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## Role of Pilgrimage and Touring Excursion in Iranian Culture, Based on the Case Study of Shah Nematollah Vali's Shrine\*

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### Abstract

Iranian people have always had a deep bond with their surrounding nature and their cultural aspect was also affected and in relation with the natural landscape in a way that by studying the religious sites of Iran we can discover a constant companionship of natural elements along the sacred places. This kind of landscape goes beyond its religious function and the interaction between man and the environment creates a potential for social and recreational functions along with its religious aspects. The principle of purposefulness in the choosing of recreational destination for the people of Iran has led them to adapt space creation of their holy monuments to this tradition and the multi-functional role, which can be adapted from the structure and hierarchy of the entrance and courts of Shah Nematollah's tomb, and for each of these courtyards in proportion to their creational elements, different behavioral aspect and status can be determined that is associated with the behavioral contract arising from the tradition of pilgrimage.

Due to the importance of cultural landscapes in the identity of a nation, maintaining and keeping the function of visiting graves and religious buildings not only helps the existence and transition of a historical value to the next generation, but also prevents the deterioration and collapse of behavioral contracts rooted in their history and identity. By choosing Shah Nematollah Vali's tomb as a case study, in addition to investigating the tradition of pilgrimage-excursion among the Iranian, this paper investigates its effect on cultural landscapes and then, studies the features of the tomb and the functional role of its different parts in the tradition of pilgrimage. Furthermore, the field observations show that how the continuation of this tradition has encountered problems due to the change in social values and new laws in dealing with religious places and changing the attitude toward this behavioral station has transformed the old tradition into an anti-value.

**Keywords:** *Ritual landscape, Tradition of Pilgrimage-Excursion, Shah Nematollah Vali's Shrine, Behavioral Station.*

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## Introduction

The ritual landscape in Iran has a naturalist nature and is the result of three elements of water, tree and holy place. Semantic and conceptual layers resulted from this adjacent in such landscapes create an appropriate spatial quality for formation of a behavioral and social contract and participation of individuals. Similar to this, from long time ago excursion beside shrines existed among Iranian people and in a lot of holy sites we can witness the formation of recreational and public spaces. The meaning of this trilogy in Iranian culture next to the common belief caused by considering a place sacred among some people, has created a pilgrimage destination and having the elements of water and tree alongside with respect to Iranian naturalism spirit in the form of pilgrimage-excursion, has given a social nature to the ritual landscapes.

The tomb of Shah Nematollah Vali is one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations for Kerman citizens. With the entrance court and setting based on the triple elements, this tomb became a space for the emergence of social interactions based on the tradition of pilgrimage. The courtyard, with a large rectangular Howz and its surrounding arches provides the space for spending time with excursion intention while not ruining the mystical space and religious value of the tomb through an additional yard between the court and tomb; however nowadays, with the field observation of the tomb and the entrance yard, some signs of confronting with the emergence of this behavioral is seen and it indicates that how, during the passage of time and changes in social values, this historical tradition has lost its position and changes in attitudes towards religious places has led to imagine a complete separation of excursion and pilgrimage and fabricate different beds for each in the mind so that camping and excursion near religious sites to be not allowed anymore. However, the existence of this historical tradition and the preservation of cultural aspects

arising from it, has a significant role in preventing changes in cultural and an Iranian historical roots; therefore, by recognizing this issue and the necessity of its continuity, the constancy of the desirable tradition of excursion - pilgrimage must be helped.

## Methodology

This paper has investigated one of the original Iranian tradition using library studies and a descriptive-analytical method, by collecting information in the field of the cultural landscape, has studied the adaptation of this tradition on the case study of Shah Nematollah's tomb. Then, with the help of field observations, the changes in the attitude and appearance of this tradition have been identified and analyzed.

## Pilgrimage-excursion tradition in Iranian culture

Since far past to the present, Iranian religions have contained a friendly look at nature. Mithraism which was common in Iran before Zoroaster, makes Iranian attitude towards nature more meaningful and shape their mentality in relation to nature. This was also the case in the period of Islam. Nature is the epitome of divine signs. The excursion and journey in nature are recommended in the Quran and religious teachings. Since religions are the most important source of revelation for the mankind, the emergence of rituals related to nature in the beginning, can be related to the traditions related to the communities' worldview (Mansouri, 2009:4). Ritual tourism is the result of bonding between journey and culture. A journey through which the human is able to discover beliefs and faiths by experiencing rituals that are present in the spirit of place and rooted in the ancient culture of society. The rituals are mostly dependent on land and place, in other words, place and ritual continue to live in the form of a living creature. Ritual excursion is a special type of cultural excursion that introduces a

person to beliefs and faiths arising from a particular society (Javadi & Ghazanfari, 2009:70).

Excursion and picnics in Iranian tradition are formed for two main goals: the perception and touch of nature and the strengthening of social bonds. The choice of a location for the manifestation of this behavior has been always the result of behavioral contracts and traditions of the user, and has been held beside a tree or spring, towards a specific scenery or holy place. The principle of the formation of holy sites alongside the natural elements of water and tree also contributed to the enhancement and continuity of this tradition and these places were chosen as a destination for excursion in addition to practicing ritual rites. In general, the context and place are very important in the ritual excursion; that is to say, this is a vessel in which this behavior is formed and emerged and gives it identity and authenticity, and the traditions and rituals rising from this context continue with it.

The trip to holy Islamic figures shrine and the religious and sacred characters in the past has been a tradition for Iranian people, which although it was intended for pilgrimage and religious purposes, it was accompanied by touring and excursion. This historic tradition converts the ritual landscape of sacred shrines to a cultural and dynamic landscape. In general, in Iranian culture, pilgrimage and excursion cannot be separated because this behavior has become a behavioral pattern arising from culture so that it can be found in different cultural and folklore poetry.

### **Features of pilgrimage-excursion tradition in ritual landscape**

Carl Sauer, a human geography expert in the definition of cultural landscape, states that: "The cultural landscape is a natural landscape which has been created by a human group and culture has the role of cause and the nature has the role of mediator, and cultural landscape is the result of that"

(Mokhles, Farzin & Javadi, 2013: 23-30). Tradition is the subset of culture and creates a landscape, in addition to be cultural, is called ritual landscape by the importance of ritual symbols in it (Mansouri, 2013:5). Generally, cultures and beliefs have a direct impact on the type of human interaction with the surrounding environment. In Iranian naturalism culture, people's attention to nature in the form of ritual landscapes can be observed; this interaction between man and environment in ritual landscapes has led to the creation of a base for formation of social activities and by studying the traditions and patterns related to these spaces, the identity of people and their history can be figured out. Therefore, it is important to recognize and preserve these landscapes in order to transfer cultural values to future generations.

Excursion and travel, whether in a day and a few days, or long trips are not merely recreational, but also associated with their beliefs and faiths. Since the far past that naturalist opinions invited people to plains, fountains and rivers, or the height of the mountains, fun and entertainment combined with the worship of water, trees, and happiness in commemoration of the fire (Javadi, 2018: 14).

To the better understanding of the tradition of excursion by ritual landscapes, a part of Orsolle's travelogue in describing the Shah Abdolazim shrine can be a good description for such spaces and their social spirit and vitality in Iranian culture:

"Around the shrine is so fascinating in terms of the diversity of interesting scenes and spectacular scenery: women are sitting in groups with their children under the shade of trees on their carpets, eating, drinking, smoking hookah, talking and laughing out loud ...

Men, are also gathered, having tea and hookah, apart from women, for Iranian man could never be seen with women in public for it to be considered bad in the people's opinion." (Orsolle, 2003: 298-299).

In the past, people travelled for pilgrimage reasons for a month to the holy Mashhad and sometimes six months in Karbala, in the holy shrines of Imam Hossein (PBUH) and Imam Ali (PBUH). From the middle-aged generation in Iran, there may be few people who do not have memories of the pilgrimage of Imam Reza shrine, Masoumeh shrine and Abdolazim shrine, or have not experienced a picnic in the pleasant places such as tombs of Imams, the elder figures of religion in the vicinity of the spring, river, grass, tree, and as the old people say, have not experienced getting a fresh air (Javadi, 2018:15).

Other sacred monuments that have been formed on the basis of naturalistic beliefs and faiths of the ancient Iranians in which the continuity of this tradition and converting them to the social behavior station and the tradition of pilgrimage-excursion are seen, are as follow: Neyshabour Qadamgah, the shrine of Sheikh Gabriel in Kalkhoran, Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan, Imamzadeh Saleh, Imamzadeh Ghasem in Shemiran, Imamzadeh Bibi Sakineh in Shahriyar, Imamzadeh Abdollah in Shushtar, Imamzadeh Seyyed Soltan Ali Rudband in Dezful and countless numbers some of which are known and some are unknown scattered in Iran. (Javadi, 2007:14)

Excursion and pilgrimage are common in European communities and traditional Christians. Fatima's shrine in Lisbon, Saint Odile Monastery in France and the cave and the statue of the Saint Mary in the village of Lourdes, France, are some of these examples. The rites that have been common during this pilgrimage have persisted so far continued, have similarities with the traditions of Iranian religious - ritual tourism (Javadi, 2018: 17)

### **Shah Nematollah Vali's tomb recognition**

The tomb of Shah Nematollah who was one of the most prominent and popular mystics of his time, is a masterpiece of Iranian architecture and garden construction, with the integrated architecture of

which, it has been built during the Safavid period, but in the post- period of itself various parts have been inserted to that, has led it to turn in an exhibition of Iranian architecture and has contained the beauties of various eras of Iranian art and architecture.

Although the Shah Nematollah's tomb is located in Mahan 35 km away from Kerman, it has been always a favorite of the people, along with visiting this religious and mystical figure, excursion and pilgrimage have been one of the people's old tradition that attracts a lot of people with tall cypress trees and mystic setting.

This tomb consists of three courts that are set up on a central axis. each of them has a pool and gardens with cypress and pine trees and roses, make this place one of the most pleasant tomb in Iran. This tomb is considered as one of the most valuable tourist spots of Kerman. The court of the royal chamber form the northern entrance consists of the courtyard of the Atabaki, Vakil al-Maleki courtyard, the Shah Abbasi porch, Cheleh Khaneh, the courtyard of Mirdamad, Mohammad Shahi frontispiece, Husseiniyeh and propylaeum, and Beiglar Beigi edifice. The oldest part is a dome that is located on the tomb of the Shah. (Naeema, 2006:180); (Fig. 1).

### **The appearance of Traditions of pilgrimage-excursion in Shah Nematollah's tomb**

Due to the respect for religious characters, Iranian people always visit their Holy and respected figures in different times of the year and the practice of pilgrimage, due to the placement of religious places along with other sacred natural elements has always been associated with excursion and spending time. The shrine of Shah Nematollah Vali, is not an exception and the continuation of this tradition caused the ritual landscape of this garden to find a function beyond the pilgrimage and memorial space due to the use of social and naturalistic nature.

By examining the structure and location of these two courtyard and their relation with the tomb, different

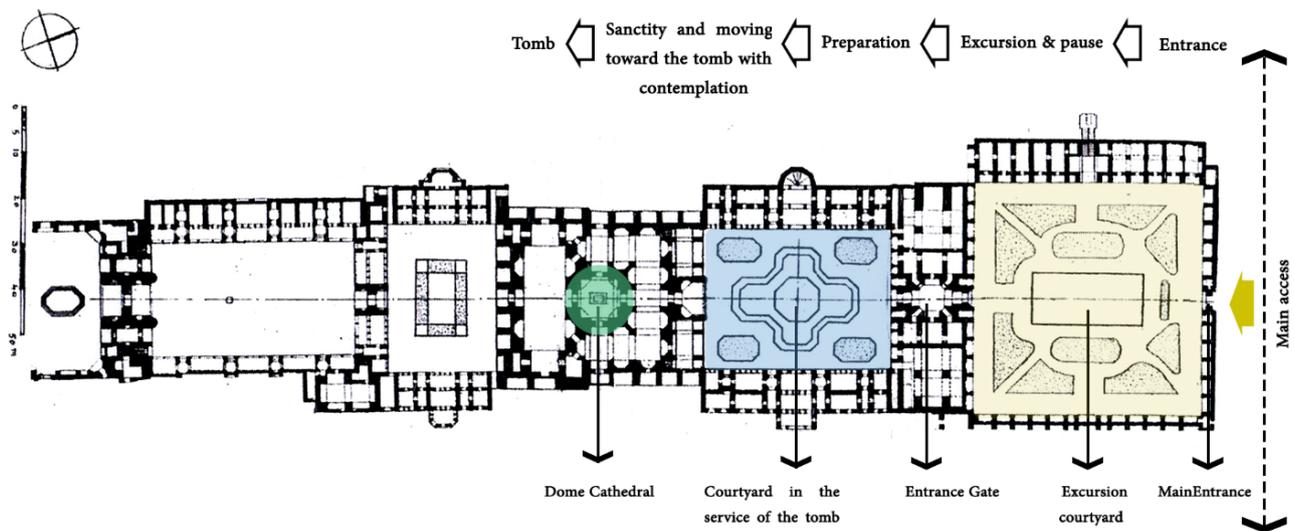


Fig. 1. The hierarchy of entrance and function of the courts in reaching the building / Nematollah Vali shrine-garden complex, Mahan, / Source: Seyedeh Hosna Husseini Nasab, map from Naeema, 2006, 181.

function and value can be dedicated to each of them with respect to their different elements and layouts. By passing the frontispiece of the tomb, we come to a large courtyard, where a large rectangular pool is located at its center and all around it is surrounded by porches. The open field of this courtyard, as well as those porches in the surrounding walls are for the presence of people and their camping near this religious place. While this courtyard provides places for people to sit and use the courtyard of the Shah Nematollah Vali's Shrine, its green and merry space, maintains its privacy by an additional court between the shrine's entrance and dome cathedral and respects its spiritual atmosphere. In this courtyard no facade is superior to the other and in addition to its aesthetic role and refined space, has a function to serve people who camp here. By passing through this court and a gate with a dome roof placed for separating these two courts, we reach the second courtyard. The courtyard in front of the Shah Nematollah's tomb with a cross-shaped howz, provides a spiritual space for its audiences; this court is comparatively smaller than the entrance court and most of its space is filled with howz and gardens (Fig. 2).

The size of this howz, its locating in front of the

building and the reflection of the tomb picture on the water, has a role to sanctify the building. The symbolic elements such as cypress trees that have been located in the selected places, make a clear view of space's privacy and dignifies it in the individual's mind. Also, the paths that provide motion with the aid of symbolic elements in this courtyard, plays the hierarchical role in creating spiritual space and emotional presence to enter the tomb.

Because of having spatial nature favored by Iranian and being located near a religious place, the function of the entrance yard has been a platform for emergence of pilgrimage tradition. The purpose of association of pilgrimage and excursion in this tradition is due to the principle of purposefulness of excursion in Iran, in which people had come here for the pilgrimage and also spend time by excursion and having good time. Indeed, in the landscape of this tomb-garden, a constant behavioral pattern of people has been seen, in which the religion is the common element of connecting people. Therefore, the arena of Shah Nematollah Vali has been a good platform for the formation of social interactions.

Unfortunately, nowadays, we see a large cloth around the courtyard written in red: "Please do not roll out a carpet) for picnic reasons) in this area."



Fig. 2. The courtyard in front of Shah Nematollah's Shrine with alternative elements and its arrangement with emphasis on the spiritual space, Shah Nematollah's tomb Mahan. source: <http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/56196221.jpg>.



Fig. 3. The people sitting around the yard and the alarming fabric to prevent people from camping in the direction of the new policies / Shah Nematollah Vali's shrine Mahan. Photo: Seyedeh Hosna Hosseini Nasab, 2017



Fig. 4. A sample of people camped in porches around the shrine and excursion/Shah Nematollah Vali's shrine Mahan / Source: <http://c8.alamy.com/comp/DRRP56/mahan-Iran-tomb-of-shah-nematollah-vali-1331-1431-founder-of-DRRP56.jpg>.

(Fig.3) It is evidence that visitors are interested in the persistence of the pilgrimage-excursion tradition in this space but this tradition has been troubled by changing criteria and the rules dealing with religious sites; this cloth can be seen as a sign of an anti-value mark for this culture, which the management and laws today want to stop it from happening. The analysis of this sample indicates that despite the change of our contracts to define religious places, people are still mentally, and in terms of semantic

and memory bounded to the previous contracts, but since contemporary urban patterns have resulted in the separation of excursion and religious practices, people have been forced to change and accept new laws. In fact, it can be said that the living system today has ordered to these changes. Now, this court has lost its identity in hierarchy of reaching the goal (tomb), and although the tomb is still considered as a social space, the action of reaching from the entrance to the site and the creation of a

conjunction between the city and tomb has been eliminated. In fact, nowadays, this perceptual and functional layer is extracted from space and thus, there is a disturbance in the use of this court, and the excursion element can be described as the missing loop of this space.

By observing the changes in treating with the ritual landscape of this shrine, it can be found that in modern society, the culture of pilgrimage has been totally changed and our definition of pilgrimage spaces have become one-dimensional so that except in some special cases, we intend to go to the place of pilgrimage or a mosque only for performing religious practices, and the occurrence of other social events is not customary and in some cases, the formation of the excursion and social activities are prevented in order to preserve the respect of the holy shrine . However, these places and traditions and symbols that are presence in them are the valuable heritage of this country that perceiving them plays an important role in understanding the culture of people and its reinforcement and development can optimize the richness of Iranian culture. The dynamics and active presence of people in these locations and converting them into recreational purposes should be considered with a proud view to the continuation of this valuable culture, not considering it as a trouble for the function of such sacred places.

### Conclusion

The existence of three elements (water, tree and holy place) arising from the ancient beliefs of the people of Iran in holy places and ritual tombs as we witness in the Shah Nematollah Vali's Shrine, has given the holy place a higher functional and semantical values and the spatial quality of social landscape has led to introducing them as social and welfare centers and other lateral functions such as excursion management must be in line with promoting social goals and organize different functions as a whole unit. Since the past, excursion has been a purposeful

matter and the tradition of pilgrimage- excursion has been based on the same principle; such sceneries present the aspects and values of cultural, identity and historical context of a nation, providing the context for the social interaction and public contributions to a religious place that transforms into a constructive and dynamic behavioral camp rooted in the traditions of its people.

The issue that we face today at the tomb of Shah Nematollah Vali, as well as many other religious landscapes in terms of ritual landscape, is the constant separation of a ritual landscape and considering it just as a religious one, which indicates that social contracts are forced and people's Presence in the courts was just for passing and getting to the building; also, the signs of social and fun dimensions alongside of religious and ritual landscapes have been faded away, and as a result, traditions of pilgrimage-excursion has lost its importance and past role. Attention to the spiritual and mystical dimensions besides the ecotourism and excursion is one of the needs of modern human being in the present era in order to invite them from their busy and mechanical life to the serenity of a spiritual space. In this period, the places that can fulfill several purpose must be paid attention to and the management of religious and ritual places should not consider the excursion and touring as an intervening factor and in contraction with the act of paying respect and pilgrimage to the holy place but it must be known as an appearance of beliefs risen from a culture that is rooted in people's belief and identity, which beside creating a sense of belonging it lead to development of social dimensions and people contributions, gives vitality and exhilaration to the society.

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