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The Potentials of Taso and Ashura Ceremonies in Cultural Tourism Development

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Abstract

Challenges of Twenty First Century have led to an urgent need to renew the spirit and satisfy spiritual needs, the effort which leads towards tourism as a cure to relieve the needs. It seems that tourism in general and cultural tourism in special can meet the needs of human. Since each region has its own cultural-religious characteristics, so this variety can attract people's attention with other religious-cultural backgrounds. In Iran, holding ceremonies such as Taso and Ashura is an example of religious-cultural tradition of Muslims. This event, which has become a symbol of Shi'a religion and culture, has been performed during certain days and within public activity since long ago. The ceremony is the story of historical event in Islam and by having various ritual arrangements can internationally be considered as a tourist attraction. Therefore, visiting the event can remain in tourists' minds as a memorable reminiscence. This paper attempts to introduce this ritual-religious ceremony as a different attraction with special style by reviewing literature and observation. The findings highlight the importance and details of Taso and Ashura in tourism and religious activities in Iran. The article ends with a discussion on the implications of the findings into practice. By having variety of ceremonies in these days, the event potentially can be considered as an important motivational factor for interested tourists. It seems that basically, Iran's tourism industry should provide adequate information and with a proper marketing strategy enters to the market the same as other comparable countries.

Keywords: Moharram, Taso and Ashura ceremony, cultural-religious tourism, Iran

JEL Classification: L83 Sports; Gambling; Restaurants; Recreation; Tourism

1. Introduction

In recent years, tourism has been considered as a solution for development and progression of many countries. Tourism in a destination includes factors which can provide more motivation for tourism demand of the destination (Law, 2000). Increasing of tourist demand leads to raise economic interests and benefits of a country and enter many different foreign currencies to the country. Meanwhile, tourist attractions can appeal tourists and visitors proportionate with their attractiveness (Alaee Taleghani et al, 2012). The interesting structure of these phenomena has great importance (Cartner, 2002). In fact, many countries tried and try to promote their tourism industry situations (Elliot, 1997). Iran can be considered as an ideal tourist destination due to variety of attractions such as natural, historical, architectural, religious and cultural heritage. However, the focus of this paper in general is Iran religious-cultural tourism and in special is *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremony.

Religion, as one of the most noble and vital spiritual needs of human, has always had special place in people's life. Religious arts have accounted the most appropriate place in emanation of intellectual tendencies (Nadalian and Hoshyar, 2008). On the other hand, religious arts including *Ashura* art in Iran are in coordination and integration with historical and cultural heritage. *Tasoa* and *Ashura* have rooted in Iranians' beliefs and values and still remained stable with special excitement and passion over the centuries. The way of holding this ceremony, styles of mourning, *Ta'zieh* (same as passion play, but about Imam Hosein not Jesus), special symbols, and use of traditional instruments have made this rite a different and unique attraction. This ceremony has the potential to be an event in form of sorrow carnival which can be introduced to non-Muslim countries to provide the opportunity of attracting foreign tourists (Ghaderi et al., 2009). The event is held in different parts of Iran every year and according to the customs of each region, the form and way of implementation vary from one place to another. Nevertheless, the totality of fundamental concepts does not change. On the other hand, according to existing narratives, this event is calculated based on lunar month. Hence, it is performed in different seasons due to difference between lunar and solar calendar and its circulation. Since Iran is a four-season country, not only can tourists watch this event but also enjoy the attractiveness of the seasons.

Despite of all above stated matters, unfortunately, very few studies have been done to promote this kind of tourism in Iran and the event has been paid little attention as a tourist attraction. If *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies potentials are regarded properly as a new tourist attraction, their ability to eager tourists to watch the event is clear and obvious. Accordingly, this event can economically be very useful as well. In fact, this kind of tourism can be useful for identifying and introducing Iranian culture to other countries. This paper attempts to introduce *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies and provide solutions for promotion and development of this type of tourism.

2. Literature Review

Tourism is one of the major forces shaping today world and world's most important and dynamic activities (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000). Tourism industry is polygonal prism that each phase obviates aspects of human life and needs, and has numerous functions due to its nature and plays an important role in economic development, cultural exchange, and the position of countries in decision-making (Ebrahimzadeh et al, 2010). Governments around the world should support tourism as pillar to stimulate economic growth (Jucan and Jucan, 2013). However today, tourism considers as goals which are premier than economic purposes. In other words, tourism has become as a factor for environmental, cultural and social elevation. Peace and friendship, preservation of social-cultural heritage, introducing ones culture and religion to other communities are objectives which have recently been highlighted. In fact, in many countries tourism industry is a manifestation of cultural identity and one of the main sources of income for the country (Taghvaei and Safarabadi, 2012). Because the culture of each society is a good platform for developing tourism, tourism in each country can be defined based on common and current culture (Shams and Amini, 2009). Tourism development as a cultural phenomenon provides ample opportunity for cultural exchange between tourists and host community. On this basis, they can understand each other better and respect their cultures more (Turner, 1999). Cultural exchange resulted from tourism lead to widening of thoughts horizon of both sides, reduction

of prejudices, and making people closer to each other (Rezvani, 1983; Soleimanzadeh, 1990). Nowadays, tourism industry has become as a tool for knowing and understanding the universe, acquaintance with different communities, and their cultures and traditions. All of these matters lead people to travel to other countries.

Cultural tourism and its ability to attract tourists

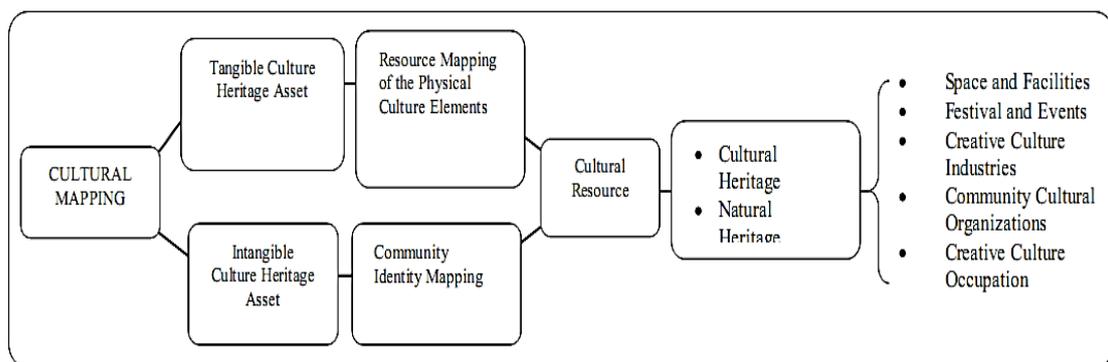
Branches of tourism are more diverse and various departments and parts are added by tourism development and increasing travel enthusiasts (Farajirad and Ehsani, 2011). Meanwhile, tourists’ needs are somehow a determinant of type of tourism they choose. In 21st century human concerns the modern life as a spiritual vacuum. This need can be fulfilling by cultural tourism, since tourism development as a cultural phenomenon provides opportunities extension for cultural exchange between tourists and host community (Taghvaei and Safarabadi, 2012). Generally speaking, cultural heritage is an outcome of human processes and activities rather than a biophysical product (Aplin, 2002). Knowing and understanding different cultures is a factor for more communication and as a result more interaction with humans as today world (Ulvydiene, 2013). In fact, the goal of cultural tourism is having the knowledge of culture and traditions, ritual and religious ceremonies, and special customs. Nowadays, the “message” of cultural assets has become more significant (Bouchenaki, 2003). Culture is a sign and tag to attract tourist, especially foreign tourists whose culture is not only a symbol of a country but the factor which can be seen and felt directly by themselves (Chai, 2011).

Cultural attractions as an element of cultural tourism include museums, exhibitions, orchestras, dramas, handicrafts, architecture, etc. In Iran, in addition to above instances, traditional rites such as Ta’zieh, (Shams and Amini, 2009) can also be added in a list. Generally, cultural tourism is defined in two dimensions:

Conceptual dimension: the movement of people to cultural attractions away from their main residence, with the purpose of collecting new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs (Bachleitner and Zins, 1999; Taghvaei and Safarabadi, 2012) and technical dimension: All movements of people to special cultural attractions such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural symbols, arts and drama outside their main residence (Bachleitner and Zins, 1999).

Othman and Hamzah (2013) divided the cultural mapping as tangible culture heritage assets and intangible culture heritage asset. The details can be found in figure1.

Figure 1.Cultural resource framework



(Othman &Hamzah, 2013)

According to Lotman, the most important duty of culture is to handle the organization of the world that surrounds human (Ulvydiene, 2013). Culture can be seen as a warehouse of information, and even everyday cultural activity includes “translating a specific part of reality into one of the languages of the culture, converting it into a text” (Lotman quoted in Segre 1988: 128). On the other hand, cultural-religious rites, which rooted in a nation’s beliefs and are today known as a cultural tourist attraction, were prevalent in a form

of celebrations and mourning among people during different eras that have been held as play (Ghaderi et al, 2009). *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies are objective manifestations of these rituals. So that these ceremonies, which culture and religion are emanated as tourist attraction, are known as an event that have been flourished by holding festivals and carnivals and their attractiveness will be more and more (Raj, 2003).

Many countries attempt to attract tourists from different parts of the world by introducing their attractions. Meanwhile, Iran should try to enter the competition and use tourism potentials to improve tourism situation especially cultural tourism. These potentials are derived from the ethnic and topographical variety of Iran (Butler et al., 2011). Iran should pay more attention to cultural tourism, because; this particular type of tourism does not contradict rules of Iran and Islamic criteria attract tourists from certain and different ages, and can help cultural excellence.

Tasoa and Ashura ceremonies and capabilities as attractions

According to lunar calendar, Muharram is the first month of lunar. This month has a particular importance for Muslims due to genocide of third *Shi'a* Imam (Imam Hussein) and his companions. The face and mood of Iran's cities is being changed coincidence with beginning of Muharram. Mourning of Imam Hussein is held in certain days and nights of the month every year. Despite of passing centuries, these ceremonies and their symbols are in people's beliefs and minds. These rituals are historically important in addition to cultural-religious manifestation. *Ashura* event has passed nearly fourteen centuries. Nonetheless *Ashura* and Imam Hussein as a *Shi'a* identity are in the context of Muslims' life and belief (Zare'ei et al, 2012). Muharram and at its top, *Ashura* event, is reminder of the most painful tragedy of Islam history, live the spirit of self-sacrifice and epic in people's mind (Shariati, 2005). It is a sensational epic which passes the geographical and even belief boundaries and engages amazingly millions of people's feelings (Beheshti, 2003). In one sentence, this month can be described by *Shi'as*: Muharram is emanation of worship, monotheism, spirituality, respect, justice, sacrifice, and crystallization of faith and values (Salimi, 2002).

Communities perform religious mourning ceremonies based on their tradition and cultures (Farbod, 2007) and use different instruments and ways. In Iran, this ceremony is held for Imam Hussein and his companions in different manner. It is interesting that not only this ceremony is different around the world, but also it differently performs in various cities, towns and villages in Iran. The instruments are used such as cymbal, drum, reed, clarinet, hautboy and other musical instruments. Dirge, hitting a bunch of chains on the shoulders, beating on the chest, and performing *Ta'zieh* are parts of this event. But in general, following elements give this event special passion:

- Weepers' song
- The sound of cymbal, drum, etc.
- Repeating the dirges and poems by mourners
- The sound from beating of mourners' hands and chains on chest and shoulders
- Metal and cloth *Alams* which are decorated in special style and particular poems and paintings, which fit with the theme, are engraved or written
- Participation of large number of people (children, teenagers, middle aged, elderly men and women)
- Similar clothes

Some provinces and cities are famous for different mourning style such as *TabaghKeshi* in Ghazvin (a city located in west of Iran) (*Tabagh* is an instrument made of wood in the shape of cylinder which is about one and half meters tall and one meter in diameter. Most of this cylinder is covered with mirror. Some mourners carry it on their heads in *Tasoa*) (figure 2); *TashtGozari* in Ardebil (Ardebil is a city located in north west of Iran) (*Tasht*, basin, is a sign of water and river which was closed on Imam Hussein and his followers. In this ceremony, which is held with sigh and tear, groups of people who beat their shoulders and chest by chain and hands pour water in water-skin for remembering Karbala thirsty people. They take it to mosque with basin made of bronze or cooper that is usually carried on the shoulders of elders of each district. After circumambulating mosque, basins are located in their own special place which is poured with water by praying. Attendees and mourners take some water from these basins as a consecration and for meeting their

needs and wants) (figure 3); *Nakhl Gardani*, trolling the palm, in Abyaneh (a village in Esfahan province) and Yazd (is a city and province located in the center of Iran) (this ceremony is held in *Ashura* as a symbol of funeral of Imam Hussein. Palm is a small room where vertical walls on both sides are like a pine and is made of net woods and walls. Palm is decorated with a variety of fabrics such as cashmere, is carried in mourning day and is put near homes which have a vow. Some people sacrifice sheep or goat near Palm. At the end, it is put in its place) (figure 4); *Gel Mali*, rubbing mud on body, in Lorestan province (located in the west of Iran) (people cover their body with mud for sadness of loss of Imam Hussein as an ancient tradition. This ritual starts from *Tasoa* afternoon by collecting the soil free of any pollution from mountains, then pour the soil in a special laver and mix with water and rosewater. After that, fire is lightened for making mourners warm after rubbing mud) (figure 5); *Chehel Manbar*, forty pulpits, in Gorgan (a city in Golestan province which is located in the north of Iran), Khoramabad (a city in Lorestan Province) and Lahijan (a city in Guilan province) (there is a pulpit or table covered with cloth near every house and there are candles on the table which are lighting. Anyone who has a forty-pulpit vow goes to the house or mosque that has a pulpit. The owner of pulpit put candles and small packages of rice on it and someone who has a vow put date on pulpit and take rice and lit the candle. This ceremony begins from twilight of *Tasoa* and ends after the evening pray). In summary, in investigating mourning rituals, artistic-cultural branches such as literature (poem and prose), music, play (drama, epopee, myth, and stage design), painting, outfits, language, accent, etc. emanate impressively.

Figure 2.Tabagh



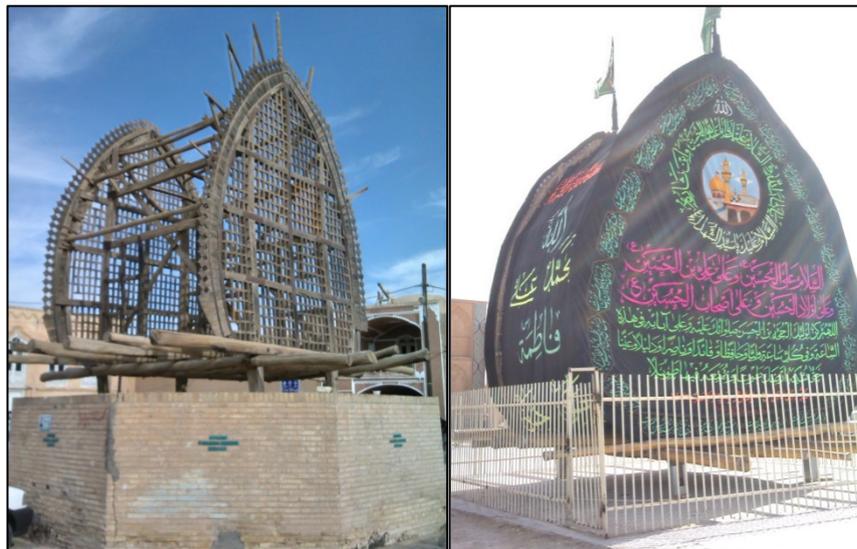
Source: Taheri (2012)

Figure 3.TashtGozari



Source: Moghaddam (2013)

Figure 4.The Palm



Source Salem (2014)

Figure 5. Rubbing mud



Source: Triposta (2013)

However a series of symbols of ceremonies are common in all parts of Iran that mentioned above briefly. For better understanding, description of these concepts is as followed:

- *Ta'zieh*: It is an obvious example of religious rituals of mourning and reflection of the people's deep beliefs and emotions which can demonstrate the value of Islam among Muslims and strengthen the sense of solidarity among people. Undoubtedly, *Ta'zieh* is one of the most genuine Iranian dramas that can preserve Iran rich culture (figure 6). It is the only indigenous play of Islam and traditional-religious play of Iran in which Iran social-philosophical values have been visualized in this art. The main theme of *Ta'zieh* is heroic martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his faithful companions in Karbala and confrontation and conflict between good and evil. But what distinguishes it from west tragedy is that conflict in *Ta'zieh* unlike tragedy is in benefit of vicious people (Zare'ei et. al, 2012).

Figure 6. Ta'zieh



Source: Moosavi (2014)

- *ZanjirZani*, hitting a bunch of chains on the shoulders: It's a kind of mourning ceremony in which male mourners as a regular group in general and sometimes irregular one beat on shoulder, back and head by chain. Hitting a bunch of chains on the shoulders is done in different modes such as one beat, three beats, four beats and more that is accompanied with poetry and panegyric, cymbal and drum.

Figure 7.ZanjirZani



Source: Mahmoodi (2012)

- Beating on the chest: It's also a mourning style in which mourners beat on chest by hand. The movement of people who beat on chest has a special harmony that increases the glory of the ceremony. Regular and rhythmic monotone that is heard during the beating on the chest attracts all people in the ceremony. In other words, major factor of organizing and effectiveness of the event is harmonious rhythm and movement of people who beat on chest.
- Music and elegy: Music in *Tasoa* and *Ashurais* played by some instruments such as cymbal, drum, reed, clarinet, hautboy, trumpet, and flute. This music surprisingly impresses the people who beat on chest by hand and hit on shoulder by chain and the audience's emotions. Along with music tones, poems are read in form of elegy. These poems are about Karbala Battle, Imam Hussein, and his family and companions. Dirge is sung individually or in a group along with the sound of beating on chest by hand and hitting on shoulder by chain. In fact, it is a sound that has aesthetic and musicological functions (Farbod, 2007).

Figure 8. Musical band during Ta'zieh



Source: Moosavi (2014)

- Alam and Kattal: Alam is an object that is made of bronze, iron and brass which is sometimes reticulated, and is put on a long wood at the height of 3 to 4 meters and has valuable colorful fabrics. Implications of Alam to tall tree and lofty position of martyr have two reasons: one is that the height of tree represents ascension of martyr (like the Ascension in Christian religion) and the other one is that falling of tree and breaking its trunk don't mean destruction and loss; but, when it refuses to come down and grows on its remaining root with more buds, it shows eternity of martyr. Alams are made of spring and resilient blades are used for greeting, paying obeisance and bowing to the greatness of the Lord (Nadalian and Hoshyar, 2008). Alams have different forms and symbols that each of them has different meaning. Kattal is a kind of alam in which is erected a shirt without sleeves in the upper part and mourners move it with signs and banners. According to Moein Persian dictionary, it is an alam which is moved by mourners in ceremonies
- Votive foods: cooking votive foods and sweets in various religious ceremonies have been done for ages. Preparation and distribution of these foods have a special value in Iran's culture. Different votive foods are also distributed among mourners and crowds in *Tasoa* and *Ashura* events. Diversity of foods is different around the country depending on the tradition and culture of the provinces and cities. These foods include a variety of rice and pottage. Preparation of food for mourning groups is a teamwork that needs cooperation and coordination of a lot of people which can be in different ages and genders.
- *Sham e Ghariban*, homeless strangers' supper: this event is held in the evening of *Ashora* and considered as a good ending of the ceremony. A lot of candles are lightened and sad dirges are sung in homeless strangers' supper ceremony. In other words, lightening candles is the main symbol of this night. No Alams and banners are used.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate potentials of *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies as a form of cultural tourism in Iran. In fact, the focus of the paper is to identify potentials and capabilities of this kind of tourism in order to attract tourists from around world. The research has been done relied on field observations and interview with participants in the ceremonies. Accordingly, documentary resources and reviewing literature

have played an important role in gathering the required data. It is noteworthy that researchers involved in this event and followed personally the steps of ceremonies. On the other hand, since strength of field research provides comprehensive vision to researchers, this method is considered useful for this kind of study.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Researchers' observations and existing documents indicates that Iran tourism industry couldn't have been achieved much progress in recent years despite of a lot of attractions. However, the number of international tourists increased rapidly in the year of 2014. Among various forms of tourism which have potential of development, cultural tourism can be pointed and highlighted. If this type of tourism (cultural tourism) is regarded and proper studies and planning are done, it can attract a large number of tourists from different countries. Cultural tourism has various subcategories which the focus of this article is festivals and events. Religious festivals are events which encourage tourists to travel for experiencing heritage, religion and art of other countries (Raj, 2003). Cultural tourism development can have a significant impact in being dynamic and reviving the culture and tradition of a society. Furthermore, local residents can earn money from flows of tourists and they can also have a prominent role in increasing tourism boom.

On the other hand, according to above mentioned factors, *Tasoa* and *Ashuraas* religious-cultural ceremonies have potentials for being special and different tourism product. Attracting a large number of tourists will be possible when suitable contexts for the growth of this kind of tourism are provided.

Religious tourists are basically divided in three types; those who practice the same religion, those who likes to see and know about other religions, and those who promote a religion. *Tasoa* and *Ashura* with religious-cultural ceremonies can attract the first and second groups. Accordingly, spirituality paves the way for attaining mental peace. In fact, spirituality leads to flourish the authenticity of life and gives it new luster. Experiences such as participating in *Tasoa* and *Ashura* religious-cultural ceremonies and knowing their philosophy is a way to satisfy the spiritual needs of people who are involved in busy and turbulent life and career; it can lead to mental and spiritual peace. As mentioned above, *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies take place in different times and as a result different seasons. Tourists who are interested in this kind of attraction and event can choose this type of tourism and benefit from many advantages because the event is held in all provinces including cities and villages and tourists can experience a full tour package due to various climates, cultures, mourning styles, food and other regional attractions in different provinces. Iran is an inexpensive country, so travelling to this country will not impose a lot of costs on tourists.

On the other hand, stakeholders, authorities and officials of Iran should attempt to restore and improve tourism in the country due to tourist attractions. They should take action to facilitate arrivals and departures of tourists, restore and rehabilitate infrastructures, prepare required facilities for tourists and organize the ceremony because tourism can lead the country away from monoculture economy, create job, lead to last friendship and relationships among communities and retention of religious-cultural values.

At the end, it should be noted that *Tasoa* and *Ashura* ceremonies historically, culturally and religiously have many potentials and strengths. They should be shifted from potential to actual by studying, planning and developing suitable tourism policies. Increased attention to this event can cause introduce religious-cultural values of Iranians to tourists and boost religious people's beliefs. In conclusion, because lack of spirituality is felt in life by people, participating in such event, regardless of being Muslims or not, can take a person to deep spiritual rapture. Due to belief principles in some communities, rites focus on saint things and sense of humility towards life inspire to a man (Farbod, 2007).

5. Recommendations

The article gives some recommendation in regards to development and promotion of the mentioned events as follows:

- Constructing the infrastructure required for tourists arrival to the country
- Facilitating the rules related to visa and custom
- Providing high quality facilities and services to tourists in order to create memorable memories in tourists' mind
- Creating special Fam tours for attracting tourists during Muharram and training the tour leaders for guiding the tourists in this event
- Improving the image of Iran as a safe destination
- Marketing and advertising for making known this event as an attraction

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