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## Commodification of Islamic Religious Tourism: from Spiritual to Touristic Experience

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

J.QURASHI University of Central Lancashire, UK. Jqurashi@uclan.ac.uk I would like to thank all the academic and non-academic people, who helped me in writing this article, especially to my Director of Studies Dr. PROF. RICHARD SHARPLEY who always stood next to me.

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# Commodification of Islamic Religious Tourism: from Spiritual to Touristic Experience

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In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the government and the local population of Mecca who used to facilitate pilgrims as ‘Guests of Allah’ free of charge have adopted the concept of ‘pay to pray’ (Shackley, 2001 & Woodward, 2004). In other words, given the escalating demand for religious tourism and the desire to achieve maximum economic benefits, the Saudi government is enhancing the hospitality, tourism and telecom sectors in general and transforming Mecca’s tourism infrastructure, in particular, developing it into a contemporary city / tourist destination by injecting US\$80 billion into the local economy (Pecenoni *et al.*, 2012). It is unclear, however, what impact this will have on the experience of religious tourists / pilgrims. That is, what effect will this commodification have on the authenticity of the destination (Mecca), the religious ritual (Hajj) and on pilgrims’ experiences? Certainly, it might be hypothesised that the pilgrim’s behaviour is becoming more materialistic, that owing to contemporary highly-branded hospitality services, modern tourism infrastructure and SMART technology in Mecca, the pilgrim’s spiritual experience is being transformed into a touristic experience, an experience which competes with and jeopardises the moralities of the Islamic religious journey of Hajj and the lessons of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) based on simplicity, equality, and no ostentation.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to address the consequences of this commodification of the Hajj. Specifically, it considers the outcomes of preliminary research (focus groups) conducted in the UK with pilgrims who have performed Hajj within the last three years. This research reveals that, for these pilgrims at least, the Hajj has become commodified; not only has the experience become more ‘touristic’, but they also seek out greater comfort and luxury, indicating that the pilgrimage has become more of a ‘branded’, commercial experience. The research also points to further research that will be necessary to fully comprehend the implications of the commodification of the Hajj for religious tourism more generally.

**Key Words:** religious tourism, commodification, authenticity, spiritual experience.

## Introduction:

Religious tourism in the form of pilgrimage is not new, as it existed before the Holy Bible and Quran (Timothy *et al.*, 2006). The followers of a faith go on a pilgrimage for two main reasons, firstly and most prominently to gratify a spiritual need, as initially a pilgrimage is a religious deed by performing religious rituals such as offering prayers and sacrifices, and secondly they travel for material needs (Vukonic, 1996). Tourism which is religiously motivated has augmented both in scale and scope and currently represents a significant sector of the international market (Sharples, 2009). History testifies that religious tourism and pilgrimage journeys were the hubs of economic activities; Rome was the first shrine of world importance to understand the economic impact of pilgrimage, and there is evidence there, of measures to

increase economic impacts (Vukonic, 2002). Religious journeys have been big business for many years, particularly when holy destinations with local communities take maximum economic advantage from the upsurge in visitors (Sizer, 1999). Indeed, the annual number of pilgrimage tours globally is conventionally estimated to total of 155 million (ARC, 2011) whilst more generally, the UN World Tourism Organisation suggest that ‘300 to 330 million tourist visit the world’s major sites every year’ (UNWTO, 2014). However, this figure, includes domestic travel; international religious tourist alone have been estimated to a total 28.5 million, generating some US\$19 billion annually in expenditure (Mintel, 2012).

Alone, in the case of Islam, Hajj is considered to be the largest religious tourism gathering and the residents of Mecca have earned a living by serving the needs of

Muslim pilgrims for many centuries (Ahmed, 1992). Pilgrimage to KSA generates annual revenues of approximately US\$16 billion and over the past 30 years the government has invested more than \$35 billion not only to improve facilities for pilgrims but to diversify so as to gain maximum economic advantage from religious tourism (Vijayanand, 2012). The economic impacts linked with religious tourism are superior to those related to other market sectors, and the KSA government claims that religious tourism's economic impacts are far superior to any other industry in the KSA with the exception of the oil industry (Fleischer, 2000). Although currently prices and demand for oil are under question (Wong, 2016).

Moreover, the Saudi government has sanctioned \$88 billion for religious tourism planning, aiming to boost hospitality and tourism infrastructure, with an additional 343,000 branded hotel rooms by the end of 2015, compared with 250,000 in 2011 (HVC Hotel Survey 2012). This trend is due to increase inbound pilgrims by 6% annually, and Aljazira Capital (2015) suggests that hotel stocks have already entered double digit growth due to religious tourism, despite worldwide recession (Collier International, 2011). In 2010, the KSA government earned US\$9 billion revenue which rose to \$16 billion in 2012, solely from religious tourism events (Travel Talk Middle East, 2010). Twelve million pilgrims visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina annually (Al Arbiya News, 2012), with the numbers expected to increase to 17 million by 2025. With the resultant growth in facilities, some commentators have started calling Mecca 'the Vegas of Middle East' (Taylor, 2011; Wainwright, 2015).

This evidence demonstrates that the KSA government has recognised the economic value of religious tourism, by learning from other religious tourism destinations such as France (Annual tourists trips - 4,608,000, holding 16.2% market share) Rome (Annual trips - 4,360,000, holding 15.3% market share) Spain (Annual trips - 2,634,000, holding 9.3% market share) (Mintel, 2012).

### **Commodification**

It could be argued that the increasing presence of contemporary branded touristic commodities in religious destination and in the lives of pilgrims promotes issues like commodification of pilgrimage journey, its objective & subjective authenticity and the weakening of spiritual experience and values. Hence as, Henderson (2010) argues, once a destination is sold as a tourism product and the tourism demand for

luxury commodities begins to exert influence, basic changes in human values may occur. Sacred sites and objects may not be respected when they are perceived as goods to trade.

This, however, raises an important question largely unexplored in the literature - the extent to which commodification impacts upon the religious tourism experience. There is need to investigate this vacuum in knowledge, in the context of how / if the holy destination and spiritual journey of Hajj has become a commodity? If this is indeed the case, then, to what extent pilgrims' behaviour is becoming more materialistic. Owing to contemporary highly-branded hospitality services, modern tourism infrastructure and information technology in Mecca, it is suggested that the pilgrim's spiritual experience is being transformed into a touristic experience, an experience which competes with and jeopardises the traditional equality, simplicity, principles and lessons of religious journey. Putting it another way, the increasingly materialistic / economic element in the spiritual experience of the pilgrim might serve to diminish or destroy the essence of the pilgrimage as a religious journey, transforming it into a more traditional luxury tourism experience and, in so doing, creating distinct tourist-pilgrim markets or different social identities, such as the 'Branded Haji' and non-branded 'Simple-Haji' pilgrim.

In the line with above propositions, if the spiritual experience of pilgrims is confronted with commodification, commercialisation and materialism, then the claim of the KSA government that pilgrims on the Hajj must experience the complete authentic spiritual effect of the journey is fuzzy. As Shepherd (2002) argues, once a destination or event is sold in the tourism market it become a commodity (i.e. a product or experience with financial value) and, as a consequence, loses its authenticity to tourists.

Thus, the main concern of this paper is to uncover the uncertainty of, to what extent commodification or commercialisation transforms the spiritual experience of Mecca's pilgrim in to more touristic one, as well as their perception the of levels of authenticity and appeal of the pilgrimage journey.

### **From Religious Tourism to Tourism as Religion**

Smith (1992) suggests that the tourism-spirituality relationship may be conceptualised as a continuum from religious tourism to tourism as religion or, Smith implies, a quest for, on the one hand, a religious

experience (the pilgrim) and, on the other hand, secular fulfilment (the pilgrim as tourist). Additionally, between these two points may be found innumerable religious / secular combinations of religious tourism defined by an individual’s religious or cultural/ knowledge needs. Thus, Smith (1989; see also Turnbull, 1981), proposes that although pilgrims and tourists share the similar fundamental requirements for travel (discretionary income, leisure time etc.), a distinction between tourist and pilgrim may be identified within the meaning or personal belief attached to each activity (Sharpley, 2009). However, this study instead of finding a gradual distinction, suggests that we are witnessing the privatisation of Islamic pilgrimage, as soaring commodification of Mecca and the Hajj is increasing the urge of materialistic consumption in pilgrims, and in turn diverting the spiritual experience of pilgrim towards a more touristic one. Yet, the authors acknowledges that this conceptualisation is open for interpretation.

**Figure 1 : The Pilgrim / Tourist Continuum**

Pilgrimage		Religious Tourism		Tourism
A	B	C	D	E
Sacred		Faith/Profane Knowledge-----Based		Secular
A: Pious Pilgrim ( <b>Simple-Haji</b> )				
B : Pilgrim > Tourist ( <b>Simple-Haji</b> )				
C : Pilgrim = Tourist $\xrightarrow{\text{blue arrow}}$ ( <b>Haji-Plus</b> )				
D: Pilgrim < Tourist $\xrightarrow{\text{blue arrow}}$ ( <b>Branded-Haji</b> )				
E: Secular Tourist				

(Derived from Smith, 1989)

Figure 1 reveals the varying motivations, experiences, and behaviours of the pilgrim / tourist, whose interests and actions may shift from pilgrim to tourist or vice versa (Smith, 1989), even without the individual being conscious of the variation (Pearce, 1991). Previous literature suggests that pilgrims to Mecca are pious and have nothing to do with tourism (Raj, 2007), representing under A and B in the continuum.

However, this research will focus on how Islamic pilgrims are being transformed from A and B to C (Haji-Plus, inspired by religious tourism touristic commodities) or D (Branded-Haji, Consumed Religious Tourism / Touristic Commodities) in the continuum, reflecting the evidence in the work of O’Connor (2014) and others who suggest that the changing behaviour and activities of pilgrims to Mecca

is a result of the increasing consumption of material commodities, leading in turn to a more touristic experience. However, the diagram is only an interpretation of present day thought, and by all means can be mutable (Smith, 1992).

Swatos *et al.* (2002) argue that apart from religious rituals, pilgrims behave like tourists in the most traditional sense of the term, tourists purchase tour packages which include the sights and scenes of the holy city and sacred places with religious affiliations. Additionally, Gupta (1999) suggests it is time to observe things from a broader perspective, apart from the devotional features, pilgrims and pilgrimage undertake an element of sightseeing, travelling and transportation with commonalities also including visiting various religious places, shopping, apart from the devotional aspects, nearly everything a tourist does.

Reflecting evidence in the work of O’Connor (2014), Osborne (2014) and others researchers who suggest that evidence is present, currently Mecca pilgrims’ spiritual experience and authenticity of journey and place is under question; as the increasing consumption of material commodities by pilgrims and their availability in Mecca, is turning pilgrims’ spiritual experience into a more touristic one.

For instance, O’ Connor (2014) drew attention to his respondents in Mecca: Esa a 37-year-old Muslim pilgrim born and bred in Hong Kong, travelled to Mecca in 2011 to perform Hajj. During Hajj Esa stayed in the Mecca Clock Tower, a mega super luxury hotel with 24 hours butler service. Esa observed at the time of prayers, the majority of the pilgrims didn’t even bother to go to Mosque Al-Haraam and preferred to offer their prayer inside their air-conditioned luxury glass rooms which are having stunning view of the Kaaba. This was an embarrassing moment for Esa, who was feeling regret - why had he selected this type of hotel which was causing destruction to the spiritual experience and raising questions for the subjective and objective authenticity of the religious journey. Moreover, Esa shared sadly, that Mecca Clock Tower Hotel’s location has been declared by the Saudi government as a premises of the grand AL-Haraam Mosque.

Esa talked about when he went to perform ‘SA’EE’ (walking and running between the two hills of Safa and Marwa) which is now executed in a large air-conditioned marble paved corridor, which connects the two small hills of Safa and Marawa. He had a feeling that the pilgrims are walking between the Apple and

Zara stores in the International Finance Centre Mall, Hong Kong, where the same marble and air conditioned structure can be found. Esa was dejected, and thinking about the future when the next generation will visit Mecca - what message will they take from here - the essence of Hajj which is simplicity, staunch worship and devotion is diminishing now and giving an impression of holidays. Eventually, Esa shared his discomfort while circumambulating the Kaaba - facing the contemporary challenge of technology; the majority of pilgrims were holding SMART phones during 'Tawaf' (circumambulation of Kaaba) and every minute one can hear ringtones, causing distraction in concentration during prayers. Pilgrims were receiving calls, calling and taking selfies during worship (O'Connor, 2014).

Additionally, Osborne (2014) has talked about 'Selfie Fever Gripping Pilgrims' noting that during the Hajj of 2014, pilgrims were snapping their own pictures during 'Tawaf', smiling with different postures, during the time of humility and tranquillity. In Selfie-culture people are thinking that the globe is rotating around them, so millions of images of people are snapped from Rome to Kaaba as they create for themselves a 'tailored autograph'. Sacredness is losing its authenticity, and instead it now occurs in numerous million different styles and tastes. However, it is not only happening in Islam; Pope Francis authorised his first papal 'Selfie' in 2014, and told the kids who had selfies with him 'Have courage', 'Go forward, Make noise' this noise as taken in Rome, has travelled through technology, it has entered Mecca and fuels narcissism in Mecca's pilgrims; this practice has turned pilgrims and the ritual of Hajj into one epic selfie, Keen (2014).

Keen (2014) has interviewed British mosque Imam (Clerics) during Hajj, and questioned them regarding 'Selfies Fever' at the Hajj. 'Iman Ajmal Masroor' contends that the selfie pandemic is destructing not only the pilgrims' spiritual experience but the place authenticity as well. The idea of Hajj is to think about yourself, self-sacrifice, take account of your life, ask for forgiveness, confessing. Picture taking is a daily activity in your life, and of course Hajj is not a daily ritual, it is different, but, snapping pictures makes you a tourist and makes Hajj into a tourism ritual: staring at your unstitched clothes in Hajj there is no vanity in them, however in selfies there is a huge element of showing yourself as a tourist. In fact you are degrading yourself, the divine sacredness of the place and earning sins for yourself. The meaning of the Hajj is that pilgrims should disconnect themselves from the

material world and focus on the spiritual experience of the journey, which Allah blessed them with.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, it is not only technology which is pushing pilgrims to behave like tourist, it is the entire experience of luxury branded hotels surrounding Grand Mosque Haram in Mecca, contributing and converting pilgrims' spiritual experience in to a more touristic one.

Irfan al-Alawi (2013) noted, that since the birth of Mecca Clock Tower Hotel, there is a change observed in pilgrims' behaviour:

*Already we are losing the spirituality, Pilgrims admire the Clock Tower instead of looking at the Kaaba and admiring the house of God* (Batrawy, 2014, p.1).

The above behaviour of pilgrims seems to be contradicting one of the Hadith of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH):

*Hajj is not for the show of things, nor for personal fame* (Raj and Morpeth, 2007:129).

Most of the above evidence indicates, that pilgrims to Mecca, in Smith's continuum might be placed under the designation C, and in addition D is gaining momentum - evidence is demonstrating that pilgrims are becoming the victim of luxury hospitality and tourism touristic commodities, and are also behaving like hedonistic tourists due to intense usage of SMART technologies, resulting somewhere in a violation of the moralities of Hajj and the lessons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which are based on simplicity, equality, no ostentation, staunch worship; the result is challenging the authenticity of pilgrimage and diverting the spiritual experience of pilgrimage to a more touristic one. Therefore, now the question is how deeply the process of commodification is rooted in the holy destination of Mecca.

### **Commodification of Mecca and Hajj**

An understanding of commodification in tourism will underpin an analysis of the conversion of traditional Mecca and Hajj into a contemporary consumer-focused tourism destination offering modern spiritual commodities (York, 2001). Therefore, to begin with, the story of Mecca and Hajj will be discussed, to illustrate the unnecessary commodification, and its effects on the authenticity of the holy destination and its religious ritual.

Islam has become more publicly visible and is growing, at the same time, KSA, which is considered to be the cradle of Islam, has gone through a process of modernisation and globalisation in terms of commerce and mega infrastructural developments (Hefner, 2000; Lukens-Bull, 2005; Azra, 2004). When KSA realised the robust economic impact of religious tourism in late 1990's, the face of Hajj changed in the public sphere domestically and internationally. Visiting Mecca and undertaking the Hajj appear to be no longer simply a set of rituals, beliefs and principles, but have become a symbolic commodity relevant to pilgrims' social class, demands for lifestyle, modesty and enjoyment (White, 2005).

White (2005) argues that commodifying religion has condensed religious lessons, ciphers, and values into free-floating signifiers to be utilised like anything else. This takes them from their authentic backgrounds and heaves them into a cultural marketplace where they can be comprised in a narrow fashion and only partially put into practice. Here, the researcher's concern is with the impurity or inauthenticity of commodifying Mecca and Hajj as presented by the new age agents. Religious commodification has in fact very much to do with the way religion, in this case Hajj, is packaged as a tourism commodity and accessible to a wider audience, and how this has served to produce an outline for the moral order of society via the objectification and systematisation of Islamic values and practices as a norm. However, when tourism arrived, what was formerly unadulterated and authentic has become inauthentic, damaged and commodified. In simple language, tourism brought contemporary visions, which can be considered as demonised, standardised and internationalised (Shepherd, 2002).

Advocates of cultural physiology argue (Picard *et al.*, 1997) that cultural tourism encourages domestic residents to play their part in conventional cultural approaches, and to take material benefits from it. Critically, if this is the case then domestic players can distinguish between what should be opened to tourism and what not - what is considered 'sacred' and what shall be opened or 'profaned' and hereafter be open to commodification. However, when monetary values penetrate into cultural values, both distract rituals and traditional values of the destination, causing destruction of the historical destination and its heritage, giving birth to the process of sacred tourism commodification (Picard *et al.*, 1997).

Harvey (1989) contends that market forces change cultural practices into saleable commodities for economic advantages, location making, and identity building; this change is also entrenched in tourism growth. Commodification of tourism occurs where domestic customs, rituals, and festivals become tourist attractions, accomplished for tourist consumption and shaped for market-based influential actions (Mitchell, 2000). Once the commodification takes place in religious tourism, it pushes society and locations towards the materialistic realm of marketing - selling its tangible and intangible cultural elements. Primarily, commodification threatens identity building and culture and turns them into economic profits. Secondly, commodification provides conditions for domestic investors to increase their capacity to produce more economic opportunities (Britton, 1991).

Thus; in this materialistic realm, pilgrims' objective and subjective spiritual assets have been robbed by the commodification of the religious ritual of Hajj, due to massive commercialisation. It seems that Muslims are praying but the feeling of spiritual devotion towards Allah and self-denial from coarseness and malevolence which is the focal point of the rite are missing from pilgrims during Hajj, as they are involved in materialistic self-contradictory acts (Bağlı, 2015). Religion has become privatised just like a private firm, where religion and spirituality is frequently called 'New Age', it is also leading to the individualisation of religion (York, 2000; Einstein, 2008). Similarly, Hajj is available for sale, just like a private firm of public efficacies and services in our contemporary neoliberal economies, the physical and cultural assets of Islamic customs are being pillaged, downsized and sold off as commodities. This neoliberalist trend pushes commodification to differentiate between poor and rich - resulting in Haji-Simple versus Haji-Plus, versus Branded Haji.

Garuda (2010) notes that for a billion of the world's population the Hajj is meant to be a great leveller, transcending race, ethnicity, nationality and economic background. Difference is minimised by pilgrims adopting the same dress code, ritual, and devotion to the same faith: 'All are equal before Allah'. But, 'Daud' a South African pilgrim feels

*in practise this is not always the case, the essence of Hajj is take away those social and economic differences of human beings to basically simplified and make it the same*

but now luxury commercialisation and profits are the basic essences of Hajj, which, according to Garuda

(2010), is the greatest shame.

Therefore, in the case of Mecca and the Hajj, commodification of spirituality has become the main means of aiding the corporate takeover of religion. In line with predictions, the KSA government utilise the spirituality of Mecca by using religious customs (Hajj) as a means for marketing their own socio-political-economic corporate values. Corporate benefits dominate the religious and spiritual value of the custom. This leads to the question, to what extent commodification is changing pilgrims' spiritual experience and the authenticity of place.

### Authenticity and Spiritual Experience

Taking the above discussion into account, the high presence of unnecessary inauthentic material commodities is leading to undesirable impacts on the authenticity of the Holy City, the religious rituals and on the spiritual experience of pilgrims, but to what extent?

Sharpley states:

*authenticity connotes traditional culture and origin, a sense of the genuine, the real or the unique (Sharpley 1994:130).*

Similarly, the KSA government confirms that pilgrims on the Hajj must experience the complete unique authentic (genuine) spiritual experience of the journey (Collins, *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to comprehend, in depth, the concept of authenticity and spiritual experience in the context of tourism. This will provide a framework for establishing how pilgrims perceive the experience of authenticity or otherwise of contemporary Mecca, the ritual of Hajj and their subsequent social identity (Haji).

The relation between traditional, modern tourism and authenticity has been revealed by researchers since the 19th century (Sharpley, 1996). In-depth discussions by MacCannel (1989) and Boorstin (1962) took the concept of authenticity in the world of marketing and later used it as a marketing tool. For instance, holidays are presented in media in a way that one feels they are truly enjoying the real. For example, currently Hajj tour agents are presenting various 'authentic' Hajj packages

*'Experience the 5 Star Hajj'*  
*'Experience deluxe Hajj'*  
*'the treasure of Middle East'*

In the case of Hajj, the authenticity on promotion is connected more with pilgrims' expectations or simply what tour operators consider pilgrim want to perceive than to what really exists. For instance, Hajj operators which arrange Hajj packages characteristically mention the implied authenticity of the travel experiences they offer. Thus, the travel agents on-line and off-line promote their Hajj packages to potential pilgrims in the context of discovering something new, for instance:

*'discover the spirituality of Mecca'*  
*'discover the 5 Star experience of Hajj'*  
*'Your passport to quality service'*  
*'value for money & peace of mind'*  
*'We take you closer to spiritual authentic experience'*  
*'not offering only spirituality but unforgettable religious experience'*

(<http://www.passport2hajj.com/> ; <http://www.aftatours.com/> ; <http://www.haj.co.uk/>).

No doubt, Mecca as a holy destination of pilgrimage and Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam; both are subjectively (Islamic Ideology) and objectively (Kaaba location) authentic. But, after the contemporary commodification and development of Mecca, with the wealth of tourism commodities that are available, is this challenging the subjective and objective authenticity of the holy place and ritual; not to mention the inner existential (liminal) authenticity (Heidegger 1996; Nehemas 1999) of the pilgrim. This approach raises some questions:

Is the city of Mecca's current infrastructure still dominated by the spiritual authenticity?  
 Are the minarets of the Grand Mosque Al-Haram still telling their historical story?  
 Are pilgrims following the rites according to the lessons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) such as, performing Hajj with simplicity, without ostentation, maintaining equality among pilgrims?

These issues are in themselves a myth, due to unnecessary inauthentic commodification, and they require serious consideration.

The word authenticity is frequently used not only in our daily lives but it is a buzz word of tourism, used in explaining the tourism experience (Dann, 1996). Though the use of the word authenticity is prevalent its interpretation differs according to its use (Selwyn, 1996). In the concept of tourism, the word authenticity has become ambiguous; on the one hand it is depicting



the original culture of a place, on the other hand it is used for labelling (and selling) various kinds of travel journeys and even whole package holidays. Vitaly, it is normally used to differentiate between niche and specialist tourism market commodities and mass tourism goods, the inference being that mass tourism is, by some means, inauthentic (Trilling, 1974).

A variance exists, emerging from the two solicitations of authenticity within tourism. One is grounded in tangibility of objects of culture or events - which thus, are either original and authentic, or bogus. The second solicitation is grounded on less tangibility in contrast; a break, travelling or holidays, a specific tourism experience or a journey is claimed to be authentic - it is perceived to be so in contrast to an additional experience that is inauthentic. The inauthentic is seen to be contemporary civilisation and tourism, consequently, there is a quest for the authentic. It is convenient, then, to perceive how certain types of tourism and travel come to be labelled as authentic as, in a sense, all package tourism or mass tourism is part of contemporary society and, hence, inauthentic (MacCannell, 1989).

The quality of authenticity is perceived to be part of pre-modern society, the cultural commodities manufactured before the infiltration of contemporary western influence. In simple words things can only be considered authentic if they have been generated or manufactured without the use of contemporary resources or ingredients. Thus, anything, which has been created, including societies, by modern tools, equipment, modern ideas, new cultures, or according to anthropologist anything which is altered by contemporary civilisations - these have all become inauthentic (Cohen, 1988).

However, the ideology of the Hajj is authentic as no modern tool can change it as it is divine and based on Islamic Sharia laws; but the contemporary tangible touristic commodities and western skyscraper culture of Mecca is full of western modern ingredients and is contaminating not only the spiritual objective, subjective and inner existential authentic experience of pilgrims but the holy destination itself. More and more

pilgrims are becoming victims of material commodities and Mecca is becoming a mall for these inauthentic material products. Thus, it is difficult to keep a grip on the authenticity of Hajj values and the divine spirituality, therefore, one must ask - is the spiritual experience of the pilgrim and the authenticity of the holy place itself is in jeopardy?

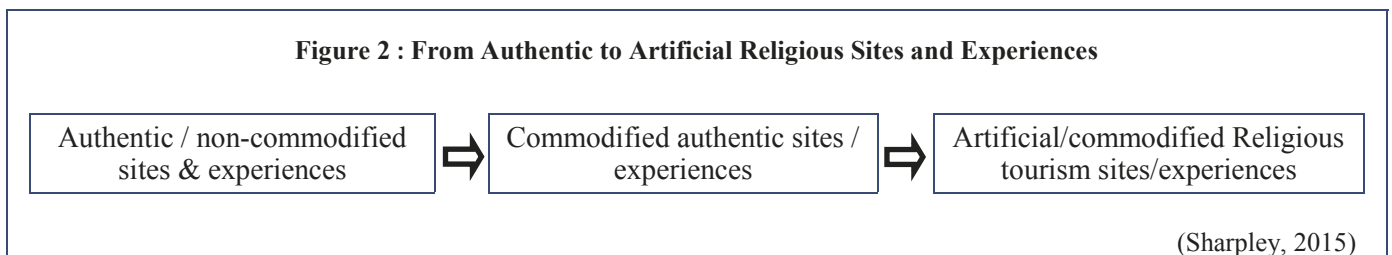
To clarify the answer to this complex question what is the meaning of authenticity, should one look to physiognomies of authentic, pre-modern societies that the pilgrim seeks? Or is it, for instance, just cyphers or symbols of authenticity, for example the reality of pre-modern, non-mechanical agricultural approaches, or do pilgrims demand to completely submerge themselves in outmoded society, to experience a way of life which is not available or exists in contemporary, industrialised societies. To comprehend this, one should consider the characteristics of 'traditional' which is seen as authentic and; 'contemporary' which is considered to be inauthentic (Sharpley, 1996).

Sharpley's (2015) continuum of 'Religious Sites and Experiences' (Figure 2) can be useful to comprehend which tourism sites are authentic, commodified or not, and their experiences.

The consistent evidence depicts that Mecca is standing in both the second and the third box of the continuum, where the presence of luxury hospitality, tourism infrastructure, branded malls and SMART technologies, have commodified Mecca's objective identity and have turned it into the 'Vegas of Middle East' (modern inauthentic) (Taylor, 2011). Additionally, the authenticity of religious tourism in KSA is subjectively and objectively under question due to heavy contemporary commercialisation, as pilgrims become victims of material commodities, affecting the subjective and existential authenticity (liminal) of pilgrims and turning spirituality into a more touristic experience (modern Inauthentic).

By logical extension it could be argued in another way, whether the city of Mecca or the pilgrimage journey of Hajj is authentic or inauthentic due to commercialisation, its impact on the spiritual

**Figure 2 : From Authentic to Artificial Religious Sites and Experiences**



experience of the pilgrim is greatly depending on the perspective adopted by the pilgrim. As Selwyn (1996), or Cohen (1988) argue, it is up to societies in what way they want to develop authenticity. Basically, less developed countries are more authentic than developed, as they didn't yet become the victim of western materialism, alienation, mass production and consumption. For instance, pilgrims who performed Hajj before the 1980's when there was no sign of contemporariness and commodification of Mecca and Hajj could be considered as having a more authentic experience, from the perspective of subjective, objective and inner existential authenticity related to their spiritual experience perspective, as the experience was based on originality (Traditional Authentic).

Conversely, pilgrims who have started visiting Mecca recently, since the commencement of its modernisation and commodification process, might feel connection with the objective (tangible) superiority of something which is related to production methods or cultural foundations that are perceived to be pre-modern.

However, in both cases, no matter whether one is a traditionalist or modernist pilgrim, the subjective authenticity of Mecca and Hajj is still alive in the hearts of pilgrims as it is based on Islamic principles. However, on the one hand, the corporate aura of commodified touristic infrastructure of Mecca is dividing pilgrims among different luxury markets of Hajj packages, SMART Technologies and marketing tactics, and this is subsequently challenging the objective, existential authenticity (liminal) of pilgrims and converting their spiritual experience into a more touristic one. On the other hand, despite commodification, the level of spiritual experience, authenticity of the journey and the place are also depending on factors such as the religious interpretation of a pilgrim's sect, their personal level of Islamic religious education, cultural, financial and geographic background.

Therefore, it might seem as if, the above debate which emphasises traditional (authentic) values versus modern (inauthentic) humanities is beyond the scope of discussion as it is an evolving and complex phenomenon and greatly depends on the perspective adopted by pilgrims (Selwyn, 1996; Cohen, 1988).

However, future research might profit from utilising a sample size which is extended and divided between developing world pilgrims (majority participation in Hajj) and developed world pilgrims (minority participation in Hajj), as developing world pilgrims are

considered to be more authentic than developed, as they haven't yet become victims of western materialism, alienation, mass production and consumption (Cohen, 1988), but how long will this last?

### Current Mecca and the Hajj

Mecca, with more than 2 million inhabitants, is the capital city of one of thirteen provinces of the KSA (Mahmoud and Plumb, 2010). Literally in the Arabic language, the term Mecca means weak, tired or the place with no water (Al-Azraqi, 1965). Mecca used to be known as 'Bakka', 'to smash', or 'be submissive' (Ahmad al-Sarif, 1965). Some Qur'anic observers have also conventionally linked reference to the Valley of Bekka 'valley of the one who weeps much' (Quran, Sura 3:96) with Mecca (Gibson, 2011, p.1).

Arabian residents have been practicing a form of Hajj for 25 centuries, since before the initiation of Islam, although not in the manner of Abrahamic teachings, which is currently applied. Ibrahim (PBUH) rebuilt Kaaba for the refuge of Allah's followers and their security, but after his death, it was taken over by other Arab tribes. Later it became a sanctuary for pantheon statues of reverence. There is consensus among Islamic historians that 'Amr ibn Luhäyy' was the first Arabian who brought sculptures to Mecca, the statue of Hubal was considered to be the chief God, placed on the top of Kaaba in Mecca (Ahmad. A. Galwash, 1973). 360 statues were placed inside Kaaba, however the Quran mentions only 10, of which eight of them are named as: Allat, Alcuza, Manät, Wadd, Siwac, Yaguwt, Yacuww, and Nsra (The Qur'an. 71: 21-23). According to the lunar calendar of Sharia (Islamic law) at that time, the Hajj took place mostly between 8th to 12th of the Islamic month called Dü al-ijja. The last three months of the Islamic lunar calendar, called Shawwal, al-Qada and al-Hijja are also considered as the months of Hajj, but the Quran does not state exactly which month it is.

However, ancient Mecca has vanished; since it has been commodified. Rizat (2010) notes that the KSA has issued licences for the construction of 500 hotels near the Grand Mosque in the Holy City of Mecca. Currently, the mega Mecca Royal Clock Tower hotel which was opened in 2010 by Fairmont group built close to the Mosque al Haram stands an impressive 485 metres high (and would dwarf Big Ben in London) and displays Mecca Time to all pilgrims. Salman (2009) argues that this edifice signifies a new period

for Mecca and is symbolic of the growth of the religious tourism industry in the KSA. The Clock Tower is also a pivotal point in the Abraj Al Bait Complex, which contains two holy mosques; King Abdul Aziz donated this project which consists of luxury hotels, malls and apartments, with an assessed value of \$3bn, with 15,000 housing units and 70,000 square metres of retail space.

The Holy City is fast becoming a 'Vegas' for pilgrims, with a new £2.3 billion mega hotel that has four helipads, five floors for Saudi royalty - and 10,000 bedrooms on 45 levels, called Abraj Kudai Hotel in Mecca (Wainwright, 2015). Along the western edge of the city the Jabal Omar development now rises, a sprawling complex that will eventually accommodate 100,000 people in 26 luxury hotels - sitting on a gargantuan plinth of 4,000 shops and 500 restaurants, along with its own six-storey prayer hall (Wainwright, 2015). In turn, tour operators are offering pre-designed Hajj packages ranging from three, to four, five, Gold, Platinum VIP and VVIP packages. For instance, the British Hajj Travel Tour and Hilal Tours company offer various amenities in their Deluxe, VIP Hajj packages in which they offer:

- Hajj attire (Ihram),
- direct flights to KSA (Airlines of your choice),
- Visa,
- Air conditioned coaches and Private Transfer throughout the pilgrimage journey,
- Hajj App,
- Sim Card,
- Animal to sacrifice,
- Stay in five star hotels with room facing the Kaaba, full-board,
- three days stay in Mina with VIP Air-conditioned Tent, Gypsum Board including Sofa-combed, Full-board,
- Tent near to Jamrat (Devil Mark),
- Visits to holy sites within Mecca and holy city of Medina with five star amenities.

The Hajj tour operators currently package Hajj as a commodity which they present in holiday packages. Furthermore, the Hajj is being sold currently all over the world from 'Deluxe to Super Deluxe, from Gold to Platinum packages; the more you spend the more you have comfort in Hajj (Mangle, 2014). It is not only tour operators. Firms are offering branded luxury tourism infrastructure to fascinate pilgrims on their pilgrimage journeys. Now the demands of the pilgrims and their constant changing behaviour towards the pilgrimage journey, due to the presence of luxury tourism commodities in Mecca, results in an increase in the

urges for pilgrim disbursement for branded spending, these are the maximum spenders of all other sorts of itinerants (Triantafillidou *et al.*, 2009). Thus, it might seem nowadays that this form of religious tourism is closely related to holiday and cultural tourism (Rinschede, 1992).

## Methodology

The purpose of this study is to critically explore the extent to which the spiritual experience of Islamic pilgrims is being transformed into a touristic experience as a result of the contemporary commodification of the pilgrimage.

In order to meet this objective, a qualitative exploratory research strategy is adopted. More specifically, given that the principal focus of the study is on the roles, actions and perceptions of pilgrims, qualitative research methods will facilitate the collection of deeper, nuanced data with respect to the motivations, perceptions and behaviours of pilgrims within the wider social and cultural context of the Hajj (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004).

One focus group was conducted in the UK with six pilgrims, including one Hajj and Umrah travel agent, all participants have performed Hajj within the last three years. The use of a focus group facilitates open-ended discussions on a specific topic, in this case the commodification of the Hajj - as well as potentially identifying new areas of discussion relevant to the research. Moreover it permits the interviewer to probe answers and readdress questions towards other respondents (Saunders *et al.*, 2003).

The focus group was initially opened with a brief introduction to the aim and objectives of the research project to ensure a clear comprehension of the subject matter. The focus group was conducted in the travel agent's office on a Sunday, as the atmosphere was quiet and calm to allow individuals the confidence to voice their opinions and be heard by others.

In addition, secondary research was conducted using books, journals, articles and on-line material to form a literature review, highlighting relevant theories and existing related research. This was vital in developing the researcher's awareness of the present state of information on the topic and in what way the planned research would enhance what is previously acknowledged.

## Focus Group Outcomes/ Discussion

Once the focus group session was conducted, despite initial coyness, the majority of members engaged in more challenging discussions related to the four key themes:

- Religious Tourism;
- Commodification;
- Spiritual Experience, and;
- Authenticity .

All themes were appropriately discussed, and the methodology encouraged topical debate amongst the group.

## Religious Tourism

Focus Group participants categorically rejected the claims of KSA government observed in literature , that the Hajj is not like other pilgrimage journeys of the globe, where people or pilgrims visit places with heaps of tourism, and the Hajj is not part of religious tourism (Jafiri and Scott, 2010).

*I performed my first Hajj in early 1970-80, at that time KSA never consider Hajj as a business or Tourism and always accept pilgrims as the 'Guest of Allah'. There was no mandatory concept of buying a Hajj package or going in a group, it was simple and easy; though claiming at that time Hajj was not in too much demand is not correct. I have really enjoyed and remember that Hajj from religiously, spiritually and authenticity perspective. However, now Mecca is full of New York Style buildings, and pilgrims are lost in worldly inauthentic commodities, rather than sharing their Hajj experience with each other, they are discussing their Hotel experience and amenities of tour packages.*

## Commodification of Religious Tourism

The participant agreed how religious tourism in KSA has become commodified, as mentioned in the literature review. Increasing demand for Hajj and gaining more economic advantage from it has pushed KSA to become the main player and turn Mecca and the Hajj into a contemporary product, by developing Mecca through adding a plethora of tourism commodities in the name of pilgrim facilities, with unnecessary inauthentic contemporary tourism products. One respondent stated:

*I condemn that, the KSA shouldn't encourage Hajj as a part of their business strategy, and just extend the very basic facilities for pilgrims,*

*it could have been as simple as it used to be in the '70s and '80s, when pilgrims were performing Hajj like Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did: simple, without ostentation, no discrimination between poor and rich, sacrifice of the person, and only staunch worship. To my recent experience of Hajj, desolately this is not the case now. The rich and poor gap can be observed due to different Hajj packages, pilgrims are not concentrating on worship but they do concentrate on their SMART phone.. Pilgrims do not want to tolerate any pain, and the simplicity element is totally invisible.*

The above discussion shows that simplicity, equality, spiritual experience and authenticity of Hajj are all becoming weaker, due to the presence and high usage of worldly touristic items by pilgrims, and also unfortunately KSA have not left any simple option, thus, one must perform Hajj with contemporary branded packaged commodities.

## Commodification of Mecca

However one participant who is a Hajj and Umrah Travel agent disagreed with their counterparts, and supports the claims of KSA in literature. Accordingly, KSA are providing facilities to pilgrims and trying to increase the comfort and numbers of pilgrims, according to this respondent, the world is misinterpreting KSA Hajj facilities by calling them touristic commodities. The travel agent said:

*we can't go back to old days where people used to run in scorching heat for basic life amenities. . . . Current facilities are expensive, luxury but comfortable, and also now according to my Hajj experience and from demand perspective . . . pilgrims do not want to give themselves pain and are willing to pay more.*

*Definitely it has become part of the tourism industry and is having some negative financial, religious, social, moral impact on the pilgrims, but on the whole, blaming KSA for turning this into business is inappropriate. We should think like this . . . The KSA is a country like others in the world, they need to maintain their GDP, meet their expenses and budgets as well, and therefore they deserve to make some profits from the Hajj, as Mecca is situated in their country. Conversely, it is also true that not everything that is happening in the Hajj takes place according to Islamic or Hajj principles - due to the presence of modern commodities in Mecca but KSA is in a learning process and they are learning by their mistakes.*

## Authenticity and Spiritual Experience

Participant of the focus group unanimously agreed that the presence of high levels of inauthentic material commodities in Mecca are defiantly causing negative impacts on the authenticity of the Holy City, religious rituals and on the spiritual experience of pilgrims. They confirmed that once a destination or event is sold in the tourism market it becomes a commodity (i.e. a product or experience with financial value) and, as a consequence, loses its authenticity to tourists (Shepherd, 2002). The experience of authenticity or otherwise of contemporary Mecca, the ritual of Hajj and their subsequent social identity (Haji) is in jeopardy. One participant shared his experience:

*by comparing the Hajj of 2001 and 2015, in 2001, I can enter in Mosque Haram any time but I was sleeping on the floor in my hotel room in Mecca, food was limited. But in 2015, I need to follow the time-table to enter Mosque Haram due to massive construction going on there and also increase in pilgrim's turnover. I was sleeping in my air-conditioned hotel room with comfortable bed though sometimes unfortunately missed prayers due to nice sleep, and also enjoying eating lunch and breakfast buffet consisting of 36 dishes which includes roasted chicken, different salads, Vita-bix and other food items every day in breakfast, receiving new towels, clean bed sheets, shampoos and soaps. However, I asked a question to myself, am I here to enjoy these facilities or to perform my spiritual religious duty of Hajj.*

Conversely another participant argues:

*The spiritual experience of Hajj is different than Tourism, for tourism we can go to Turkey and Spain, but now . . . It feels due to loads of tourism products available . . . Mecca looks like we are . . . somewhere enjoying religious holidays. I felt that the KSA is not doing justice with Mecca; they should leave Mecca premises with local domestic population, and take all the commercial activities outside Mecca, where they can do business and promote their religious tourism activities, 'so the left over authenticity and spiritual experience for future generation can be restored'*

The pilgrims are agreed that luxury commodities are putting somewhat negative impacts on their religious spiritual experience and leading to non-compliance with the Hajj principles and also lessons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUM).

## Commodification Hajj

The participants similarly experienced what O'Connor's (2014) respondent Esa had experienced during his Hajj (see literature review):

*It was shame when I performed 5 Star Hajj.*

*The KSA religious scholars announced a 'Fatwa' [religious law or rulings by Muslim scholars] that pilgrims can even perform prayers from their hotel rooms as it is considered now [part of] the premises of Mosque Haram, lots of pilgrims preferred to pray in their air-conditioned rooms. As a result of this Fatwa, within my HAJJ group I have experienced a few pilgrims who went to Mosque Haram with me for prayers, stood with me for prayers but later withdrew between the prayers and went back to hotel room to offer prayer in the comfort zone of contemporary hospitality, by overruling and ignoring how Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) performed his prayers and Hajj. Here I experienced inauthentic commodities, putting impact on the pilgrims' spiritual experience that they can go to that extent, where they bend the rules of Hajj and Islam for their own ease, comfort and requirements.*

*However for me it was sad, painful and distracted from my spiritual experience; pilgrims travelled from thousands of miles to sit in Haram to perform their prayers, but due to inappropriate inauthentic 'Fatwas' they have been given an opportunity to stay in their 5 star hotel room 'Glass Cage' to offer their prayers.*

*I realised I shouldn't have come here. It is better that I hang the picture of Kaaba in my own house / room and pray in front of it. Therefore, my experience is that spirit and the spirituality of Hajj is loosening its grip among followers due to the commodification of Mecca, pilgrims have been classified and segregated between hotel Star rankings. Therefore, I suggest that instead of making 4 to 5 Star hotels, KSA should make [millions of] simple rooms . . . which can be affordable not only by developed world pilgrims but also from developing nations' pilgrims who are participating in Hajj in the majority.*

Focus group participants agreed that currently, pilgrims may perform Hajj according to their own interpretation or Fatwas; this is not allowed, as the ritual act has a form which must be in accordance with what the Messenger brought us. Participants also

unanimously agreed, that the presence of inauthentic touristic commodities is making pilgrims more materialistic and taking them away from the principles of Hajj.

### Hi Tech Commodities of Mecca

Five focus group participants (all except the Travel agent) agreed that offering free Wi-Fi to pilgrims, is indeed a great facility for the guests of Allah, but a great distraction for the spiritual experience, worship, equality of the pilgrim and the authenticity of the place.

Focus group participants witnessed:

*during Hajj, in the field of Arafat, Muzdalifah, Mina and even during circumambulation of Kaaba, pilgrims are busy taking 'selfies', shooting films, chatting on WhatsApp, sending snaps on Instagram, skype, etc. showing the external world their Hajj luxuries and social status.*

*This is one of the major shocks we have experienced . . . the spiritual experience of the Haji is dramatically going down due to SMART technology availability throughout Hajj operations. Imagine if a pilgrim went to Mecca asking for forgiveness of his / her sins but actually now they are enjoying and earning sins with their worldly acts and touristic commodities available in Mecca.*

A few pilgrims experienced that

*Instead of reciting 'Talbiya' (Labbaika-llahumma labbaik) the pilgrims . . . recorded this [on their] mobile phone or Hajj app and played it throughout Hajj . . . not reciting a single word of 'Talbiya' from their own mouth ,which is sad, but thanks to technology.*

Therefore, it could be argued that the presence of tourism luxury commodities in Mecca such as hospitality, in addition to tourism infrastructure and SMART technologies are having negative impacts on the spiritual experience of pilgrims and the ritual itself. Mecca is currently a town with a plethora of tourism commodities, resulting in converting pilgrims' spiritual experiences into more touristic ones. This all can be controlled if KSA shows its religious will, but unfortunately they are encouraging such activity for their 'corporate ambitions'.

Critically, one participant states:

*it is due to [a lack] of religious faith and education among Muslims, using SMART gadgets is one of the examples but the KSA provided these so called facilities for pilgrims on pilgrim's demand but if they are using this in a negative way, this is their own individual act.*

By contrast, another participant states

*Muslims have religious education, that is why they are in Mecca to perform Hajj. However, due to the availability of these so called facilities, or tourism commodities, they lost the spirit of Hajj and [are] enjoying their worldly acts, and not considering Hajj principles seriously in the context of Muhammad's (PBUH) lessons, Quran and Sunnah.*

*In 1980 or before, pilgrims used to call once or twice to their families from Mecca, making them aware of their safe arrival and then concentrating seriously on worship, cut from the worldly problems for 6 days they tried to please Allah, but now pilgrims are more concentrating back home during Hajj than Hajj itself and trying to please their friends, families and social circle.*

### Social religious Identity

The thoughts of the group regarding adherence to the principles of Hajj are encapsulated in the following:

*Currently actually, we are there just to earn the title of Haji, Allah knows better - whether our Hajj is accepted or not - but at least we should follow the principles of Hajj and give our best, and rest leave on Allah, but, if we start by violating Hajj principles and expecting we did a great job and Allah will accept that, then we are deceiving ourselves.*

The social religious Hajj identity is also under jeopardy due to heavy commercialisation of modern commodities in Mecca, as the gap between rich and poor pilgrim is increasing in Mecca, thus, a race has started - who is a branded Haji and who is non-branded.

### Authenticity of Place

Participants agreed that the ideology of Hajj is authentic and divine, based on Islamic laws; however, the contemporary, tangible, western skyscraper culture of Mecca which is full of Western modern ingredients, is contaminating the spiritual authentic experience of pilgrims and the holy place, as both pilgrims and place

have become victims of material commodities. Thus we are losing grip of the authenticity of Hajj's principles and the divine spirituality of the place.

Developing this idea, the group argued that KSA should be clear in one thing:

*Mecca is not their property, it belongs to all Muslim Ummah (Nations). To maintain the authenticity of Mecca and the spirituality of Hajj, they should always consult with Muslim Nations before taking any massive decision. The Ummah and KSA must have consensus and unanimously agree what should be in Mecca and what shouldn't be. The Muslim nations should annually contribute financially in the planning of infrastructure of Mecca; this would share the financial burden of KSA.*

*We always support amenities for pilgrims, but always oppose facilities which are leading to entertainment such as star ranking hotels and hospitality, SMART technologies etc. We are agreed to expand the grand Mosque of Haram but not at the cost of historical cultural heritage genocide.*

*Jabal al Rahmah is like a park now, with camel riding, swings for kids, and no . . . authenticity due to modernism. When our kids read in books the significance of Jabal al Rahmah, and literally then visit that place, it is no less than a picnic spot, therefore the loss of heritage is taking away Islam from the hearts of pilgrims and future generations.*

## Conclusion

The main concern of this paper is to uncover the uncertainty of, and extent to which, commodification or commercialisation transforms spiritual experiences of Mecca's pilgrims into more touristic visitors, as well as their perception of levels of authenticity and the appeal of the pilgrimage journey.

The evidence indicates that religious tourism is a hub of business activities for centuries, including Mecca, though the intensity of commercialisation in Mecca has been tremendously increased when compare with other religious tourism sites, as Muslim pilgrims are demanding more comfort and luxury commodities for their spiritual journey.

It was unanimously agreed among the participants of the focus group, that Hajj has become a product of Islam, and Mecca is a product of KSA. Mecca and Hajj are highly commercialised, the more you pay (Simple-

Haji vs Branded- Haji) the more you enjoy Hajj's so called facilities, but engaging with these results in weakening of the spiritual experience and authenticity of place. The presence of contemporary tourism commodities in Mecca is rapidly changing the behaviour and spiritual experiences of pilgrims, changing them into more touristic encounters, The pilgrim approach is becoming more materialistic than before, due to the commodification of Mecca and Hajj.

Conversely, it could be argued that the ideology of the Hajj is subjectively authentic, divine and based on Islamic laws. The Holy Quran is genuine, Kaaba circumambulation and the location of the Kaaba are authentic, performing 'sa'ee' is authentic although there no longer exists the hills of Safa and Marwah. Islam is still present in the hearts of pilgrims, but, due to the commodification of Mecca, the pilgrim's true sense of spirituality is in jeopardy.

Last but not least, the above approaches raise one question 'where is Mecca and the Hajj of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), which teaches us the lessons of Simplicity, Equality, Sacrifice of Self, without ostentation and only staunch worship. It is time to ponder: *do we Muslim pilgrims need this mortal world (Doniya) or the immortal world after life (Ākhirah), which Allah All mighty promised us.*

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