual pilgrimage experiences to people worldwide, the spiritual and geographical dimensions of Islamic culture can be shared in an innovative and engaging manner. This not only enhances religious understanding but also contributes to the commercialization of religious tourism on a global scale.

From an anthropological perspective, virtual religious tourism can be viewed as a form of "Symbolic Tourism," where technology enables individuals to "visit" sacred sites in a non-material way. This represents a shift in how visitors understand the sacred space, moving beyond physical presence to encompass symbolic interaction that fosters cultural and religious awareness. Modern cultural anthropology theories suggest that these forms of digital tourism intersect with the concept of interactive culture, where individuals can share thoughts and emotions about sacred places in ways that go beyond traditional, physical visits. (Cohen,2019,p64)

6. Importance of Virtual Hajj

6.1. Spiritual Interaction

A virtual pilgrimage offers an interactive experience that emulates the profound spiritual journey traditionally undertaken by pilgrims during the Hajj in Mecca. While this form of pilgrimage does not serve as a substitute for the physical pilgrimage in Sharia terms, it presents a novel means for Muslims to engage with the spiritual and faith-based aspects of Hajj in an innovative manner. It redefines the relationship between the individual and the sacred within the digital realm. Through technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), or interactive video, the virtual pilgrimage allows users to experience the spiritual essence of the holy places, enhancing emotional and religious interaction despite their physical absence from Mecca.

From an anthropological standpoint, virtual pilgrimage signifies a shift in how individuals engage with the sacred, reflecting a modern understanding of holiness that transcends geographic constraints and emphasizes spiritual and emotional connection. In this context, "rituals" are being reimaged through digital tools, allowing Muslims to interact with Islamic practices in ways that are both immersive and transformative. This interaction fosters a renewed desire to perform the actual pilgrimage, as participants reassess the significance of spiritual rituals in their lives. Their virtual engagement becomes an extension of the powerful role rituals play in shaping religious identity. Religious anthropologists emphasize that holiness is not confined to a specific location; it can be digitally recreated while retaining its spiritual essence. (Turner,1973,p35)

6.2.Educational Aspects

Virtual Hajj also plays a crucial role in educating Muslims worldwide about the correct way to perform the Hajj and Umrah rituals, enhancing their understanding of religious practices in a hands-on and interactive manner. By engaging with virtual elements such as circumambulating the Kaaba and performing the Sa'i between Safa and Marwa, Muslims can learn the intricacies of these religious rituals and how to execute them in accordance with Sharia guidelines. This virtual interaction serves as a powerful educational tool, allowing individuals to absorb the practices without needing to travel, making it easier for them to integrate these rituals into their daily lives.

From an anthropological perspective, this evolution in the teaching of religious rituals represents the concept of "digital learning," which utilizes technology to transmit knowledge and practices through cyberspace. Cultural anthropology underscores the impact of such techniques on individuals' understanding of rituals and the reproduction of customs and traditions in contemporary settings. Antonio Gramsci, in his theories of popular culture, argues that cultural shifts occur not only in physical spaces but also through cultural patterns influenced by modern technologies. These technologies, through visual and auditory means, help to replicate and transmit cultural rituals, thereby facilitating the dissemination of religious knowledge. (Gramsci,1971,p99)

7. Challenges of Virtual Hajj

While virtual pilgrimage offers numerous advantages by enabling Muslims to engage with spiritual rituals and interact with the sacred environment remotely, several challenges remain regarding its legitimate acceptance. Pilgrimage, as one of the five pillars of Islam, is traditionally performed in the holy city of Mecca. This raises important questions regarding the permissibility of virtual pilgrimage and whether it can be considered a valid substitute for the actual pilgrimage from a religious perspective.

A thorough examination of the views of Islamic jurists is necessary, particularly concerning the distinction between real rituals and the digital experience, and whether the virtual pilgrimage can truly encapsulate the spiritual and faith-based significance of the actual pilgrimage. There are concerns that virtual pilgrimage may fail to fully embody the symbolic and collective aspects inherent in the real pilgrimage, which serves as a unifying event for Muslims from around the world, fostering a sense of Islamic unity.

From an anthropological viewpoint, this challenge addresses the broader issue of how long-standing religious rituals adapt to digital formats. Cultural anthropology highlights that rituals are not merely symbolic but also carry significant social and collective dimensions that shape individual identities within the religious community. The real pilgrimage, with its extensive rituals and communal participation, acts as a “rite of passage,” restructuring social relationships within the Muslim community. According to Arnold van Gennep, collective rituals represent a transition from one state to another, cultivating a sense of belonging and group solidarity that cannot be adequately replicated in a virtual environment. (Van Genep,2019,p58)

Victor Turner further elaborates on the concept of rituals as mechanisms for "social transit" that communicate shared spiritual experiences among individuals. Such collective rituals foster unity within the community and dissolve social distinctions. Turner suggests that this communal bonding cannot be achieved in virtual pilgrimages, which do not provide the same level of collective immersion as actual pilgrimages. (Turner,1973,p30)

7.1. Social and Cultural Challenges:

Beyond the religious legitimacy issues, virtual pilgrimage also presents socio-cultural challenges related to its potential impact on the cultural values associated with pilgrimage. Transitioning to a digital experience may reduce the unique collective dimension of Hajj, where Muslims from all over the world converge in a shared space, creating a powerful religious and cultural bond. The pilgrimage is viewed as a means of fostering unity among Muslims and highlighting their spiritual interconnectedness, an essential element that cannot be fully captured in a virtual setting.

Moreover, virtual pilgrimage may be seen as diminishing the sanctity attached to the physical locations of the holy sites, such as the Kaaba and the Grand Mosque. For many, these sites represent the essence of the religious experience, which cannot be replaced by a mere digital simulation. The actual pilgrimage also embodies adherence to cultural values deeply tied to Islamic rituals, such as sacrifice and sincerity in intention. These values may not be conveyed with the same authenticity or significance in a digital format.

8. Virtual Pilgrimage and Anthropological Approach:

From the standpoint of cultural anthropology, traditional pilgrimage is not merely a series of individual rituals but a significant event that fulfills various symbolic and social functions. It plays a crucial role in shaping the collective and spiritual identities of Muslims. The pilgrimage serves as a collective experience that emphasizes the unity of the Islamic Ummah, bringing together Muslims from diverse nationalities and cultures in a shared space, fostering a sense of belonging to a single religious community. Within this context, virtual pilgrimage can be seen as an attempt to reframe this monumental religious event within the digital realm. This shift raises critical questions regarding how

the transition from traditional pilgrimage to digital pilgrimage impacts the anthropological dimensions of religious rituals.

8.1.Virtual Space as a New Social Space

Virtual pilgrimage is redefining the very concept of religious space. In traditional pilgrimage, the sacred space of Mecca is not merely a physical location but also a "social space" where individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds can interact. Traditional pilgrimage offers the opportunity to live within a shared "ritual community," where social and cultural differences are temporarily subsumed under the umbrella of religious and spiritual unity. In contrast, virtual pilgrimage simulates these rituals in a digital environment, turning the sacred space into a non-physical realm that reflects the ritual while allowing individuals to interact through digital technologies.

Anthropologically, this transformation alters the nature of social interaction among participants, raising important questions about whether digital space can effectively replicate the social experiences offered by physical space. According to Victor Turner's theory of "collective communion" in rituals, such events foster social transformation by dissolving distinctions between individuals .(Turner,1973,p52) In virtual pilgrimage, however, this process of collective bonding may be undermined by the absence of direct physical interaction, an essential element of traditional rituals.

8.2.Symbolic shifts in rituals

The advent of virtual pilgrimage also prompts questions regarding the religious symbolism inherent in the pilgrimage ritual. The pilgrimage is a profoundly sacred event, embodying complete devotion and obedience to God. In the traditional pilgrimage, the ritual extends beyond the individual's spiritual experience and incorporates social dimensions, linking the individual to the broader Islamic community. In virtual pilgrimage, although the rituals are digitally simulated, certain sensory experiences, such as touch, direct auditory cues, and a genuine sense of place, are absent. These sensory elements play a key role in enhancing the spiritual meaning of the experience for the pilgrim in Mecca. The gap between the traditional and virtual pilgrimage experiences raises significant concerns about the ability of digital media to fully convey the depth of spiritual symbolism.

8.3. Reconfiguring Collective Identity

From an anthropological perspective, traditional pilgrimage is a fundamental tool for constructing the collective identity of Muslims, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the Islamic Ummah. However, with the emergence of virtual pilgrimage, this process of identity formation is undergoing a transformation. Virtual pilgrimage may contribute to the development of a new form of identity, one more closely tied to the digital world, where the digital space becomes the common ground for all pilgrims rather than the actual geographical space of Mecca. This shift may create a tension between the collective identity shaped by shared experiences in sacred physical space and the identity forged in the digital realm.

Through these anthropological lenses, virtual pilgrimage can be understood as an evolving experience that reflects shifts in the concepts of "collective rituals" and "collective identity" in the digital age. While it cannot replace the authentic experience of pilgrimage, this digital experience represents a new attempt at fostering spiritual and social communication within the confines of digital space.

4. CONCLUSION

The theoretical study of virtual pilgrimage, coupled with its ritualistic overlap with digital technologies, reveals a fascinating intersection between tradition and modernity, as well as between spirituality and technology. Advances in virtual reality (VR) and augmented

reality (AR) have enabled many Muslims worldwide to engage with the sacred rituals of Hajj, even if they are unable to perform the pilgrimage physically. While this virtual experience cannot replace the traditional pilgrimage from either a legal or spiritual perspective, it opens new avenues for understanding and interpreting Islamic rituals within a contemporary context.

Through the application of virtual pilgrimage technologies, key anthropological and ritualistic questions emerge about the nature of spiritual experience in the digital age. In particular, the impact on the collective and individual identity of the pilgrim in the digital space, as well as the challenges surrounding the reproduction of religious symbolism in an environment lacking direct physical interaction, come to the forefront. Virtual pilgrimage also fosters a sense of spiritual belonging within the Muslim Ummah, though the digital realm still lacks the social and cultural dimensions that the traditional experience in Mecca provides.

Despite its challenges, this digital experience plays a crucial educational role by offering an interactive means to transmit religious and ritual knowledge. This aids Muslims in preparing both psychologically and spiritually for the actual pilgrimage. Yet, the central question persists: can the virtual pilgrimage preserve the symbolic and ritual dimensions that have made Hajj a unique and profound experience for centuries?

Ultimately, virtual pilgrimage marks a new chapter in the history of Islamic rituals, not in its religious function, but in the digital interaction it facilitates, which raises both opportunities and challenges regarding the intersection of religion and technology. Its significance may grow in the future as a tool for spiritual engagement and education, provided that a balance is struck between preserving ancient traditions and embracing digital advancements, ensuring the integrity of the spiritual pilgrimage experience.

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