

9th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference :
Extended Abstract Template - Western Mexican shrines: mapping and
categorizing holy places

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Biography

Obtained her Phd in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, UK. Her undergraduate formation is also in Anthropology in Mexico. Since then, her interests are drawn to religion, particularly among indigenous populations. Some of her areas of interests have been religion and ethnicity, chamanism, pilgrimage and shrines.

Abstract

A tradition on shrines inventories exist in Central Europe since the middle ages, in order to offer practical information to pilgrims, so they could get more graces along the way. These projects have been pursued until today, either by tourist agencies or by scholars trying to see an ample regional view of the shrines in a particular area (eg. The Netherlands by Post, et al., 1998; or Spain by William, C. 1990 and 1991). Here, I will present the results of a cartographic project to map shrines in the Western part of Mexico, showing how such an endeavour problematizes the notion of shrines, and sketch the new tendencies of pilgrimages and the use of holy places in Mexico.

Introduction

During 2012 to 2016, I conducted a research project dedicated to georeference shrines in what is known as *Occidente de México* (Western Mexico), which comprises the states of Guanajuato,

Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Nayarit and Colima. The goal of the project was to search and map shrines, and conduct interviews with the priests. The final product was a database with information of each shrine. This database is to be used in a book and a web page where any user can play with the data offered. The data on shrines however, raised a number of questions regarding how shrines are both conceptualised and used. The presentation will intend to put problematize these uses and conceptualizations.

Literature Review

The present work is an advance of results from a project that has already given some products (Aguilar Ros, 2017, 2016, 2012). It searches for new tendencies in the study of places of cult (Eade and Albera, 2015), and its definitions since the early works of Turner (1973), and Turner and Turner (1978), and discusses with survey projects regarding shrine surveys (Poste et al, 2012).

Methodology

The first methodological problem was to define the searching area. Archaeologist have already problematize *Western Mexico* enough to define it as a cultural area standing on its own towards other neighbouring areas (Williams, 2005) However, among anthropologists, there has been long discussions on to what is *Occidente de Mexico* (cf. the contributions on the *Seminario Permanente de Estudios de la Gran Chichimeca*, which is in its 15th reunion). Thus, I decided to go with the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, 2013-2018*, which defines the country in regions, *Occidente* being one of them. After the data survey I will decide what these shrines had or not in common.

In any case, we needed a basic definition for shrines. The Turners' (1978) approach works mainly with pilgrimages, but as an extension, we used the basic features they mention: pilgrimage sites are to be reached by a sacred journey and the pilgrimage ritual provides a threshold (liminal) experience, which connects pilgrims to the sacred. So, a shrine first should have pilgrimages, and provide a sense of sacredness to its devotees -as extension, should be considered sacred (cf. see also Eliade, 1959). But mainly, based in Post and Uden (1998), I considered they: should have a pilgrimage, should be considered sacred either by the

practitioners or by the ecclesiastical authorities, should show historical evidence of devotional practices to which people tend after a specific travel to a specific geographic location in search for a sacred experience, and has expressions of religious feelings. We were not to look for secular shrines at this point, but classify four basic kinds: catholic, evangelical, “energetic” or New Age, and ethnic shrines.

Search for shrines thus started with this basic definition, and a search in hemerographic sources such as the main newspapers on line in the area. This first exploration tossed around 90 shrines, to which the team composed by anthropology students and me, visited during 2014 and 2015. Some of them required double visiting due to different circumstances, and several were discarded for not being considered as shrines (mostly by users).

After the first review, we visit and interview guardians’ shrines, and finally ended with 80 shrines in the area. I will discuss here some other issues on methodology, as the shrines were charted.

Results

Shrines in Western Mexico revealed tendencies regarding:

- a. Object of devotion and temporality.
- b. Periods of festive activity
- c. Influence Area
- d. Cultural content: pilgrimages, devotional offerings.

I will offer here also a review of new shrines and pilgrimage’s trends in the area.

Conclusion and Discussion

The shrines found in this project show us that definitions on shrines have to be problematized in favor of local discourses and practices. Definitions in advance help to understand categories, but fail to develop these categories in more fluid contexts and processes. Large-scale projects can be

helpful to have an overview of present circumstances, but need to be enriched with ethnographic approaches. A contextual approach thus is important to understand new practices on shrines, and places of cult that does not necessary fall in closed categories.

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